

DEAD PRESIDENTS



MC

SEATTLE, WA

*Redeeming*  
**RABBIT**

INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR  
**HARLEY STONE**

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Acknowledgments

*For the faithful readers who never gave up on me.*

*Thank you!*

*I'm back, bitches!*

# INTRODUCTION

## ***Rabbit:***

They say combat trauma can be the noose you hang from, the cross you bear, or the cliff you scale to survive. But I was a f\*ck up long before my Army enlistment and the resulting PTSD. Thanks to the veteran MC that took me in, I'm coping with my condition. Mostly.

Until her.

The Complete Package. She's way out of my league. I shouldn't have a chance in hell with Elenore, but I got a peek under her hood, and the sexy scientist has a screw loose.

Good thing I'm the best damn mechanic in Seattle.

## ***Elenore:***

I never once contemplated murder until my sister showed up bruised and bloody on my doorstep. Now, my intellect has overridden my morals to create an extermination plan with a 98.3% success rate.

Relax, I won't actually kill anyone. Probably.

But he might.

Who knew I'd find a kindred spirit in my self-appointed tattooed biker bodyguard? Rabbit's alarmingly protective, but he's the most fascinating person I've ever met. And the sight of his bare chest just made the lock on my bedroom door spontaneously combust.

A tempest on the outside with a soft, gooey center, he could be the one.

If I'm strong enough to love him.

*The Dead Presidents MC is a brotherhood of military veterans formed to help vets reintegrate into civilian society. They're the good guys... mostly. Complete, standalone HEA love stories. No cheating, no cliffhangers.*



## Rabbit

Combat trauma can be the noose you hang from, the cross you bear, or the cliff you scale to survive. I learned that eight years ago from a VA psychologist who'd looked at me like I was dog shit clinging to the bottom of his shoe. The fucking quack hadn't even bothered to ask why I'd lost my shit and barricaded myself under my bunk during the "episode" that had earned me a medical discharge. Yet the blowhard claimed he knew precisely how to cure me. If only I were willing to do my part.

What a goddamn joke.

No number of forty-five-minute sessions talking about my feelings could fix my condition because PTSD wasn't the root of my problems.

I was.

Truth be told, I was a fuckup. Always had been, always would be. But at least I owned my shit, making it clear as day I was not to be depended on. Saddle me with responsibilities at your own peril because I will leave you stranded.

And, judging by the incredulous look Tap was throwing my way, I'd done a damn fine job proving what a thoroughly worthless piece of trash I could be.

"You forgot your keys?" he asked. "Seriously, Rabbit? That's the line you intend to use on her?"



Tap was my brother, not by blood, but by patch. We'd both joined the Dead Presidents Motorcycle Club after our time in the service. He was a good guy. A tad too uptight and self-righteous for my taste, but that was a character flaw most of my club brothers shared. Whenever their raised noses broke the nearly constant Seattle cloud cover, my job was to pull them back down to earth and remind them their shit still stank.

"Line?" I jammed my hands into the front pockets of my jeans and tugged them inside out, showing him they were empty. "No keys, genius. It's not a line. I left them in her condo."

His gaze swept back to the upscale apartment building we'd just emerged from. We were on our way to the commercial building next door, where we'd parked in the underground garage. Being in Seattle's more affluent neighborhoods made my skin crawl. I did not belong amongst white-collar hustlers and stuck out like a... well, a grubby kid on a motorcycle in a sea of starched suits. At least the Queen Anne district wasn't as bad as Medina, the suburb that housed the Amazon and Microsoft plutocrats. I'd wandered into that district once, only to be immediately detained by one of Seattle's finest. The bastard had run my license and was sorely disappointed to learn I didn't have a record. Don't get me wrong, I'd participated in my fair share of illicit activities, but I'd never been hare-brained enough to get caught. Regardless, he'd escorted me out of the district, following until my tires hit the 520 Bridge. That had been years ago before I'd joined the Army and covered most of my body in tattoos.

Tap frowned at me. "Convenient."

It took me a moment to realize he was still carrying on about my misplaced keys. Tap rode a Softail Fat Boy and wore a cut, but I doubted the cops ever messed with him. He kept his dark hair and beard neatly trimmed, his jeans were always clean, his boots didn't have a single scuff, and the bottom of his only tattoo—a club logo—peeked out beneath his shirt sleeve. I'd heard stories and knew black people didn't always have the best interactions with the law, but something about Tap screamed 'undercover cop.' He'd served as an intelligence

officer in the Army, and if the rumors around the club could be believed, he'd worked for the CIA. But since he was a private bastard who played his cards close to his chest, he refused to disclose any details about his past.

The man was fucking unflappable.

Naturally, ruffling his feathers was one of my favorite pastimes.

Gasping in outrage, I slapped a hand over my mouth. "You're accusing me of leaving my keys behind on purpose?"

He didn't even bother to look at me. "A hundred percent."

"Why the hell would I do that?"

He cocked his head to the side. "Cut the shit, Rabbit. I saw you checking Elenore out. We both know you're fixing to go back in there and make a move on her."

Tap was many things, but unobservant he was not. Still, I couldn't just admit he was right. What fun would that be? "Or... I fucked up and left my keys behind. People make mistakes, asshole. Even you. Unless you got a pair of wings and a fuckin' halo I don't know about."

He blinked, and I could practically see the calculations in his head as he tried to piece together a response that wouldn't set me off. Like all the Dead Presidents, Tap had a hero complex. I was a veteran, so they allowed me to join their little league of do-gooders, but I wasn't one of them. No, I was essentially the mascot, the posterchild beneficiary of their goddamn philanthropy. They treated me like a hyena with a broken paw. I was a dangerous animal they wanted to help but didn't really understand. Link, the club president, had a soft spot for veterans struggling with PTSD, and it would eat at his soul to leave a wounded warrior behind. I wasn't sure if that made him a good man or a sucker—likely a little of both—but his altruism had gotten my foot in the door. I didn't belong in their club, but like the critter I'd been named for, I'd burrowed into the safety of its membership and was determined to stay.

"Even if I was going in there to hit on her, what business is it of yours?" I asked.

“None. Look, I’m not telling you what to do. I’m trying to keep you from making a terrible decision. You saw the way Kaos was lookin’ at Tina.”

Tina was Elenore’s older sister, and Kaos was smitten with her. He watched her with fascination and regard, the way many of my brothers looked at their ol’ ladies. I understood the allure since Tina was pretty, but she couldn’t hold a candle to her younger sister.

Tap glanced back at the condo. “If they end up together, you don’t want to make shit weird by fucking with her sister. We’re supposed to be helping to keep them safe, not adding to the shit they have to deal with.”

Tap’s assumption that “fuck with” was the extent of my relationship capabilities should probably piss me off, but he wasn’t wrong. Elenore hadn’t seemed like a one-night gal, and ‘commitment’ was too close to ‘responsibilities’ and ‘expectations’ for my taste. I should probably leave her be, but that option had flown out the window the moment I’d left my keys in her condo. I had no choice but to go back now.

Tap glanced at his watch, causing his duffel bag strap to slide down his arm. Not knowing what security deficiencies to expect at the condo, he’d brought a shit-ton of equipment and supplies. We’d installed new locks, a hidden camera, and monitoring equipment, but she’d refused everything else he’d offered. Well, other than the Taser. “I have time to come with you,” he said.

“To cockblock me?” I’d known he didn’t trust me, but damn. That hurt.

*Of course, he wants to cockblock you, dumbass. He knows you’re trash, and he’s trying to protect the club’s reputation. Can you blame him?*

The voice in my head was harsh but honest. But something within me wanted to see Elenore again, and it refused to give up without a fight. “What the hell do you think I’ll do?” Yes, I was a fuckup, but I was also a grown-ass adult, solely responsible for my behavior and any resulting consequences. Had anyone else left their keys in the apartment of a sexy,

single woman, Tap wouldn't give them an ounce of grief. Yet here he was, trying to drown me in it.

He stopped and stared up at the sky, likely praying for patience. "That woman in there..."

I narrowed my eyes at him. "Elenore. She has a name. Show a little fuckin' respect, man."

He snorted and met my gaze. Then, finally realizing I was serious, he gaped at me for a solid beat. I couldn't blame him. My modus operandi was to nickname women based on their best assets. Shari, our lead club girl, had purchased herself a big-ass rack, so I called her Tits. Lacey, who could give the best damn blowjobs around, was Lips. I called Kim Ass once, but she got all up in her feelings about it and sicced Havoc on me. He threatened to cut my balls off and shove them up my ass if I did it again.

I liked to push people, but the club's sergeant at arms was one scary son-of-a-bitch. At nearly six-and-a-half feet tall and about three-hundred pounds of muscle, Havoc was the club babysitter, the big man my brothers tagged in when I lost my shit, and they needed someone to wrestle me back under control. But I wasn't out of hand—at least, not yet—and since I wasn't currently suicidal, I steered clear of him.

Regardless, Elenore was too classy for any of my bullshit objectification. Besides, she didn't have one asset that outshined the rest. Every inch of her body was mouth-watering perfection, and she was brilliant and funny to boot. The determined gleam in her eyes when Tap had shown her how to use the Taser... that shit had almost done me in. I'd likely be jacking off to the image of Elenore wielding a Taser for the rest of my life.

*You're a worthless pile of shit, and she's a fucking goddess.*

"She's out of my league, anyway," I lamented as the voice in my head ramped up.

*Worthless. Worthless. Worthless. Run away, little rabbit. Run and hide like you always do.*

My mind was a broken record player without an off switch. Sometimes, I danced to the songs it played. Sometimes, they made me want to shove a pistol into my ear hole. Right now, the voice—my voice—mocked me, reminding me who I was and what I'd done. Why I'd never be good enough for anyone. Especially not someone like Elenore. She'd sneaked peeks at me when Tap wasn't looking, but I was sure her attention had more to do with curiosity than interest. Anyone with eyes could see that I was nothing like the others. If Elenore were to leave the club a review, it would probably say something like, 'Great guys, except the tatted-up creep who kept staring at me.' There was no guarantee she'd even let me back into her place to get my keys.

"You think I'm stupid?" I asked. When the bastard didn't respond, my self-loathing turned to anger and frustration. "I know I ain't shit. She's a sophisticated woman who'll never give my unrefined ass the time of day. Believe me, I get that. I hear it." I banged a knuckle against my forehead to emphasize the point. "Loud and clear. Every fucking day, all day long."

Tap's mouth snapped closed, and uncertainty clouded his eyes. My club brothers were used to me acting the fool, but no one knew how to react when I got real. This glimpse of me—of bona fide and certifiable Rabbit—was too much for anyone to handle. Hell, my own mother had sent me packing. It was only a matter of time before the club realized I was busted beyond repair and did the same. But I'd sleep under that bridge when I came to it.

For now, I needed to reel myself in. Throwing my hands up in the air, I cracked a disparaging smile and reminded him, "But hey, look on the bright side. At least I'm only a danger to myself."

Tap let out an exasperated breath and tugged his phone from his pocket. "Maybe I should call Havoc."

I threw my hands in the air. "What the fuck for? Because I'm a dumbass who forgot my keys? What do you think I'm gonna do to her, man? Bust down her door, bend her over her kitchen table, and fuck her brains out?"

I was trying to reassure him, but the bastard only looked more concerned.

Fuck that. I was done playing nice with him. “You know what, Tap? Snitches get—”

“Stitches,” He finished, cutting me off as he glared right back. “You threatening me, Rabbit?”

“Not at all.” I loosened my invisible leash, chuckling like the maniacal nutjob they all believed me to be. I’d worked hard to build that image, and I’d maintain it. The less people expected from me, the less I’d disappoint them. “And I won’t give you stitches, brother. Only fools leave evidence, and I ain’t no fool.”

The club was the only thing I had to live for—well, the club and my little sister—and I couldn’t get kicked out. I’d find other ways to fuck him up. Methods that wouldn’t lead back to me. I could periodically break into his house and rearrange his shit, a surefire way to drive his anal-retentive ass up the wall. On second thought, the paranoid motherfucker probably had alarms and cameras everywhere. Maybe instead, I could smear the underside of his engine in roadkill. Every time his bike heated up, it would stink to high heaven. It would likely kill him to dirty his hands and search for the source.

“Oh, yeah?” Tap asked. “Then what will you do?”

Like I’d share my plans with him. Pretty sure Link would consider that premeditated, and I liked to keep my options open. Spur-of-the-moment attacks accrued far less severe punishments than those I planned and fixated on. For now, I’d just fuck with him a little.

“Did you see how your mom was checkin’ me out last time you brought her to the club? Maybe I’ll give her some dick and become your new daddy.”

That wiped the condescending smirk off his face. “Stay the fuck away from my mama.”

I doubled down. “Aww, what’s wrong, son? Don’t think Mama deserves to get her world rocked?” I threw in a couple

of hip thrusts and grunts for good measure.

“Swear to God, they will never find your body.”

I grinned, damn proud of my ability to bring the psycho bastard out in anyone, even a nerdy stiff like Tap. Some might call it a character flaw. Hell, considering the tempers of some of my brothers, it was a hobby that might one day get me killed. Regardless of the danger, needling these guys was too damn entertaining to quit. “You don’t want me sniffin’ around your mom, stay the fuck out of my business.”

“Link told you to focus on the job, not the women.”

“He should have told you to mind your own damn business.” I’d never done anything to a woman she hadn’t wanted me to do. If anyone so much as suspected me of being a sexual predator, my ass would be kicked to the curb faster than I could dispute the claim. Havoc had almost killed a guy he’d caught raping a woman, and I was under no illusion he’d go any easier on me. Plenty of bikers out there took what they wanted from women, but our club didn’t stand for that shit. That was one reason I was proud to wear the patch.

Fuck Tap for questioning my commitment to our values. He fuckin’ knew better and needed to stop treating me like I was some scumbag rapist before I snapped. The truth was, I had no plans to make a play for Elenore. I just wanted to see her again. Hell, if I knew why.

“Fine.” Tap stuffed his phone back into his pocket. “But don’t make me regret this.”

Who the fuck did he think he was? My mother? I clenched my fists, wanting to lay into the bastard. He was no better than me. Okay, technically, he was, but he didn’t need to act so smug about it. It only made me want to needle him more. “Stick around, and I’ll give you a ride back.”

He and Kaos, the brother we’d arrived with, had left their bikes at the renovated fire station that served as our club headquarters and drove a loaner car from the shop. Our trip to Elenore’s apartment had two purposes. Kaos had come along to pick up Tina and her son. They’d taken the loaner car to his

house, where he planned to hide them from Tina's abusive husband. Tap had come to evaluate the security of Elenore's apartment. He'd installed equipment to keep her safe and alert us if her sister's husband showed his face. I'd come along for something to do on my day off. And because after hearing about how Matt had smacked around his wife, I was itching to serve the coward some retributive justice. Too bad he hadn't made good on his threat and come for Tina. I couldn't wait to see how tough he was now that she had a bunch of pissed-off bikers at her back.

"You want me to ride bitch on your bike?" Tap asked, his eyebrows creeping up toward the bill of his baseball cap. "I'd rather take a dull switchblade to the gut." He tugged a set of keys from his pocket. "Thankfully, I don't have to. I have orders to drive Tina's car to the station so we can check it for trackers."

I tipped my head to him. "Here's hoping the son-of-a-bitch is stupid enough to come lookin' for it." There wasn't a man in our club who wouldn't love an opportunity to rip a wife beater's arms off and clobber him with them.

Tap nodded. "Finally, something we agree on. Go get your keys, brother. I'll see you back at the station."

I saluted him. "Ten-four, son."

Shaking his head, he turned and walked away. I spun on my heel and headed back toward the building. My hands immediately started sweating, and my ribs dug into my chest.

*What were you thinking, dumbass? This isn't you. Get back to the fire station before you make a complete fool of yourself.*

But it was too late for wisdom now; I had keys to retrieve.





Elenore

*I wish a motherfucker would.*

Whoa. Where had that come from? Apparently, my new weapon and mortal enemy had turned me into Samuel L. Jackson. Regardless, I glared at the front door, Taser in hand, willing my sister's ex to make an appearance. The weapon felt good—comforting—making me wonder why I'd never armed myself before. After growing up in a small Idaho town where residents owned more guns than teeth, the moment Matt became a threat, I should have purchased a shotgun for home security. Yet the thought hadn't even crossed my mind. Then again, I could give myself a little grace, considering I'd never hung out with the shooting range crowd. Or assimilated with any group of people, really. The bikers who'd just vacated my condo were no exception. They'd shown up approximately an hour ago to point out the deficiencies in my home security. I'd conceded to some of their points, and, at my approval, they upgraded my locks and installed a hidden camera aimed at my door that would dispatch the biker brigade to save me if Matt Parker ever grew large enough balls to come knocking.

Matthew *Fucking* Parker.

My big sister's soon-to-be ex-husband was a malignant, fungating wound on the taint of society. He'd looked great on paper with his MBA in business, respectable job, and cookie-cutter house in the suburbs, but he was the black hole that had devoured Tina's hopes and dreams. In the seven months since

my sister had shown up on my doorstep with her young son, tears in her eyes and bruises mottling her skin, she'd let bits and pieces of their horror story slip. In turn, I'd discovered the abundance of rage bottled inside me that no kickboxing classes, yoga, or meditations could quell. I was a shaken bottle of champagne, ready to explode. When my cork finally popped, I would shoot straight up Matt Parker's ass, clutching my newly acquired Taser as I lit that bastard up like a Christmas tree.

That's not what would actually happen, of course. I understood how Tasers affected the nervous and muscular systems, and they wouldn't literally increase the brightness of a person. Still, it would sure be satisfying to witness the effects. After all, Matt Parker would be the perfect test subject. Ever since his last threatening phone call, my mind had been working through body disposal options, realizing that sometimes knowledge wasn't power.

Sometimes, knowledge was temptation.

As a bioscientist, I'd identified the best way to liquefy a corpse. Thanks to the power of the internet, anyone could look up instructions. But unlike the average Joe, neither my browser history nor purchasing necessary lab supplies would implicate me. I already had access to sodium hydroxide and knew precisely how much water to add and what temperature it needed to reach to turn a wife-beating brother-in-law into mineral oil. Well, not mineral oil per se, since that's derived from naturally occurring crude oil, but his remains would be the consistency of mineral oil.

Biodiesel.

I chuckled to myself. The idea of turning my former brother-in-law into fuel definitely had appeal. In approximately three hours, the world could be blissfully Matt-free.

What were the risks?

DNA contamination? Bah. I was used to working in a sterile environment, was well-versed in the procedures, and had unmonitored access to the proper equipment. Even if the

authorities somehow found Matt's remains, there'd be no evidence to pin his disappearance on me. I'd see to that.

And the downside?

Murder was wrong. There could be emotional consequences I hadn't counted on, but as an intelligent, capable adult female, I could figure that out later.

*Oh. My. God. I could become a criminal mastermind if I ever felt so inclined.*

My fifth-grade science teacher had been onto something when she'd said I could be anything I aspired to be. The realization was slightly disturbing yet strangely liberating. There was power in knowing no man would ever beat me senseless because I could reduce him to primordial goo. Matt Parker had fucked around, and he was one poor decision away from experiencing the consequences of an enraged anatomy expert. I knew precisely where to cut to maximize pain while prolonging his life.

Some would doubtlessly find my reaction to Matt's abuse extreme, but seriously, fuck them. They hadn't been there after our mother died when Tina and I were abandoned in the custody of an uncle and aunt who had never wanted children. A fact they'd made abundantly clear at every opportunity. Tina and I accepted then that we'd have to protect each other because nobody else would. She became my best friend and staunchest supporter, driving me to after-school classes, helping me apply for scholarships, and encouraging me to shoot for the stars. When I was accepted into the University of Washington, Tina moved to Seattle with me so I wouldn't have to brave the city alone.

She'd been there for me when I needed her most. Then, instead of coming to me in her hour of need, she'd hidden Matt's abuse behind long sleeves and infrequent contact. I'd believed the lies that she was busy, allowing her to drift further and further away. She should have marched to my doorstep the moment that cretin had struck out at her, but instead, she'd put up with it for far too long.

*Why?*

Was his penis magical?

My cell phone dinged, the lab's app notifying me that my next series of test results were in. I pulled the cell from my pocket—yoga pants thigh pockets are one of the most ingenious inventions ever—and silenced the alert, grateful for the distraction. Thinking about Matt was turning my anger into rage, which meant it was beyond time to leap from this rollercoaster of emotions and bury myself in research. Work was the ideal distraction I needed to stop considering possible murder weapons and options for making Matt's demise look like an accident.

But first, I needed a shower.

Reluctantly setting the Taser on the entryway table beside my keys, I traipsed down the hall to my bathroom, peeling off sweaty gym clothes along the way. I started the shower and forcefully redirected my thoughts to my current project, wishing I could pull up the test results on my laptop or phone. Proprietary company data was only accessible onsite, though. Meaning I'd have to physically go to the lab, flash my badge, and pass through a retinal scanner to view the files. Thankfully, my clearance level didn't restrict my access hours, so I could bury myself in data until I was too exhausted to plot a murder.

Fortunately for douchebag-Matt, I was a workaholic.

Steam clouded the room as I swiped a hand under the spray. The water temperature was just below scalding, precisely how I liked it, so I stepped into the tub and reached for my hair tie, freezing at an unexpected interruption coming from my front door.

Bang. Bang. Bang.

Apart from today's impromptu meeting with the bikers, I never had visitors. In fact, other than my employer, Tina was the only person who knew my address. But she also had a building access code and a key and wouldn't have bothered to knock before letting herself in. Besides, she should be safely hidden away at Kaos's house.

*So, who the hell is at my door?*

Turning off the water, I checked my phone, verifying that there were no new notifications from the building security app, indicating my visitor hadn't buzzed my apartment to request entry. Was it another tenant? Had Matt somehow weaseled his way past the security door? Would I get the opportunity to zap him and have him arrested? Morbidly hopeful, I tugged on my bathrobe and dashed down the hall.

Tap had installed a hidden camera in the exterior hallway, connecting the feed to a small monitor mounted in my entryway and a monitor at the Dead Presidents' headquarters. Knowing the bikers were keeping an eye on my place and would dispatch help if I was in danger was reassuring. However, I still reached for the Taser, exchanging my phone for the weapon, before my gaze shot to the entryway monitor.

Unfortunately, it wasn't Matt.

Instead, Rabbit, one of the bikers who'd left my apartment about twenty minutes ago, shuffled from foot to foot in front of my door. His movement didn't seem to result from nerves but rather from his inability to hold still. He'd exhibited the same behavior earlier, making me wonder if he suffered from attention deficit disorder. Possibly with hyperactivity.

He was unquestionably attractive, but as a dedicated—okay, obsessed—career girl, bad boys had never been on my radar. Before today, had I seen Rabbit on the street, I would have given him a wide berth. That same sense of self-preservation told me the best course of action now would be to ignore his knock and hide. But as I scrutinized the biker, grateful for the opportunity to do so undetected, he fascinated me. With long, wavy brown hair that lightened to blond at the ends and a matching beard, he looked more like a rugged mountain man who worked under the sun than one of Seattle's usual gray-sky hipsters. I'd never been much of a beard gal, but Rabbit's facial hair made me fantasize about sex on a soft flannel blanket in front of a cozy campfire. An alarmingly specific desire, but I chalked it up to residual small-town urges not yet stamped out by my personal city-girl evolution. This would also explain my peculiar fascination with his muscular

arms, broad shoulders, and powerful jaw. Though I'd resolved not to be a typical gatherer looking for the strength and security of a big bad hunter, my lady parts apparently hadn't received the memo. Hands and jeans stained with grease, arms covered in colorful tattoos, he wore a faded Metallica T-shirt under a black leather vest covered in patches. 'I'm a ray of fucking sunshine,' 'It's only kinky the first time,' and 'Stop reading my patches' were the first three to catch my eye, but there had to be at least a dozen others on the front panels alone.

He was like no man I'd ever dated, and I couldn't stop wondering what he'd be like in bed.

*Savage. Dangerous. Wild.*

Before I could come to my senses and question his presence, Rabbit lunged forward.

**BANG! BANG! BANG!**

I'd watched him knock, but the sound still nearly flung me out of my skin. Reflexively, I tightened my hold on the Taser and reached out to unlock the deadbolt and open the door. It swung toward me, and I leaned back, blurting out, "What are you doing here?"

I had manners. Or at least I used to. Aunt Victoria had seen to it, gifting me the book *Etiquette* by Emily Post, insisting it would turn me into a lady. Like my aunt, the book was terribly outdated and pretentious, but it taught me one thing: I'd rather be rude and curious than polite and stupid. I would not be shamed into silence when there was so much to learn. So, I left Aunt Victoria to stew in her ignorance, choosing instead to harass my ninth-grade science teacher until she promoted me to the teacher's aide position and gave me internet access.

Rabbit lifted his head. Piercing blue eyes stared directly into mine. He stopped fidgeting and froze as his gaze burned a path down my jawline, neck, and collarbone. I held my breath as his attention swiveled to my feet before trailing up my bare legs and pausing, making me wonder what all he could see.

Because I was wearing a flimsy silk robe that barely covered my ass.

The biker stared me down like I was a forbidden dessert he couldn't wait to have on his tongue. I was familiar with the look. It was the same way I eyed the homemade brownies at my neighborhood coffee shop. Every day, I resisted temptation, but Rabbit struck me as a man who didn't let consequences impede his cravings.

I should have been concerned about his intentions, but his rapt attention was heady. I felt drunk yet strangely alert, every synapse firing up and preparing for action. Even the air against my skin was charged with possibilities. Fear had no place in this moment. Rabbit would never hurt me. His disdain for men who abused women splashed across his face every time Matt was mentioned. By sharing his sister's story of abuse, he'd become an ally. One who clearly wasn't above committing a felony to protect the innocent. I empathized with his stance. The moment Tina showed up on my doorstep with one eye swollen shut, a busted lip, and a fist-sized hematoma covering the right side of her jaw, I'd experienced an overwhelming desire to break from legal and moral norms to exact justice. If given the opportunity, I would absolutely swerve onto a sidewalk to vehicularly execute the degenerate responsible for her pain. Without hesitation.

Rabbit was still watching me like he intended to gobble me up. Realizing I needed to put a stop to this, I stepped forward and snapped my fingers in front of his face.

“Eyes up here, buddy.”

He flinched before meeting my gaze.

Thankful I didn't have to surgically remove his eyeballs from my cleavage, I gave him a tight smile. “Hey. There you are. What are you doing here?”

“I... I...” Shaking his head, he paced a step to the left. Then, one to the right. Stopping abruptly, he tapped on the doorframe three times. Now that he was free to move again, he was like a caged animal. A caged rabbit? Was that how he'd gotten his biker name?

“Can I... come in?”





## Rabbit

Elenore stared at me like I'd sprouted a second head. "You want to come in?" she asked, repeating my request like it was the wildest suggestion she'd ever heard.

I nodded vigorously, bobbing my head like some useless collectible doll.

*Play it cool, dumbass. You look like an idiot.*

Forcing myself to stop, I rubbed at the back of my neck and tried to think up a sophisticated response. "That's why I knocked." Great. Now I sounded like a dick.

Her eyes narrowed. "Why are you here?"

*Why?* I had a perfectly valid reason for returning, but the sight of her wearing nothing but that silky robe was making it difficult to think. *Oh, right.* "I... I forgot my keys."

She glanced over her shoulder, peering into the apartment. "Where?"

The moment of truth. I could be honest and tell her exactly where I'd hidden them, but then I'd have to leave. And I wasn't ready for that yet.

*What the fuck do you think you're doing? You don't belong here. Shut your goddamn trap, grab 'em, and leave before she calls the cops. Women like her want nothing to do with fuckups like you, and Link will lose his shit if she files a restraining order.*

But she was so damn hot. All that pale, creamy flesh on display made my fingers ache to touch her, to see if her skin was as soft and smooth as it looked. The freckle beneath her collarbone—the one peeking out just above the robe covering her left breast—called to me, daring me to lean forward and lick it.

*Because that'll make you look less like a fucking creep.*

I'd already been called out for drooling over her breasts and sure as hell didn't need to add 'unwanted licking' to my offenses. I'd rather not have to explain that shit to Link.

"Don't know," I went to pull out my pockets again, but they were still inside out from when I'd shown them to Tap. Betting I looked like a train wreck, I stuffed them back into my pants. "But they gotta be in there somewhere. Let me in, and I'll retrace my steps and find them."

Her gaze swept over me. I wasn't stupid enough to believe she was checking me out, so she had to be assessing my threat level. Understandable since she was half my size, and I had military training. I could overpower and disarm her before she could scream. Was that fear in her eyes? What the hell? Why was everyone treating me like a goddamn criminal today?

"I'm not gonna fuckin' hurt you," I grumbled.

"Right. Of course not." She shook her head. "You're a member of the Dead Presidents Motorcycle Club. Bikers who help people. Tough exteriors, gooey interiors. Quintessential good guys in leather vests who swoop in and rescue women and children from abusive, khaki-clad scumbags. You're basically Boy Scouts on bikes."

I barked out a laugh, wishing Havoc was here. I'd give anything to see the big man's reaction to our club being referred to in such a way. It would make my life. "Nailed it. If Link ever decides to market, you should write our campaign."

A smile ghosted her lips. "I don't want to brag, but I have been called brilliant a time or two."

"Damn modest, too."

The grin she flashed me punched me in the gut and snatched the breath from my lungs. Nobody should be that beautiful. It wasn't fucking fair.

"I do what I can," she replied, gesturing me forward. "Come in. By the way, I meant to commend you earlier for the way you reassured my nephew. Tina's crazy if she thinks he doesn't know Matt was beating her. Dylan is smart, and he's a mess right now. You got on his level and distracted him with humor, making him feel seen and valued. Thank you for that."

Her praise made me uncomfortable. Like expectations and impending disappointment, and I didn't want that for her. Stepping into her condo, I closed the door behind me. "It was nothing. Kids are easy. It's adults who fuck everything up."

A cell phone dinged. Her gaze shot to the little table beside the door, and she reached for the phone, realizing the Taser was in her right hand. Giving me an apologetic smile, she kept the Taser in hand and stretched across with her left to grab the phone. Studying the display, she released her breath, and her shoulders relaxed.

"Tina and Dylan made it to Kaos's. They're safe."

I nodded, unsurprised but wanting to reassure her all the same. "Kaos is a solid dude. That crazy motherfucker enlisted in the military because he was bored and wanted to play hero. He won't let anything happen to them."

"You're a veteran, too, right?"

I gave her another nod, this one more curt and less enthusiastic. My time in the service was never up for discussion, but if she noticed my reluctance, she ignored it.

Her gaze flickered over me, snagging on my arms to take in the ink. "Why did *you* enlist?"

*Tell her the truth. Be honest. Let her know what a fucking loser she's dealing with.*

But she watched me like I was the most fascinating person she'd ever met, and I wasn't ready to shatter the illusion yet. I couldn't lie and make myself out to be a hero either, so I fumbled for a response. Glancing down at the tattoos that had

caught her attention, I came up with a version of the truth. “I was a scrawny kid who couldn’t afford a gym membership or ink.”

She cocked her head to the side, and her gaze met mine again. “Yet, unlike most of the population, you properly used ‘who’ instead of ‘that.’ You’re intelligent. Did you go to college?”

Was she... mocking me? I narrowed my eyes, trying to figure out her angle, but she seemed genuinely curious. And maybe even a little impressed.

*She wouldn’t look at you like that if she knew the truth.*

No, she sure as shit wouldn’t. She’d look at me like the others did. Like I was some wounded bunny caught in the snare of a fucked-up life. Just another asshole from the wrong side of the tracks who turned everything I touched into shit. But she knew nothing about me. I could pretend to be worthy of her attention for a bit longer.

“No. College is substantially more expensive than a gym membership. I started an *Only Fans* page to pay for my tuition, but nobody paid to see pictures of my fuckin’ feet.”

The side of her lips quirked, and her eyes lit up. “You’re funny.” Her expression turned thoughtful. “A real Roger Rabbit. Is that the reason for your biker name?”

“Road name,” I corrected because she was the type of chick who’d want to get shit right. “And... Roger Rabbit? Are you talkin’ about the cartoon?”

The disbelieving look she gave me was almost comical. “*Who Framed Roger Rabbit* wasn’t a cartoon,” she said, sounding offended. “It was a groundbreaking technical cinematic marvel that combined animation with live-action acting.”

I’d seen the movie a few times. To be honest, closer to a dozen or so. And I’d skipped over most of the flick to catch scenes with a particular character. Like most heterosexual guys my age, my teenage spank bank had been brimming with images of Jessica Rabbit.

“But back to your *road* name,” Elenore said. “I’m guessing they didn’t name you after Roger, did they?”

Amused, I shook my head. “Afraid not.”

Her eyes lit up. “Don’t tell me, let me guess.” She dropped her phone back onto the entryway table and thoughtfully tapped the Taser against her leg. “Is there a common theme to biker names?” Without waiting for me to reply, she plowed ahead. “It’s obvious they’re not all based on animals since I’ve met Tap and Kaos. Tap said your leader’s name is Link. If it weren’t for you, I’d believe violence to be the theme since Tap is slang for shooting someone, Link makes me think of chains which could be used as a weapon, and Kaos...well, chaos is every scientist’s worst nightmare.” She chuckled at her own joke. “I suppose rabbits could be vicious if cornered, but you’re definitely more of a Roger than a wild hare.”

Had I not seen her work through questions with Tap, I would have assumed she was rambling, but this was Elenore’s method. I enjoyed watching her brilliant mind at work, content she’d never crack the mystery of my road name.

“What are you smiling at?” Elenore asked.

“Just can’t get over the fact that someone as smart as you watches cartoons.”

She straightened. “I don’t watch cartoons, but if I did, there’d be nothing wrong with that. Studies show they positively benefit childhood linguistic, cognitive, emotional, physical, and social development levels, Roger.”

Nerdy shouldn’t be so damn hot, but it sure was on Elenore. I still didn’t know what to think of the nickname she’d given me, so I fucked with her a little. Lunging forward, I closed the distance between us, startling a gasp from her lips. She staggered a step back, then seemed to remember herself and planted her feet, staring up at me defiantly. This close, her hazel eyes were more green than brown. Hints of copper radiated from her pupils, and a thick, dark green band encircled her irises. Unique and fucking captivating, just like the woman herself. She smelled sweet and tempting. Unable to

help myself, I breathed deeply through my nose, savoring the scent and sighing my approval.

“W-what are you doing?”

“You think I’m a joke?” I asked. “A Roger Rabbit?”

Eyes wide, lips parted, she shook her head. “He’s not a joke. A little zany, yes, but not a joke. More like unconventional and idiosyncratic. And yes, from the behavior you’ve exhibited thus far, I’d say that’s an accurate description of you.”

I had to hand it to her, she wasn’t wrong. “Yeah? Well, I have a nickname for you, too. Postal.”

Her forehead wrinkled in confusion. “You think I’m in danger of a mental breakdown resulting in the deaths of all who’ve dared anger me?”

Oddly enough, she sounded more curious than offended. Filing that information away for later, I took a step back and let my gaze gobble up her body as I fisted my hands to keep myself from touching her.

“No. It’s your... assets. Fuckin’ perfection. I could never pick one thing about you that’s better than the rest. You’re the full package. Postal.”

She folded her arms across her chest, pointing the Taser toward me. “I think I’d rather be nicknamed for my propensity to snap.”

“Okay, fine. We’ll go with that story. I’ll call you Poe for short.” Grinning, I let my gaze drop to the weapon and quoted the only *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* line I could remember. “Is that a rabbit in your pocket, or are you just happy to see me?”

“Now you’re just trying too hard.” She gestured toward the living room. “Probably best to retrieve your keys and go.”

Not even five minutes had passed since she’d opened the door, and I’d already disappointed her. That checked out. Once again defeated by my number one nemesis—me—it was time to come clean. I marched to the sectional, slid my hand in the crack between the armrest and chaise lounge, and lifted my

keys. Yep, I'd known exactly where they were and had lied to her. Tossing them into the air, I caught them and stuffed them into my pocket.

"You...." She narrowed her eyes at me and tightened her hold on the Taser. "You didn't leave your keys behind; you stashed them. Why?"

"For someone as smart as you, it should be obvious. I wanted to see you again."

Her expression was unreadable as she wagged the Taser at me. "You should leave."

Yeah, but I rarely did what anyone expected. And I stayed away from smart choices altogether. This was likely the last moment I'd get with Elenore, and I was determined to enjoy it fully. Holding her gaze, I prowled toward her until her weapon pressed against my chest. Determination squared her shoulders as she adjusted the Taser in her grip. She'd already powered it on. All she had to do was press one little button, and I'd get 50,000 volts of electricity directly to the sternum. I wasn't even sure my heart could survive a blast like that.

I grinned. "Gonna zap me, babe? Normally, I have to pay extra for that."

Fear skittered across her features.

*You're scaring her, jackass.*

I could have softened my tone, apologized, and pretended to be a gentleman, but with the way Elenore was looking at me, I could tell we were well beyond pretenses. "You see the real me now, don't you?"

She nodded. "You're no Boy Scout on a bike." There was a slight tremble in her voice, but determination had replaced her fear.

I didn't know what the hell to make of that. "I'm leaving. If I come back, don't open your door." My gaze drifted back down to that goddamn robe. "Especially not wearing that."

Another nod. "I won't."

“Good.” This was it. Past time to walk out of her life. Determined, I turned and strode toward the door. But as I reached for the handle, she stopped me.

“Wait. What you said about your sister... was that true? Or did you lie about that, too?”

The question caught me off guard and kicked me in the gut. Still facing the door, I asked, “Why do you want to know?”

“Because Tina finally escaped Matt.” She drew in a deep breath. “And then that bastard jumped her outside of her workplace and beat the shit out of her.” Her voice cracked with emotion. Pausing, she swallowed and started again. “On average, three women are killed in the US every day by their intimate partner. I refuse to allow my sister to be one of them. She and Dylan are the only family I have left, and I will do whatever I must to protect them.”

My respect for Elenore ballooned, becoming a pressure in my chest. I’d been where she was now. Afraid for someone I loved, wanting to do something, but so fucking helpless. I should have held my tongue, but I couldn’t.

“Rose *did* date a guy who smacked her around. I *was* in Afghanistan and couldn’t do shit about it. But man, did I ever want to. The motherfucker stole that privilege from me by getting himself locked up for armed robbery before I came home.”

“And he’s still in jail?”

I shook my head. “Got out last year on good behavior.”

Her eyes widened at this new information. “Where is he now?”

“Disappeared.” I shrugged, careful not to give anything away. “Nobody’s seen him since.”

I expected fear, but realization and then respect stared back at me from those unique hazel irises. Maybe she didn’t always do what people expected, either. Regardless, her reaction encouraged me to share more... to show her I could be helpful, even as fucked-up as I was.



“The world is a dangerous place, full of unsolved mysteries.” I shrugged again. “Who knows? Maybe Matt will come up missing, too.”

She considered me for a beat. Just as I started to worry she might be an undercover FBI agent or some shit like that, she bobbed her head. “You know, Boy Scouts are great and all, but not every situation calls for a hero. Sometimes, a little vigilante justice is required.”

My mind stuttered over the words as I struggled to unpack their meaning. I got the strangest feeling this woman understood me, but that was impossible. Nobody—not even the brothers trying to save me—truly got me. And they sure as hell didn’t approve of my methods.

*You’re so goddamn desperate for acceptance, you’re seeing what you want to see. Fucking loser.*

I needed to get out of there and get my head on straight before I said or did something even more asinine than implicating myself in a missing person case. But I was also a masochistic motherfucker, so I tormented myself with one last look at Elenore. Taser in one hand, pebbled nipples straining against her silky robe, she stood directly in front of me but would forever be out of my reach.

Bowing, I tipped my invisible hat to her—because why the fuck not—and said, “Goodbye, Poe. It’s been a fuckin’ pleasure.”

Then, I did the kindest thing I could. I turned and walked out of her life.



Elenore

You still safe?

I fired off the text message to Tina, keeping one eye on my cell screen, anxiously awaiting her response as I exited my apartment building. It was early Monday morning, and I was exhausted and inexplicably keyed up. An odd combination that made me want to crawl back into bed even though I'd never be able to fall back to sleep. After yesterday's bizarre interaction with Rabbit, I'd showered, dressed, and gone to the lab to log test results. With one inconclusive test and another inconsistent with previous data, I'd restarted the entire set. I'd stayed way too late, and it was well past midnight by the time I crawled into bed. And then I'd stared at my ceiling for hours, worrying about Tina and Dylan. Now, my stomach felt queasy, and my eyes stung.

The dreary Seattle sky did not improve my mood, but I had responsibilities to fulfill and bills to pay, so I flipped up the hood of my waterproof peacoat and slid from one building awning to the next. When I'd first moved to the rainy city, I'd found it odd that nobody used umbrellas. I'd assumed it was some silly show of pride to distinguish the locals from the tourists. Now, I knew better. The frequent yet unpredictable nature of the rain meant an umbrella would have to be carried at all times, only to be opened sporadically. It was hardly worth the trouble.

I glanced at my phone again. The text to Tina remained unread, which increased my apprehension and made me want to scream with frustration. What if something had happened to them? Would Tap notify me? And what if Tina never answered her phone? I didn't know where they were staying and, therefore, couldn't send the police to do a welfare check. I hadn't even gotten Kaos's real name.

*Relax. It's still early. They're probably sleeping.*

And I needed to trust in the biker equivalent of protective custody to keep them safe. There was no need to worry. Not yet, anyway. Wrapping my fingers around the Taser in my pocket, I tried to dismiss the icy fingers of unease raking up my spine. With my phone in one hand and the Taser in the other, I likely embodied the spirit of paranoia, but I couldn't shake the feeling that something disastrous was about to go down. No matter how frequently I reminded myself there was no scientific evidence to support precognition, and if it were an actual phenomenon, surely my sister-senses would have kicked in before now. Where was this reaction the many times Tina was getting the snot beat out of her?

Still no response from my sister. Pocketing my cell phone and releasing my hold on the Taser, I hopped the two remaining awnings before ducking into my favorite local coffee shop. The aroma of freshly baked pastries and roasted beans enveloped me in familiarity, lifting my mood and filling me with hope that I could, in fact, make this day my bitch after all. Eager for my fix, I took my place in the back of the line and waited, drooling over a glass-covered plate of brownies.

*A moment on the lips, forever on the hips,* a feminine voice taunted from the back of my mind.

Another pearl of wisdom from Aunt Victoria. As a child, I'd been overweight, a condition that only worsened after my mother's death. Aunt Victoria had been disgusted by my weight and determined to help me slim down so I could fulfill what she doubtlessly saw as every woman's sole purpose: landing a good husband. But her passive-aggressive jabs at my weight and eating habits had helped me lose weight. And today, like every day, they kept me from ordering a brownie.

The door chimed, announcing the arrival of a new customer. I automatically curled my hand around the Taser in my pocket and turned. The newcomer wasn't someone I recognized, so I released the weapon, pulled my phone out, and checked for messages again. Still no response from Tina.

The barista called out a name as my phone finally pinged. Shuffling forward with the line, I read my sister's message.

T

We are safe. Getting the boy ready for school.

She'd given her phone to Tap in case Matt tried to use it to find her and was using a loaner from the bikers. Assuming she'd eventually get her phone back, I hadn't bothered to enter more than her first initial into the contact information. Regardless, the response flooded me with relief.

The door chimed, and like before, my heart rate kicked up as I turned and looked, still feeling like a paranoid idiot. Another stranger, a woman this time. She slid into the back of the line and focused on her cell phone. The line lurched forward again, and the barista called out another name as I responded to my sister.

Update me when you have time.

Kk. Will message later.

My fingers hovered over the keys briefly before typing out one more message.

Love you.

Tina and I had never been super affectionate, not even after Mom died. But this shit with Matt had frightened both of us, and we'd been closing out our correspondence more frequently than not with those two words. And even though my sister loved me, typing the phrase first still made me feel vulnerable. Like revealing the open wounds my childhood had left behind and begging her not to salt them. Most of me knew

she would never compound my damage, but people were flawed creatures, and trust was a complicated emotion. There was a reason I kept almost everyone at arm's length.

T

Love you, too. Have a good day!

“Good morning. What can I get for you?” someone asked.

Lowering my phone to give the barista my full attention, I ordered a simple oat milk latte and cast one last longing look at the brownies before paying and sliding away from the crowd to wait.

The door chimed again. I glanced up and froze as a familiar figure stepped inside and shook his head, flinging water droplets as he wiped his loafers on the mat. It had been at least two years since I'd seen him in person, which, in hindsight, should have set off all kinds of alarms. He'd skipped Dylan's past two birthdays, and they spent holidays with his parents. I'd never been invited to join them. Not like I would have gone. Matt Parker had always had an entitled frat boy vibe that did not make me eager to spend time with the uppity breeders responsible for his existence. Now, I wish I had exchanged numbers with them at the wedding. I'd call and rip into them for raising such an egotistical miscreant.

Regardless, I'd recognize Matt anywhere. His sharp, blue-eyed gaze scanned the crowd before slamming into mine. The smile stretching across his face had to be fake, but it looked convincing. Like he'd just recognized an old friend. Ignoring the line, he headed straight for me. Dressed for an average day at the office, he wore an open wool coat over a crisp gray button-up and black slacks. Professionally styled short blond hair and a crater-sized dimple in his right cheek made him look harmless and almost sweet. A real guy-next-door, he had no horns, tail, or anything else to expose him as the demon he was. There should have at least been an evil gleam in his eyes, but no. He looked normal. As he approached, his smile widened, revealing straight, white teeth.

“Elenore.” His tone was friendly as he opened his arms.

It took me a moment to realize he intended to hug me.

My sister's abuser.

Did he really expect me to allow that? Feeling cornered, I took a big step back, thrusting my hand into the space between us in the universal sign for him to stop.

He slowly dropped his hands, and his friendly expression morphed into concern. "What's wrong, El? Aren't you happy to see me?"

Was he for real? "Not in the least. What do you want, Matt?"

A few heads turned at my sharp tone as we snagged the interest of an audience. Most still pretended to watch their phone, but I could feel their scrutiny. Growing up in a small town had taught me exactly how nosey people could be. And boy, did crowds like drama.

The fingers of my right hand had encircled the Taser, feeling for the power button. I turned it on, even though it would be unwise to use it in front of all these witnesses unless Matt attacked me.

Perhaps I could provoke him, but how?

I suddenly wished we were better acquainted so I would know the best way to bring him down. Despite technically being family, we'd never spent much time together. I'd dined with him and Tina a few times before they got married, but back then, he'd struck me as basic and boring. We had no common interests, and our conversations were always forced and uncomfortable. After they tied the knot, he was always busy whenever Tina and I got together, and I'd been relieved to not have to deal with him.

"What do you want?" I repeated, not bothering to mask my disdain.

His eyes hardened at my tone, but his smile didn't falter as he looked me over. "Long time no see. You look great. Very professional and all grown up."

Caught off guard, I glanced down at myself. Beneath my open peacoat, I wore a cream-colored blouse, dark slacks, and comfortable pumps. As usual, I'd slicked my hair back into a low bun to complete the look my stylist referred to as 'business-powerful.' I called it 'yes-I-have-boobs-but-respect-me-anyway.' My closet held twelve similar outfits, and I'd been instructed how to mix and match clothes and accessories to create a month's worth of acceptable looks. And, because I didn't trust my fashion sense, I'd taken pictures of each combination so I didn't accidentally mismatch.

This was what I always wore, but Matt's reaction to my outfit gave me pause. I'd met him as an adult, but he made it sound like we'd been close since childhood. Was he trying to establish some imaginary history between us? Why? Glancing around, I found the answer in the cluster of people still pretending not to watch us.

Matt wasn't finished putting on his show. "Tina tells me you landed a job in a local laboratory. That's fantastic." His smile threatened to blind me. "I always knew you'd be a success. Proud of you, little sis."

*Little sis?* The look on his face told me he was seconds away from patting me on the head. If he so much as tried, I would zap him so hard his balls would shrivel, witnesses be damned.

"I am *not* remotely related to you. So, I ask again, what do you want?" I repeated.

"What? I can't stop by and check on you from time to time?"

Matt lived in Duvall and worked in Redmond. Both locations were a toll bridge and at least a half hour away. The commute to downtown took forever in rush hour traffic. He'd never checked on me once in the years I'd known him, but his concern seemed so honest and genuine. Even I struggled to separate the image he was creating for himself from what I knew to be true. I wanted to call him out on his lies, but I worried nobody would believe me.

Instead, I said nothing, merely raising my eyebrows to let him know I was onto his little charade.

The smile finally slid from his face. He blew out a breath, and worry shadowed his eyes. His words took on a slight tremble as he said, “I’m worried about my wife and son. She asked for time to work through her issues, and I’m doing my best to give her what she needs, but it’s tearing me up to be away from her. She told me they’re staying with you, but her car isn’t in your garage, and she’s not answering any of my calls or texts. I... I don’t know what to do. Tina is the love of my life. She and Dylan are my entire world. She’s been acting strange lately, and I need to know... Is there another man in the picture? Is she cheating on me?”

I stared at him, aghast. *Her* issues? *Her* cheating? What bizarro world had he stumbled out of? And how could he seem so genuine? I’d seen the evidence of Matt’s love and devotion with my own two eyes. Yet, my mind still stuttered over his behavior, wondering if I somehow misunderstood the situation. After everything he’d done to her, he should know better than to play the victim with me. Yet here he was, acting confused and wrecked by her absence.

Was this performance for my benefit?

He shouldn’t have bothered. Tina had bruises. She had scars from this man, both physical and emotional. The perceived sincerity of his concern didn’t matter because it wasn’t true. How dare this bastard come to me looking for sympathy.

“So, *this* is gaslighting,” I acknowledged aloud. “I’ve read about it, but I don’t think anyone’s ever attempted it on me. It’s so bizarre. I *saw* the bruises *you* put on my sister. Do you know the pinky toe on her left foot will forever be crooked? She could have an expensive surgery with a sixty-three percent chance of success. You’re the one who should pay for it, but she’s choosing to live with the pain since *you* turned her into a broke single mother the minute YOU RAISED YOUR FIST TO HER!”



Matt's eyes were wide with a combination of fear and surprise that would have been comical had I not been holding the business end of my Taser to his neck. The coffee shop was alarmingly silent, and I could feel the attention of every single person directed toward Matt and me. I had just aired my sister's dirty laundry in front of at least a dozen strangers. And, of course, threatened a man with a weapon. As I registered the potential consequences of my actions, I calculated the odds of Matt surviving a point-blank shot to the trachea and of me beating a murder charge with this many witnesses. If I was going to off him, I needed to go full-on lunatic because temporary insanity would be my best defense.

Which threw up a red flag about the entire plan.

Straightening, I pulled my hand back, powering off the Taser to slide it back into my pocket.

"You're as crazy as she is," Matt said, reading the room. "You all saw that, right? The psychotic bitch assaulted me with a weapon."

I lived in a city bursting with strangers and shouldn't care what this coffee shop thought of me, but I did. My inner small-town girl was a survivor, no matter how many times I tried to choke the life out of her. I spun to face the crowd. "He abused my sister. Tell me you wouldn't behave the same."

"I don't know what she told you, but she's unwell. She's been self-harming and making up stories. I hate to say it, but she needs professional help," Matt said to my back.

His words were so full of concern I spun back to face him. He looked... legitimately worried. Maybe he was now, but he'd hurt her. Repeatedly. This was why she went back to him. Why she'd stayed so long. He was good. A skilled narcissist and master manipulator.

"I love Tina and want to get her the help she needs before it's too late. Tell her to contact me, and I'll forgive your attack. If I don't hear from her by Wednesday at nine a.m., you'll be hearing from my lawyer." He plucked a business card from his pocket and extended it toward me.

I had no intention of calling him, but I reached for it all the same. I could do plenty of other things with his direct phone number. Perhaps I'd use it to request information about erectile dysfunction and register him on sites that tracked STDs. This baby was absolutely going on men's room bathroom stalls directly under the words 'Free blowjobs.'

Matt turned and left.

"Elenore?"

My name was a hesitant question coming from the counter. I followed the voice to see my coffee waiting. The barista eyed me like she had one finger on a panic button. One sudden move from me, she'd press it. That was... insulting. I'd been coming to this shop for years and never once displayed aggressive behavior. One brief outburst, and suddenly, half of our audience was looking at me like I was a serial killer. The other half looked like they weren't sure. Only one woman glared at the door Matt had retreated through. At least someone other than me knew a lying bastard when she saw one.

The still-stunned crowd parted like the Red Sea for Moses as I made my way to the front, keeping my chin up and avoiding eye contact.

Matt Parker had just outplayed me, and now a lawsuit might be in my future. Plucking my coffee from the counter, I turned and walked out the door, irritated.

On top of it all, now I'd have to find a new coffee shop.



## Rabbit

Rolling my bike to a stop, I killed the engine and scanned the two-bedroom trailer before me. Mom hated the term ‘trailer’ and corrected me every time I used it, but what else would I call it? Manufactured home? It sure as shit had never been a home to me. ‘Home’ implied security and affection, two things utterly absent from this shithole. Instead, it oozed tension and foreboding, like something was about to happen that I wanted nothing to do with. I fucking hated drama, and Mom’s trailer reeked of it.

*Manufactured home, my ass.*

The old fire station the club used as its headquarters was the only home I’d ever known. I’d give my left nut to be back there now, rolling out of bed and getting ready for work without this task looming over my head. Hopefully, I wouldn’t be here long.

Lowering the bike’s jiffy stand, I ignored how my hands shook and yanked my phone from my pocket. The sooner I could notify Rose of my arrival, the sooner we could get out of Dodge. The roar of my bike should have done the trick, but the way my little sister blasted music in her earbuds ensured she rarely heard anything in the world around her. I didn’t know how she did it. I’d be paranoid that someone would sneak up on me.

My cell phone was dead. I mashed the button again, hoping the universe would gift me with enough juice to make

one last text, but nothing happened. My fault entirely since I hadn't plugged it in last night. It had been sitting on top of my nightstand—not my dresser where my cord waited—because I'd stayed up way too late on social media, jerking off to pictures of Elenore. Like a goddamn creep.

I didn't know what the fuck was wrong with me. They hadn't even been bikini shots since she was too classy to post those. I'd searched. No, I'd choked my chicken to images of her in business attire. In my favorite picture, she wore a navy blue blazer over a silky white blouse and a tight-ass navy skirt. Her hair had been done up, showing off her long, slender neck, and she'd been wearing dark-framed glasses as she stood in front of a whiteboard with a dry-erase marker in one hand.

I never had a thing for teachers, but I also had never seen one who looked like that. Hot damn. You better believe I saved the picture on my phone along with a half dozen others. My newest obsession made me feel a little like a pervert, but I'd come to terms with it.

I glared at the door, cussing out Rose for putting me up to this. As a grown-ass adult, she should clean up her own shit. I'd already done more for her than anyone had ever done for me when I was her age. I'd found her a dependable little Hyundai Accent at the auto auction and fixed it up so she'd have a safe ride to work. That car should have run for years, but she'd fucked up and totaled it.

I loved my sister and would do anything for her, but she was a shitty-ass driver who wouldn't stop texting while she was behind the goddamn wheel. A fact I'd discovered when—after her third fender bender—I hid a camera on the dashboard. Armed with video evidence of her crime, I called her out for lying to me only to have my head bitten off for “invading her privacy,” insisting I could have caught her in a compromising position with a man.

That was when I lost my shit.

No man wants to hear about his little sister having sex, especially not in the car I fixed up for her. Where was the goddamn respect? And what the fuck would she want with a

loser who didn't even have his own place to take her to? Her dates should, at the very least, be able to afford a hotel room.

But, of course, I couldn't make my pigheaded baby sister understand any of that. She'd flat-out refused to talk to me until I removed the camera and promised never to spy on her again. In return, she'd vowed to quit texting and driving. I'd made good on my end of the bargain, but apparently, Rose hadn't done the same.

Last week, she'd slammed into the ass end of a Dodge Ram on the freeway, turning her Hyundai into an accordion. If her attention hadn't been on her phone, what the hell had it been on? Sure as fuck, not the road. They'd had to pry her ass out of that vehicle. I was no stranger to fear, but nothing in my life had terrified me as much as the phone call that she'd been in an accident and was on her way to the hospital.

Hell, I'd had nightmares about that phone call.

But in the end, Rose had limped away with nothing more than a sprained ankle and a concussion. I was waiting until she fully recovered to lay into her, but that conversation was coming.

I was still pissed at her, but not enough to say no when she called yesterday and asked me to take her to work this morning. I should have told her to take the bus, but I'd given in since the closest stop was about a quarter of a mile away. She couldn't walk that far on a sprained ankle. So, here I was, up at the ass crack of dawn, trying to muster up the courage to approach a motherfucking door.

*Don't be a coward, dumbass. It's just a door. Rose needs you. She asked you for help.*

I'd rather let a Ford F450 drive over my left foot, but I'd made a promise to my sister and was determined to keep it. Squaring my shoulders, I dismounted the bike and followed the crumbling cement pathway to the front porch. Anxiety tightened my chest. My heart thrummed in my ears, louder and faster with each step.

Weathered boards creaked under my weight as I climbed the steps and paused before the door. My anxiety kicked up another notch, skittering up my spine like dozens of tiny spider legs. I lifted my hand to knock, but before I could, the knob turned, and the door swung inward.

Mom stood in the doorway. I'd seen her at the hospital after Rose's accident, but it had been almost ten years since I'd really looked at my mom. She'd aged. The lines around her eyes and lips had deepened, and her steely, grey eyes were dull and watery. She wore faded pink pajamas she'd owned for as long as I could remember.

She studied me like I was a defective fuel pump she couldn't fix, an expression I was well accustomed to since it was the only one she wore when she looked at me. After a beat, she shook her head and gave me a derisive snort. "Hm. You actually showed up."

Mom's aim had always been true. She knew exactly where to hit me to do the most damage. I instinctively wanted to fire back, to verbally destroy her like she always did me, but she was my mom. I'd long ago learned it was better to just concede and walk away.

"Rose ready?" I asked.

Mom shook her head, chuckling in that humorless way she did whenever I disappointed her. "Not even a hello for the woman who birthed you? No 'good morning' or 'how have you been'? What about an apology? Can I get a 'sorry I screwed up your life'? You know, Child Services came to check on Rose after your little stunt. She could have ended up in foster care because of what you did. And you... you never even wrote or called. Didn't even have the decency to drive by and flip me off so I could see you were alive."

She'd pushed me out, and now she was pissed I hadn't returned? If I lived to be a hundred, I would never understand what the fuck she wanted from me.

"I didn't even know you were back until Rose brought home that car, and I forced her to tell me where she got it. She

said you made her promise to keep your return a secret. How do you think that makes me feel?”

I shuffled from foot to foot, desperate to be anywhere but on the front porch of this goddamn trailer. Mom had stopped speaking, and I realized she was waiting for an answer. “I don’t know. Relieved?”

I’d been going for honesty, but the anger that flashed in her eyes made me want to stuff my steel-toed boot in my mouth. “Always such a goddamn smartass. Just like your goddamn father.”

Did she really wonder why I’d never come back? Why the fuck would she care? My useless sack of shit sperm donor had knocked her up when she was sixteen, and he was in his mid-twenties. A real knight in shining armor, preying on teenage girls. He’d sold her the idea of a clandestine affair, never giving her his address, full name, or any other information that would have enabled her to file for child support. And the moment her belly started to swell with me, the motherfucker bailed. I’d never touched an underage girl in my life, and I sure as shit didn’t lie to the women I slept with. They knew my damage from the beginning, so I didn’t have to worry about anyone getting attached. I wasn’t my sperm donor, and I hated being compared to him.

What had I been thinking to make this promise to Rose? I’d known seeing Mom would lead to this. It always did. Memories flooded in. Suddenly, I was eighteen again, standing on this very porch, knowing I’d fucked up for good this time and wondering what the hell to do now.

*A pair of gray boxers caught a breeze and rolled across the yard. My belongings were strewn out everywhere. She’d thrown it out in a rage, not even bothering to box it up. She didn’t want me here—I’d known that for a long time—but she’d never gone this far to remove me.*

*“I told you to stay the fuck out of it!” she shouted from the door. “You had no right to ruin this for me. After everything I’ve done for you, don’t I deserve a little goddamn happiness?”*

*“He’s a fuckin’ criminal,” I fired back. I’d been trying to tell her as much for days, but she refused to listen. Instead, she planned to move his ass into our trailer. Over my dead body.*

*“He was wrongfully accused.”*

*“Maybe.” I shrugged, doubting it. “But that’s not a chance I’m willing to take with Rose.”*

*“It’s not up to you. I’m the parent, and this is my goddamn house. I warned you there’d be consequences, but you always fucking push me. This time, you’ve gone too far. Leave. You’re not welcome here anymore.”*

*Had I ever been welcome there? For as long as I could remember, she’d treated me like a burden. Like a prison sentence she had to endure until her time was up. Judging by the clothes strewn across her yard, she’d finally figured out a way to break free. “Where the hell am I supposed to go?”*

*Her expression hardened. “Don’t know, don’t care. Get your shit and get off my property before I call the cops.”*

*I tried to look around her into the darkness of the trailer to search for my little sister. What did she think about this? She hated it when Mom yelled, and she was probably scared shitless in there, cowering in a corner as tears streaked down her face. “Where’s Rose?”*

*“Rosemary is no longer your concern.”*

*“Don’t I even get to say goodbye to her?”*

*“Did you let me say goodbye to Tristan?” She shook her head. “You made your bed. You have five minutes to leave before I call the cops.” Turning her back on me, my mother walked back into her house and closed the door.*

*The lock engaged with an ominous click as the hopelessness of my situation settled in. I wasn’t sorry for what I’d done, though I did regret the consequences. Mom might be the parent, but she didn’t always have Rose’s best interests in mind. I’d always been my sister’s protector, and now she’d have to protect herself. I wanted to take her with me, but I had nowhere to go. Nobody wanted a bastard fuckup.*



Mom's bitching brought me back to the present. She looked at me with such open disgust it made my head ring. My vision blurred, and my ears buzzed as another flashback slammed into me, chasing me deeper down the rabbit hole.

*Sand. Everywhere. Gunfire getting louder, and enemy soldiers are closing in. How do they know we're here? What happened to our distraction? Up ahead, Sergeant Torre turns and signals to retreat as the order comes over my earpiece. The sergeant jerks, and darkness blossoms from his midsection, blood painting his fatigues. He's been hit! He falls as a bullet whizzes by my head, mere inches away. Dirt explodes next to me. Someone screams.*

*Run away, little rabbit. Run and hide.*

Smack, smack, smack.

Smack, smack, smack.

I kept hitting my leg in bursts, trying to bring myself back to the present. But the past kept nipping at my heels. I could feel its teeth, ready to rip into me and tear me to shreds. It had been a while since this fear—this terror—had held me in its grip. I'd forgotten how deep its claws rake and rend. How quickly it could steal the air from my lungs and the strength from my muscles.

Mom was talking again, but I couldn't focus on her words. There was too much going on around me, too many battles being fought in my head.

*More gunfire. Coming from everywhere. Surrounding us. There's nowhere to run. Another soldier falls. Another. I need to fucking flee!*

Spinning around, I zeroed in on my bike. My heart hammered against my ribs, feeling too tight for my chest. Blood surged through my veins, stealing my breath and blurring the edges of my vision, trying to swallow me whole. If I could just make it back to the fire station, I'd be safe. All the destruction, all the shit I'd left behind, couldn't find me there. My brothers would shield me.

I needed to get *home*.

“Unbelievable.” Mom’s derision reverberated through my bones. “You’re not even gonna wait for her, are you?”

Her words should mean something to me, but for the life of me, I couldn’t figure out what. It was taking every ounce of my focus to keep putting one foot in front of the other. I wanted to run—to drop all bullshit pretenses and sprint for the bike that would drive me to safety—but that could draw their attention. Stealth, not speed, would save me.

“Of course, you’re not. Why would Rose depend on you? You’re just like your goddamn father. Whenever shit gets tough, you run. Good to know some things will never change. I told her not to expect more from you. I fucking told her you’d only let her down!”

The words pierced my skin like bullets, driving deep into my flesh and bones, shredding all the walls I’d built to hide behind.

But there was no escaping the truth.



## Rabbit

“Rabbit. Come out from under there, brother,” said a familiar gruff voice. Its owner had quit his two-pack-a-day habit six months ago, but for the life of me, I couldn’t remember the man’s name. I should. He wasn’t blood, but he was fucking family. I’d bet my left testicle on it. Why couldn’t I remember his name? “We have that engine rebuild on Mrs. Oleson’s caddy today, remember? Goddammit, you’re the one who told her we’d bend over and take it up the ass on labor. You better get out here because I’m not the only one working for free today.”

His words punctured the noise in my brain, but sure as shit didn’t compute.

*Out from under where? What caddy? Who is Mrs. Oleson?*

My head went silent, and then an image of an elderly widow with kind eyes popped into my head. She had a grandson who died in the service last year, leaving no one else to take care of her.

*Fuck, yes, we’re fixing her engine for free. Just as soon as I can figure out what’s going on.*

The iconic riff of AC/DC’s “Thunderstruck” played in the background, fading out before a boisterous DJ came on to announce a giveaway for tickets to an upcoming Aerosmith concert. I breathed in through my nose, inhaling the familiar dark aroma of coffee, oil, rubber, gasoline, and exhaust. The

sounds and odors were all familiar and calming, grounding me.

I opened my eyes.

I was sitting on a hard cement floor with my hands wrapped around my legs and my head resting against my knees. Under the breakroom table at Formation Auto Repair, the club's auto shop, was where I worked Monday through Friday and every other Saturday. Not because long hours were a requirement but because I had nothing else to do. Besides, work kept me out of trouble. Mostly.

*How the fuck did I get here?*

Fractured memories pieced together in my mind, and I recalled that there had been something different about this morning.

*What was it?*

Footsteps approached from the left.

“What’s going on?” a second voice asked. Wasp. His name came to me instantly. No surprise, considering the debt I owed to the man. Despite my past and my psych eval, he’d given me a job. I’d been promoted three times, and panic squeezed my chest as I realized I must have had another goddamn episode.

And someone had found me under the breakroom table and reported it to the boss.

*Fucking awesome.*

Knowing I was a fuckup didn’t make dealing with the consequences of my actions any easier. Goddammit, this was why I rarely left the club properties. Stress was a trigger, and the rest of the world could be a stressful place. I limited my exposure, and as a result, my episodes were rare and manageable.

“It’s Rabbit. I don’t know what’s wrong with him, but he won’t respond,” the first guy answered. My scattered thoughts pieced together an image. Shaved head, nose ring, and skin so pale I would have sworn he was albino had it not been for his dark eyes... Zombie.

“Go get Sage,” Wasp ordered.

“Yessir.”

Boots pounded against the concrete, retreating. The Z-man had to be anxious as fuck to get away from this shitshow. I couldn't blame him. I was ready to bolt myself. It had been about six months since my last freak-out. That time, I'd woken up in my closet, brain in a fog, and muscles stiff and sore. But at least there'd been no witnesses. This time, shit would be different.

Knowing I couldn't avoid facing Wasp any longer, I sucked in a bolstering breath and stretched out my legs, wincing at the stiffness. How long had I been under the table? I'd have pulled out my phone to check the time, but it was dead. Other fragmented memories stitched themselves together, and I swore at the image they created.

*Rose.*

I'd gone to pick her up, parked, and then... nothing. Scratch that, there was something. *Someone*, rather. Mom. She'd opened the door, and... blackness. That must have been when my mind checked out. How had I even gotten back to the shop?

Darkness blotted out the light between two chairs, and Wasp appeared. Concern dug deep grooves across his forehead, and his uncertain smile made me want to laugh. Or punch him. I wasn't sure which.

“Hey, brother, you okay?”

He was usually a joker, all laughs and witty barbs, and his gentle tone grated on my nerves. My life had never been easy, but I wasn't fucking fragile. I'd had an episode, like lots of other vets. It was no big deal; he needed to stop looking at me like I was about to shatter.

“I'm fine.” I slid out from under the table, standing to stretch my limbs.

Wasp pushed up beside me. “Nothing about this is fine. Zombie went to get Sage, and I really think you should—”

“No.”

“Rabbit, I...”

“Forget it. You know how I feel about this.”

All the club’s officers pushed therapy like it was made of sunshine and tequila, but I knew the truth. The service had forced a psychologist on me, and that idiot hadn’t done jack shit other than recommend a medical discharge. He didn’t care that I had nowhere to go and no future waiting for me. The bastard just wanted me out before I got someone killed. Sage could be a decent guy, but he reported to Link. The club president knew I was fucked up, but he didn’t know the extent. And I sure as hell didn’t want him to. Today had been a mistake. I never should have promised to pick Rose up. It was stupid of me to think I could return to that house like it wasn’t the start of all this shit. But now that I’d reinforced my limits, I wouldn’t repeat that mistake. Rose would have to find a different ride to work. She’d understand.

Mom was right; my sister should know better than to depend on me. She’d told me as much when I stood at her door this morning, and now I could remember that little tidbit, too. I still had no idea how I’d gotten from Mom’s place in Tukwila to the shop, but maybe that’d come back to me eventually.

“You can trust Sage. He’s not like the—”

“Don’t care. I’m not talking to him, and that’s final. Can you just give me a fucking minute to collect myself?”

I didn’t need therapy. What I needed was for him to get off my back so I could process the fact now everyone would know I’d been hiding under the table like some frightened pussy. My brothers gossiped worse than any little old ladies I’d ever seen.

Wasp narrowed his eyes at me. “You’re supposed to be on the clock right now. You didn’t sign in, you didn’t call, and then Zombie found you under a fuckin’ table. Nothing about that is fine. You need to talk to someone, and Sage is qualified to deal with this shit. There’s no shame in getting help.”

He didn't understand. Wasp had grown up in an upper-middle-class family, raised by parents who were still married. Everyone liked and respected him. He had a wife and two kids who thought he walked on fucking water. He was Link's vice president, and he'd turned the shop into a well-oiled machine. We always met our goals while still managing to help veterans who couldn't pay the full price for repairs. I'd bet he'd never been kicked out of anywhere in his life.

Anger burned away the last of my humiliation, and I glared right back at the entitled prick. "Great. If I ever need help, I'll be sure to ask for it."

"Dammit, Rabbit." He stabbed a hand through his hair and rubbed the back of his neck like *I* was harassing *him*. "I'm trying to help you. Don't make me be a dick about this."

"Too late, cocksucker. You may be my fuckin' boss, but not even you can force me to get therapy."

"Like hell, I can't. You are the best mechanic we have. I won't lose you because you're being a stubborn asshole. You're not clockin' in until Sage gives you the all-clear."

The bastard was relentless. "I have an engine rebuild today. And I'm donating my labor."

"I don't care. I'll pay someone else to do it."

Now, he was just being stubborn. "I told you, I'm not talking to him. Not ever."

"Fine. Then take the rest of the week off."

My jaw dropped. I studied his expression, waiting for the 'gotcha' moment, but the bastard was serious. "I don't fuckin' consent. You gonna have him rape my mind?"

"That's not how therapy works."

"But you think forcing someone to do it is okay?" Had he made anyone else talk to Sage? There had to be a way out of this. I couldn't be the first one he'd pulled rank on. Wasp was usually Mr. Fuckin' Cool, and I couldn't believe he was treating me like this.

“This is a business,” he said. “I can’t have you losing your shit in the middle of the workday. On a personal level, I don’t know what’s going on with you, but I give a fuck and want to make sure you know you’re not fighting this battle alone.”

“So, you’re taking away my job for a week.”

He frowned. “No. I’m telling you to get help. Not working for the rest of the week is the consequence of you not accepting that help.”

“Is this even fucking legal?”

He shrugged. “If you’re gonna work here, you need your head on straight.”

The front door of the shop buzzed, and the receptionist greeted Sage.

“I’m not talking to him.”

Wasp’s jaw ticked. “All right. I’ll see you Monday.”

“Fuck you, and fuck this place.”

I pushed past him and stormed out of the building without saying shit to Sage, whose gaze scorched my back as I left.





### Rabbit

Since work was off the table until Monday, I got my shit together and marched up the block to the station, leaving my bike parked at the shop. I was too pissed to drive. Admittedly, I was also worried about the condition I'd find it in since I still couldn't remember the trip home. I'd lose my shit if I'd fucked up my ride—or if it was missing altogether—and I wasn't in the right frame of mind to deal with that shit.

Determined to ignore the possibilities, I stormed through the station door like a goddamn thundercloud before remembering I didn't want to draw attention. Everyone would find out what had happened soon enough. There was no reason for me to spark their curiosity early. Ignoring the few questioning glances directed my way, I headed for the stairs. Two flights up, I entered my room, grateful I hadn't locked the door this morning because my keys were MIA. Not a good fucking sign. Plugging in my cell phone to charge, I paced until it powered up. Notifications popped up, but I ignored them and fired off a text to my little sister.

I tried to tell you I couldn't do it.

ROSE

That wasn't 100% on you. Mom was... being Mom. Are you okay? I tried to call, but it went straight to voicemail. I texted, but no response. WTF??? I was worried about you.

Well, now I felt even shittier than before.

Sorry. My phone was dead.

Are you okay?

Rose and I were close, but I sure as shit hadn't given her the details of my discharge from the Army. She was smart enough to figure out that stressful situations triggered my anxiety but didn't need to know the severity of my meltdowns. I'd prefer she took me for an ill-tempered asshole than a shut-in who could barely stand to leave home.

How would she react if I told her the truth?

Irritated with myself for even considering burdening her with my bullshit, I raked my fingers through my hair. She worried too much as it was, and I sure wouldn't saddle her with more drama. Tap, tap, tap on the dresser grounded me, reminding me this was real life. I was back in Seattle, no longer risking death for Uncle Sam in the desert. Nor was I standing in front of my mom's trailer, rejected and unwanted, wondering what the hell to do with my life.

Here, I was safe—home—and that was all Rose needed to know.

Yeah, I'm good. Did you get a ride to work?

Yep.

Her lack of details pricked my senses.

From who?

Ryan.

I immediately called her.

She answered on the first ring, her voice a whisper. "You know I'm at work, right?"

Yeah, I did, but right then, I didn't care. "Who the fuck is Ryan?"

“Just a coworker. And he’s a nice guy, so don’t be a psycho.”

She had no idea how psychotic I could be. “No promises. I need to meet this asshole, then I’ll decide how to treat him.”

“No. Absolutely not. I’m an adult now. I don’t need you to screen my friends.”

“That’s debatable.”

“Stay away from him. I mean it. Shit. Here comes my boss, and I’m not supposed to be on personal calls. Love you, bro. Please don’t get me fired.”

The line went dead.

“Rose?” Pulling my phone from my cheek, I confirmed that she’d hung up. My thumb hovered over the button to call her back, but I decided against it. She was proud of this job and would never forgive me if I was why she lost it. However, our conversation about Ryan was far from over. Wondering if Rose’s employer had a list of employees on their website, I thumbed open a browser. If I had the asshole’s last name, I could figure out the means to run a background check. Morse, the head of the club’s technical and security department, could do it. I just had to devise a compelling reason for him to break his moral code and help me out.

I couldn’t remember the name of Rose’s employer, so I gave up on the search and checked the time. Eleven-thirty-seven a.m.

Holy shit.

I’d lost four hours. No, that couldn’t be true. Yet... it was six-forty-five when I left to pick up Rose. It had to be about seven when I parked in front of the trailer. What the fuck had I done afterward? How long had I been under that goddamn table? My shift at the shop started at eight, and I was never late. There were others here qualified to do my job, and I didn’t want to give anyone a reason to take it. As far as bosses went, Wasp wasn’t bad. The position paid enough to cover my bills, and the excess had been steadily piling up in my checking account.

I'd overheard Zombie in the breakroom talking to Stocks about investing and had almost butted into the conversation. Stocks used to work for Wall Street until the pressure became too much for him. He snapped and had a meltdown of his own that resulted in a stint in jail and a hefty financial judgment. Now, he runs a halfway house with his wife and offers financial advisement services to our club members. I wanted to ask him for help with investing, but something had held me back. Investment sounded too much like commitment, and I wasn't comfortable tying up my funds. What if I fucked up and lost my job?

Today, I'd proven that wasn't out of the realm of possibilities. But what would have been worse? Me refusing to talk to the shrink and being forced to take a few days off? Or getting fired when Sage voices his concerns that I'm not stable enough to work with automobiles?

I'd lost four hours today.

The adrenaline of my argument with Wasp drained from my veins, leaving me feeling wrung out. I collapsed on my bed and stared at the ceiling, willing my memories from this morning to return.

Elenore.

Her image slammed into me like a goddamn beacon shining through the fog in my brain. I needed to work on remembering this morning's events, but she was the only thing in focus. That goddamn bathrobe should have been illegal. I'd left my phone plugged in on the dresser. It probably didn't even have a full bar of life yet. I was too tired to stand and keep it plugged in, but her social media accounts were calling my name. Her posts were infrequent, so I doubted I'd find new content, but I couldn't resist the temptation to check.

"Pathetic dumbass," I muttered as I unhooked the phone and wandered back to the bed. At least I was putting myself on a timer. I'd only look until the battery died.

As suspected, Elenore's last activity had been the photo her company had tagged her in two months ago at some awards lunch. I'd drooled over all her public pictures last

night, but I took the time to do it again, wondering how she was doing. Had Matt Parker ever shown up last night? I should ask Morse and find out. Peeling myself from the bed, I plugged my phone back in and headed downstairs, where I found our technology guru hunched in front of his computer, alone and thoroughly absorbed by something playing on his screen. Not unusual, considering it was his job to monitor the club's many video feeds, but I'd never seen him so focused before. Curious about what had caught his interest, I crept in and peered over his shoulder. Some woman I didn't recognize was weeding a garden on his screen. She was pretty if somewhat plain, conservatively dressed in jeans and a T-shirt. He zoomed in. Her light brown hair was twisted up in a messy bun, and the barely noticeable lines around her eyes and lips made me put her age somewhere between thirty-five and forty. Morse wasn't married, and it was impossible to tell how old he was. Judging by his looks, I'd guess closer to thirty, but he usually acted around eighty.

"What the fuck, man?" I asked.

He startled before body-blocking my view of his monitor. Morse quick as lightning, he closed the screen and turned to greet me with a nod. "Rabbit. What do you need?"

I chuckled. He was acting shady. If he thought he could get out of explaining himself, he was in for a surprise. I peered past him to the screen and said, "I *need* to know what the hell that was."

"That's classified."

Sure it was. "I never took you for a kinky bastard, but if gardening porn is your thing, who am I to judge?"

"You're ridiculous." He opened a file on his screen, then glanced in my direction, not quite looking at me. "What's up?"

"You. Spying on some poor woman. You bein' a creep, brother?"

His jaw ticked. "I told you that stream is confidential."

"Right. Definitely business. I could tell by the way you were drooling over her."

“I wasn’t....” He shook his head. “She’s the wife of a friend, okay? I’m keeping an eye on her for him.”

“The plot thickens. She a cheater? You trying to catch her in the act?”

“No. Her husband’s dead.”

“Then she’s not a wife, she’s a widow. Up for grabs. You should introduce us.” The woman on his screen couldn’t hold a candle to Elenore, but I’d learned long ago that when I wanted to find out how a man felt about a woman, all I had to do was express interest in her.

Morse held my gaze, and his eyes hardened. “Fuck you, Rabbit.”

“That’s what I thought. Creepin’ on the friend’s widow. Gross.”

He stood and eyed his watch. “I have a meeting with Link soon. Is there a reason you’re here?”

I could press him for more information about the mystery woman, but that wasn’t why I was here. My gaze shot to the wall of screens displaying the security feeds Morse and his team monitored. It took me a moment to pinpoint the hallway outside Elenore’s door, but I found it. The door looked every bit as secure as it had last night. “Any updates on the Parker case?”

Morse followed my gaze. I could almost see the wheels spinning in that massive brain of his as he decided how much to tell me. I got why he hesitated—I’d resisted responsibilities like a motherfucker—but this wasn’t about me. It was about Elenore. I fucking cared about her safety, and I’d become emotionally invested in Matt Parker’s demise. Besides, Link had personally selected me for the away team on Mission Spring Tina from Her Sister’s Apartment. I had every right to be kept in the loop.

And yet the fucker pressed his lips together, unwilling to tell me shit.

“Link know about the widow you’re perving on?” I snapped.

Morse jerked his head around to face me, denial forming on his lips.

“Don’t pretend that’s not what you were doing. You were so focused on her that you didn’t even hear me enter. Obsessed much, brother?”

“Don’t look at me like that,” he snapped back. “It’s not like I’m sending drones into her house to raid her panty drawer or something. Besides, when the fuck did you grow principles? Before or after you stashed your keys in Elenore’s apartment? You didn’t fool a soul with that bullshit.”

“Good, because fooling people wasn’t my intention. She knows I left them on purpose. Unlike you, I came clean. Now, bring me up to speed on the Parker case unless you want Link to find out about your little stalker session.”

“Jesus, Rabbit. I was planning to tell you. You don’t have to fucking blackmail me.”

“You hesitated.”

“Yeah, because I was trying to decide if sending you out there alone is safe.”

I wanted to tell Morse right where he could go, but recent events proved he had a point. Besides, pissing him off would only be counterproductive. Swallowing back the insult, I asked, “Out where?”

He sighed in resignation, leaning a hip against his desk and folding his arms. “Elenore’s. Matt’s been spotted cruising around her parking garage.”

“Fuck. Is she okay?”

The idea of that bastard hurting her sent panic racing through my veins. My previous exhaustion melted away as concern sent a shot of adrenaline straight into my bloodstream. Steadying myself under the rush, I tap, tap, tapped the wall.

*I’m home. I’m safe. I’m okay.*

Morse eyed me thoughtfully. “She’s fine. He hasn’t approached her building.”

Realization hit me. “He’s looking for Tina’s car.” I searched the wall of monitors until I found the feed covering our side parking lot. Tap had positioned the vehicle where it could be easily seen from the street. We wanted Matt to locate it. “Were there any trackers on it?”

“Not that we could find.”

Which meant no. Tap and Morse were thorough. “Can we draw him a map to it? Put up a fuckin’ neon sign?” The sooner Matt learned Tina had a club of bikers helping her, the less likely Elenore was to encounter the bastard sniffing around her place.

Morse scratched his chin. “There might be something I can do. Let me think about it. I was planning to call Elenore to warn her, but if you can manage it, she might appreciate an in-person update instead.”

I stared at him. “Are you fucking with me?”

He had to be. Morse knew everything that went on in this club, and there was no way he hadn’t heard about my freak-out from this morning. The club was on a quest to improve the community’s view of veterans. We wanted to help all the vets we could, and proceeds from the bar and auto shop only went so far. We needed donations. But not one of us was comfortable asking for handouts. So, we serve. Programs like our anti-bullying campaign for underprivileged preschools have given us the opportunity to show that we’re real fucking human beings. Our time in the service may have fucked some of us up, but we’re still here, wondering why we survived. As I’d proven this morning, I was one of civilian society’s rejects. I wasn’t even sure where my bike was. Did my ass really belong off club grounds?

“You went back to talk to Elenore,” Morse replied as if that somehow answered my question.

“I did.”

“Why?”

“She...” It should have been a simple answer, but I couldn’t think of a single reason I couldn’t stop thinking about



her. It was everything. With no other way to explain that, I blurted out the truth. “She’s the total package. I know she’s out of my league, but why wouldn’t I do everything I can to spend more time with her?”

“Jesus, Rabbit.”

“What?”

He chuckled, shaking his head. “Sometimes I forget you don’t have a filter. You say whatever pops into your brain.”

“Why wouldn’t I?” I asked. “I no longer have a drill sergeant trying to physically exorcise the smartass out of me when I tell the truth.”

He weighed my words for a moment and nodded. “It’s one trait I like best about you. I never have to wonder where you stand. Think you can handle seeing her again?”

“Yes.” The word sounded a hell of a lot more confident than I felt. I’d had a fucking episode this morning, but he’d barely gotten the question out before I’d volunteered. I was just like the preschoolers I saw once a month, so desperate to be picked that I was seconds from jumping and waving my hand in the air.

“Good. Go tell her about Matt and maybe try to get her phone number or something.”

I cracked a smile. “This feels a little like the blind leading the blind.”

He scowled at me. “I’m doing you a fucking favor. For once in your life, can you not be a dick to me? If today’s like yesterday, she’ll be home from the gym around six.”

I was going to see her again. Memories of our last conversation sped my pulse and made me question whether that was a good idea. “What if she doesn’t want to see me?”

Morse pulled out his chair and plunked his ass back onto it. “Listen. I’ve created the opportunity. Take advantage of it or don’t; that’s on you. But do me a favor and text me either way. If you decide not to go, I’ll call and let her know the

bastard's been sniffing around. She should be aware, so she knows to be cautious."

I nodded, still unable to verbally commit to a course of action even though I had no choice. How the fuck could I resist seeing her again? I couldn't. It would be stupid—especially considering this morning's events—but I was going to Elenore's. I had to.

He waved me toward the door. "Go. I'm busy." He was already typing away.

"I thought you had a meeting with Link."

"Made that shit up so I wouldn't have to deal with you."

Shaking my head, I chuckled, grateful Morse always spoke his mind, too. "I'll go see her."

"You'd be stupid not to. Just don't stare at her rack the whole time."

Saluting him with my middle finger, I turned and walked out the door, my mind spinning. Elenore would be home around six. Would she really give me her number?

I had to plan my attack.

And I had to find my fucking bike.



## Elenore

A familiar tattooed biker was pacing in front of the entrance to my apartment building when I arrived home from the gym Monday evening. So, I did what any badass would. I panicked, ducked behind a bushy arborvitae, and attempted to figure out why he was there. It couldn't be Tina and Dylan. I'd received a facetious, "Yes, Mom, I'm fine" text from my sister less than ten minutes ago. Still, Rabbit couldn't be here of his own accord. Yesterday, he'd made it clear he never planned to return. Despite his run-if-you-see-me insinuation, he'd been on my mind periodically all day.

And now he was here.

Butterflies salsa danced in my stomach. Such a daft idiom for what was physically happening inside my body. His unexpected presence triggered a typical stress reaction. Blood vessels constricted, and digestive muscles contracted, creating a drop in blood flow. It was a reaction caused by anxiety, not affection. My stomach likely would have fluttered no matter which biker had been waiting for me in front of my apartment.

And if I told myself that enough times, maybe I would believe it.

Taking a deep breath to relax my suddenly haywire nerves, I tried on a smile before realizing there was no need to fake the pleasantries. I was genuinely happy to see him and needed to roll back my excitement. Rabbit was fascinating, while most people bored me to intellectual oblivion.

I got myself under control, stepped away from my hiding spot, and approached, noting the faded grease stains on his jeans. He drummed fingers against his thighs in three-tap successions as he paced. Nervous energy rolled off him in waves as he muttered to himself, sounding agitated. He was so consumed by his one-sided rant he didn't appear to notice me. Not wanting to startle him, I spoke up.

“Hey, Roger.”

He jerked to a stop and spun to face me. His gaze crashed into mine, and panic filled his blue eyes. “You're here.”

I looked around, confused. “Is there somewhere else I should be?”

“No. Of course not.” His gaze drifted down to my clavicle before snapping back to my eyes. “How was work?”

Was this an attempt at small talk? Or did he actually want to know? “Fine,” I said cautiously. “What are you doing here?”

He rubbed his hands down his thighs as if to wipe them off and thrust one toward me. “I'm here to talk to you.”

I shook his extended hand, ignoring the zing of energy that passed between us. Nonsexual forms of touch often cause the brain to release oxytocin. It was a perfectly normal reaction, often romanticized in books and movies. Neither of us appeared to want to end the handshake, though, and it continued for several seconds past awkward before I finally yanked my hand away.

“It's good to see you, Poe,” he said like it had been months rather than hours since our first interaction.

I opened my mouth to correct him but remembered Poe was the abbreviated nickname for Postal because I was apparently the complete package. It was quite possibly the lamest line I'd ever heard in my life, yet mention of it now only increased the fluttery sensation in my stomach. My smile kept trying to widen, but I wrestled that traitorous twitch of my lips under control. “It's nice to see you, too.”

He seemed surprised by my admission and kept watching me like he was waiting for me to take it back.

“Did you leave another set of keys in my apartment?” I asked to break the sudden tension between us.

He grinned. “No. But I do need a word with you. Is there somewhere we can talk?”

The polite course of action would be to invite him up to my apartment, but I wanted to know more about the reason behind his presence first. Decision made, I led him into the common area on the bottom floor. The interior decorators had obviously been going for a seventy’s retro vibe with explosions of earth tones and odd-shaped chairs and tables. It was vibrant and trendy but not too comfortable, and residents rarely took advantage of the space. Today, it was empty, so I perched on an upholstered orange chair while Rabbit wandered to the nearest coffee table and picked up the odd teal and gold centerpiece.

He studied the abstract conglomeration of plastic and metal and shook his head, muttering, “Rich people are into the weirdest shit.”

I was comfortable, not wealthy, and still paying off college loans, but I didn’t correct him. Instead, I watched him wander around and take in the space.

Finally, when his curiosity about the room had been sated, he faced me. “The cameras have picked up Matt Parker’s car in your building’s garage.”

No surprise since Tap had told me of his intention to mount a hidden camera above my parking spot. “Matt approached me this morning,” I replied automatically.

“What? Where?” Rabbit’s eyes went a little crazy as he closed the distance between us, his gaze roaming over my body as if checking for damage. “Are you okay?”

His unrestrained concern was unexpected and overwhelming. “Yes. I had the Taser.”

“Of course you did.” The grin that stretched across his lips conjured emotions I didn’t want to think about. “What

happened?”

I gave him a detailed recap, answering questions and voicing my intention to never return to the coffee shop. By the time I finished, Rabbit had sat and stood three times and paced to the door and back twice.

His brows drew down in a ferocious scowl. “Want me to break into his house and beat him with a sack full of rocks?”

His threat of violence to another human being should have thrown up a red flag, but instead, it warmed my heart. Blood also rushed to my face, making me feel flushed. Unfortunately, my mind eviscerated his offer. “Too risky. I don’t know what security measures he has in place.”

“I have people who could figure that out.”

“Also known as potential witnesses. I don’t want anyone to get in trouble for... taking out my trash. I can empty my own garbage.”

His expression softened, and his lips quirked with amusement. “You have a lot of that in your life? Trash?”

“Actually, I avoid refuse at all costs. This is Tina’s... dumpster fire.” This was when people usually realized I was too bizarre to hang out with, but Rabbit’s grin encouraged me to keep going. “I wouldn’t leave remains in a dumpster, though. And torching it would only stink up the place.”

Rabbit’s grin didn’t fall, but his eyes sharpened with concern. I might have gone one step too far.

“Only raw recruits put the trash in the dumpster. There are... other ways to dispose of useless shit.”

*I’ll be dammed. The man might genuinely understand me.*

My smile stretched, as did the silence between us, until we walked right off that ledge back into awkward. “Well, thank you for stopping by.”

“Pack a bag. You’re coming to stay at the station until this mess blows over.”

Confident I'd misheard him, I blinked. "I beg your pardon?"

"It's not safe for you here. He's stalking you."

"He approached me in a public place. That's hardly stalking."

"You ever seen him there before?"

"No. But it doesn't matter. I'm not staying at your clubhouse."

"That dipshit has a history of violent behavior. Link said it was more than your sister. He also beat the shit out of a hooker who looks like her."

"I know, but I refuse to let him chase me out of my home. Everything I own is here, and relocating—even temporarily—would be inconvenient and unnecessary. Besides, if Tina finds out I went into hiding, she'd react. I don't want her approaching that dipshit because she's worried about me."

He frowned. "Would she do that?"

"Without a doubt. The big-sister protective gene is strong with her." And if she found out he was blackmailing me to get to her... I didn't even want to think about what she'd do. But it was more than concern for how my sister would react that made me dig in my heels. I liked my quiet, drama-free existence. Now that Tina and Dylan were gone, I looked forward to returning to my regularly scheduled monotony. "Tina can't know Matt approached."

He nodded. "I understand. But you can't stay here alone."

I'd never appreciated being told what I could and couldn't do, and today was no exception. "You guys are monitoring my door." I patted my coat pocket. "I'm armed, and I won't hesitate to file a restraining order if Matt continues to harass me."

"What if he files assault charges against you?"

"He was likely only bluffing, but I'll deal with that if it happens. I'm sure you mean well, Roger, but I'm not afraid of my sister's ex. I refuse to let him—or anyone else—bully me

out of my apartment. Thank you for stopping by to inform me of his presence, but I'll be fine." Standing, I straightened my coat and slid my purse strap back over my shoulder. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I need a shower."

Rabbit followed. "I'm not leaving you alone, Poe."

"Well, I don't know what to tell you then because I'm not going into hiding."

He followed me up the stairs and down the hall to my unit. I unlocked the door and went inside, expecting him to follow, but he stayed in the hallway.

Confused, I held open the door. "Are you... coming in?"

"Nah, I'll just keep an eye on shit out here."

It took a moment for me to realize he was being serious. Did he plan to sleep outside my door? "Tap installed a camera to do that. This building has a strict no-loitering policy. You can't camp out in my hallway. If you plan to stay and protect me—which, for the record, I still don't think is necessary—you'll need to come inside. Otherwise, someone will report you, and security will show up to escort you off the premises."

"You want me to stay in there?" He glanced past me and shook his head. "With you?" His hesitancy was unexpectedly charming.

"Do you plan to rape, rob, or kill me?"

Outrage screwed up his face. "Hell no, but—"

"Then please recognize that I am a capable, intelligent adult, perfectly capable of protecting myself. I don't need a savior."

"Good, because I ain't no fuckin' savior."

"Noted. I bet you could be a good time, though."

As soon as the words spilled from my lips, I wanted to take them back. But I didn't. Rabbit was an attractive adult who'd made it clear he was interested in me. Letting him know I wouldn't mind exploring the possibility was only natural.



Confusion furrowed his brow, and it took all my restraint not to get offended by the reaction. I was admittedly a bit rusty—okay, I had never been adept at flirting, and the man rattled my nerves to boot—but seriously, what did I have to do? Should I have winked suggestively?

I'd never winked at anyone in my life. Besides, maybe that wasn't the best tactic for interesting someone like Rabbit. Changing course, I asked, "Do you know the best way to tamper with someone's brakes?"

His eyes widened at my seemingly random question, but he didn't miss a beat. "Yeah. Of course, I do."

"Good. I'd like to discuss that with you after my shower. If you decide not to stick around, please lock the door before you go."

Turning on my heel, I left the door open and headed for my room.



### Rabbit

Sliding my foot across the threshold to keep Elenore's apartment door from closing, I stared at the hidden camera. I could almost feel Morse watching me. The bastard was probably laughing his ass off. "What the fuck do I do?" I mouthed.

My cell phone rang. I dug it out of my pocket and answered.

"What do you do?" he asked, his tone disbelieving. "Correct me if I'm wrong, but from here, it looked like a gorgeous woman just invited you into her apartment."

"You're not wrong."

"Christ, Rabbit, I don't know. Maybe follow her in there?"

"She wants to talk about brake tampering."

"Cars. A subject you're interested in. Still don't see the problem."

I opened my mouth to inform him Elenore had expressed an interest in murdering Matt but fuck that. I was no snitch. If she wanted to off that wife-beating bastard, I wouldn't stand in her way. Who was I to judge? Hell, I might just help her. Between the two of us, I bet we could even figure out a way to delay the destruction and make the whole thing look like an accident.

My conscience tugged at me, but I ignored that meddling fucker and focused on the real reason I shouldn't walk through her door.

“She's too good for me, all right?” I glared at the camera, pissed that he'd made me admit the truth out loud. “Is that what you want to hear, asshole? 'Cuz there it is. I know I'm not supposed to care about that shit. Let loose and live for the night, right? Get mine and get out? Here for a good time, but not a long time, right?”

“There's nothing wrong with that if it's what you want. Just be honest with her.”

“But it's not what I want. One night with that woman won't be enough.”

“Then... I don't know. Maybe take her on a couple dates. See where it goes. Jesus, Rabbit, lots of women are into that shit.”

I laughed, but there was no humor in the sound, and I gestured to encompass the mess that I was. “Look at me. Do you honestly think a woman like Elenore will want to date this? Where would I even take her? A fancy, five-star restaurant? The orchestra? Yeah, I bet they'd totally let my ass in.”

“You sound like a whiny little bitch. If you really want to be with the woman, stop making up excuses and figure your shit out. God, man, just be real with her. Show her who you are and let her decide if she can handle your damage.”

He didn't know what a giant ass that was. Crowds, stress, people talking shit... just thinking about it made spots dance at the edges of my vision. “She deserves better.”

“Oh, for fuck's sake, Rabbit, get off the cross. We need the wood. Besides, circumstances have given you an opportunity most men only dream about. It's obvious you got a thing for her, and for whatever reason, she seems oddly interested in you. The way I see it, you have two options. Keep being a dumbass and walk away or grow some goddamn balls and get your ass in there.”

“I’m only here to protect her. It’s not like she’s offering me her body.”

“You don’t know what the fuck she’s offering because you’re still. Standing. In. The. Hallway.” Morse’s tone was angry as he punctuated each word. “Shit or get off the pot, but I gotta go. I have work to do.”

The line went dead.

I stared at my phone in disbelief. What was with people hanging up on me today? I raised my middle finger to the camera and grinned, hoping I looked every bit as unhinged as I felt. The bastard had called me a coward. He’d thrown down the gauntlet, and now I had to pick it up and shove it down his goddamn throat.

“Fuck you, Morse,” I growled through gritted teeth, adding a second middle finger for good measure.

I slid through the door, locking it behind me, toed my boots off, and wandered down the hall. The soft, fresh scent of her home enveloped me, easing the tension from my shoulders. It reminded me of clean laundry and sunshine, making me want to grab a beer, kick my feet up, and relax. I glanced at her sofa, knowing I should sit and wait for my host, but I’d never been much for holding still. Besides, I’d already seen her living room, and there was an entire apartment to explore.

Feeling curious as fuck, I drifted down the hall, finding the spare bedroom, a bathroom, a utility closet, and then finally, Elenore’s suite. The condo was nice and uncharacteristically large for Seattle. One-bedroom shacks rented for two grand a month in this neighborhood, so she must have paid a fortune for this place. I made good money as a mechanic but didn’t give two shits about square footage and luxury. Living at the station was safe. The rent was reasonable, allowing me to stack my checking account and funnel the rest back into the club through anonymous donations. Not because I was altruistic or anything, but because I ate a lot. There was no way the room and board rate covered my expenses, and if the club went under, plenty of us would be up shit creek without a

paddle. My brothers were stand-up guys who didn't deserve to lose their homes and livelihoods due to lack of funding.

Unlike me, who was standing in Elenore's bedroom sniffing around for clues about the woman to satisfy my curiosity while she showered in the attached bathroom, oblivious to my invasion of her privacy.

*Naked and sudsy.*

My mind stuttered over the images conjured by the thought, drying my throat and making my cock twitch. I forcibly turned my back on the bathroom door and focused on the task at hand. Unfortunately, even in her inner sanctum, clues were scarce. Decorated with a large whiteboard covered in handwritten scientific equations and a planetary mobile hanging from the ceiling, her bedroom had the same minimalist style as the rest of the apartment. Her bedroom furniture was a matching set, and the tight corners of the bedding would have made my old drill sergeant proud. I paused by her nightstand to study a framed picture of a younger Elenore awkwardly holding a baby. Her smile lit up her entire face. I traced it with my fingertip before moving on to the next door.

The faint scents of cedar and fabric softener greeted me as I entered the large walk-in closet. On the left, clothes hung in a rainbow of colors. Blues bled into purples, then reds, oranges, yellows, and finally greens. The right side went from white to black, with every imaginable shade of gray between. Her shoes—also organized by color—were displayed in racks along the back wall. A chest of drawers stood in the center of the space, exhibiting a collection of belts, scarves, and jewelry, each item in its place.

Her organization was intimidating as fuck. I turned to leave, but something caught my eye. Polaroid pictures hung from a clothesline stretched across the back wall, each image secured by a clothespin. Curious, I drifted closer, realizing what I was looking at. Each photo showed a different outfit, from the neck down to the shoes. I didn't need to see the face to know these were all Elenore. I would know her lithe body anywhere.

Unable to help myself, I unclipped a photo of a navy skirt set that made her toned legs go on for miles. Hot damn, could she rock a skirt. I reached for my phone, intending to snap pictures of the photos, but a splash of red almost made me swallow my tongue. Elenore dressed in nothing but a red teddy.

Fuck me, I could almost see her nipples!

I shouldn't have looked. It had to be wrong to eye fuck a goddamn picture without consent, but I couldn't stop staring. The sheer fabric clung to her pert breasts, darkening around her nipples like a goddamn tease. It hugged her narrow waist before flaring over hips that begged me to grab on as I plowed into her from behind. My mouth watered, and my cock throbbed at the sight.

Forget snapping pictures, this image was mine. I unclipped it and held it beside the first one I'd taken, trying not to drool like the rabid dog I was. It was like Christmas for my eyeballs. If Elenore wanted the pictures back, she'd have to pry them from my cold, dead hands.

The water turned off.

Without a doubt, I should remove myself from her closet and haul ass back to the living room like a good little guest, but I couldn't fucking move. Morse had told me to be honest with her, and that's what I intended to do. This snoopy, horny bastard was one hundred percent me.

Had she come out of the bathroom yet? I listened, straining my ears. Footsteps crossed the bedroom, and the closet door swung open.

Elenore gasped. "What are you doing in here?"

Fixing my face into the cockiest, most unapologetic expression I could muster, I turned and held up my two prizes. "Admiring the ... *fuck!*"

All she wore was a fluffy white towel wrapped snugly around her torso, ending just beneath the apex of her thighs. Her dark, wet hair was slicked back, and the soft, sweet scent of her bath products enveloped my senses like a goddamn

caress. A glossy sheen coated her skin like a layer of honey, making me want to lick her from head to toe. God, she was gorgeous.

I expected her to rip the pictures from my hand and point me to the door, but she didn't. Instead, she went straight to the center island and opened a drawer. "My stylist selects my outfits. I take pictures so I can recreate the looks for work."

I held up the teddy picture. "And this one?"

A smirk tugged at the corner of her lips even as her cheeks grew impossibly redder. "It looked good on me, so I snapped a picture." She selected a pair of silky floral panties and opened the next drawer, tugging out a tank top.

I had no idea what to do. She hadn't flipped out on me for invading her privacy. Nor had she asked me to leave. If she dropped her towel and started dressing right there in front of me, I'd likely cream the inside of my jeans. She was perfect. And not just because she was brainy, beautiful, and had her shit together, but because she was fucking weird. I'd been through her entire apartment, and nothing was out of place. Her closet was arranged by color with pictures of her goddamn outfits to keep them straight. Nobody was naturally this clean, organized, and meticulous.

Elenore had a screw loose.

Which meant I might actually have a chance with her.

"You left the door open," I blurted out, sounding like a fucking idiot.

"To my apartment. Not my bedroom."

"It wasn't locked."

She added pants to the pile of clothes in her arms and turned to face me. "I need to get dressed."

I wanted to tell her to go right ahead but decided not to push my luck. Still clutching the photos, I said, "These are mine."

Her eyebrows shot up, but before she could argue, I marched out of her closet and back into the living room.

Growing up, whenever I royally fucked up, I would find shit to do around the house to prove my usefulness and keep Mom from throwing me out. Planning to employ the same tactic to convince Elenore to let me stay, I headed for the kitchen. The meals of my formative years hadn't consisted of anything more complicated than Hamburger Helper, but my time at the station had turned me into a halfway decent cook. I enjoyed feeding people. It kept me busy and made me feel like I was worth something. Determined to prove I could be an asset, I opened Elenore's fridge to check out her grocery situation, but there wasn't much I could do with the almond milk, orange juice, and pre-packaged meals I found.

Grabbing the top meal, I read the label aloud. "Tofu wrap with roasted winter squash. Bet that tastes like cardboard."

"It's a little bland, but you get used to it," Elenore said from the hallway.

Putting the meal back, I closed the refrigerator door and gave her my full attention. She'd dressed in leggings and a loose-fitting T-shirt with the word 'Inclusion' written using rainbow-colored periodic table elements. Below it, "is elemental" was written in a simple font. Goddamn, could she be any more amazing?

"Why eat something you have to get used to?" I asked.

"Because food is for sustenance, not pleasure."

"Can be both. If you had any strawberries and whipped cream in here, I'd show you." I checked her freezer just in case, but the only thing in there was ice.

"Are you always this intrusive?" A splash of pink across her cheeks was the only indication that she'd picked up on my innuendo.

"The best way to get to know someone is to invade their space."

"You could always ask questions."

"And you'll answer? No matter what I ask?"



“Please. Answering questions is my jam. As long as you promise to extend me the same courtesy.”

“Deal.” I leaned against the wall and folded my arms across my chest. “Why do you really eat that shit in your fridge?”

“Several reasons. Grocery shopping isn’t a productive use of my time, food preparation doesn’t interest me, the meals are fast and easy, and it’s one less detail to worry about.” Her eyes narrowed. “Why? Does it bother you I don’t cook?”

“If you’re asking if I’m a sexist piece of shit, the answer is no. Just so happens I enjoy cooking.”

“Hm.” She eyed me thoughtfully. “You any good at it?”

“Sure am. I don’t know shit about tofu wraps, but my paella’s so tasty it’ll make your eyes roll back in your head. There’s an ocean between liking something and tolerating it.” I paused to think. She’d said she didn’t mind questions, but how far should I push my luck? Then again, that was who I was—a pro at pushing shit too far. “You don’t pick out your clothes, you don’t pick out your meals. Do you even know what you’re into?”

“Yes. I’m clearly into finding the best, healthiest, most convenient life hacks to handle the mundane day-to-day details so I can focus on the demands of my job.”

“Tell me about these demands. What exactly does a scientist do all day?” I leaned toward her, surprised by how starved I was for the answer. Elenore was a mystery I wanted to crack. I couldn’t have contained my curiosity if I’d tried.

She fought a smile. “An indiscriminate question since scientists work in many fields, but if you’re specifically asking about me, I work for a CBD manufacturer.” When I gestured for her to continue, she added, “My department is in charge of creating an easy, affordable method for personalizing the type and dosage of CBD products—with the correct amount and type of activating THC—to maximize the effects of pain management for individual patients.”

I knew little about CBD, but it was no secret who controlled the pain management market. “You get a lot of pushback from big pharma?”

She finally released that smile she’d been fighting, and it was all I could do not to gawk. She was a goddamn beauty queen.

“They would shut us down if they could. But if we can offer a safer, non-addictive form of pain management, we have a societal duty to try. Regardless of which powerful corporations we enrage.” Her smile fell. “I shouldn’t have told you any of that, though. Our new program is hush-hush until the promotional department gives us the green light, but it’s so freaking exciting I tend to get carried away and say too much. Please don’t repeat any of this.”

“My lips are sealed.” I pretended to zip them up and throw away the key. “Now, dinner... You have nothing for me to cook, so I’ll order a pizza.” I pulled my phone from my pocket and opened the browser. “Peperoni? Hawaiian? Veggie? What can I get you?”

“I...” She glanced at the fridge, her expression uncertain. “I don’t think pizza meets my dietician’s nutritional guidelines.”

“You know what they say; everything’s acceptable in moderation.”

“Oh really? What about arsenic? Mercury? Polonium?”

I was familiar with the first two, but that last word had me stumped. “What’s polonium?”

“A highly radioactive metal with a median lethal dose of one-millionth of a gram. It’s rumored to make a lovely poisonous tea. Too bad it’s only produced in Russia and has a terribly short half-life, making it almost impossible to transport.”

“I don’t know whether to be terrified or impressed by your odd fascination with murder methods.” Even I recognized that this was no ordinary, socially acceptable conversation. Anyone else probably would have run away screaming, but for the first

time in recent memory, I wasn't afraid. Elenore was fascinating as shit. She kept such white-knuckled control over herself and her surroundings. It made me curious what would happen if she let loose.

"Both is your best option."

"Both, it is. Now, come on, Poe. Share some cheesy, breaded goodness with me. I'll buy, and we can talk brakes while we eat."

In the end, she caved. We decided on pepperoni and mushroom. I threw in a six-pack of lager, and we ate at the coffee table in front of the television like two mannerless savages.

"What do you like to watch?" I asked, grabbing the remote.

"I'll show you in a minute." She snatched it out of my hand and plunked it on the table. "But first, how'd you really get your road name?"

"Isn't it obvious?" I asked.

"If it was, I wouldn't have asked."

I stuffed a bite into my mouth, giving myself time to think. I still had every intention of being honest with Elenore, but this was something I couldn't bring myself to tell her. At least, not yet. "Rabbits are known for how frequently they fuck."

She leveled a disbelieving look at me, letting me know she saw right through my bullshit. "If you're hung like a bunny, just say that."

I choked on my pizza.

She grinned, obviously proud of herself.

"Play your cards right, Poe, and I just might show you," I said once I'd cleared my airway enough to speak.

Then she cut off my damn air supply when she said, "Play *your* cards right, and I just might want to see it."



## Elenore

“**Y**ou’re kidding, right?” I whispered, trying—but failing—to keep the panic from my voice. “Please tell me this is a joke.”

My boss and I were standing in the entryway of Taste, an upscale downtown restaurant. We were here to meet a potential investor, but her unexpected phone call had foiled our plans for the day. Now, I looked on in horror as her expression remained alarmingly stoic. Dark eyes watched me with a mix of confusion and concern.

“My son broke his arm at school. That’s hardly a laughing matter.”

Lysha Moore was a superwoman. Less than two percent of scientists were African-American women. Lysha had not only spliced her way through those odds, but she was also the majority owner of our company. She believed in what we were doing and had put her money, heart, and soul into the work. And her conviction was contagious. She’d made me believe in the cause, which was the only reason I wasn’t storming out of the restaurant right now.

Well, that and her son had just broken his arm. As far as excuses go, that had been a solid one. But I was socially inept. Hell, I’d asked if she was joking about her son’s injury. Clearly, I couldn’t be trusted to be alone with an investor.

“No. Definitely not funny. Sorry. I hope Micha’s okay. You know I’d do anything to help you out, but—”

“Good. Because I need you to attend this lunch and secure the Chamberlain Industries research grant.”

There was a reason Lysha always ran the potential investor meetings. I was a medical technologist, bred for the lab, dangerous in the wild. I wasn't built to interact with other human beings. Especially not without supervision.

“This lunch could make or break our company,” I reminded her, trying not to wheeze as the pressure made my chest tighten and my tongue thicken. Soon, I probably wouldn't be able to speak. I'd sound like an idiot, disgracing our company and making any decently perceptive investor flee for the sake of their intelligence in case my stupidity was contagious. “We should reschedule.”

Lysha frowned at me. “My schedule is packed for the foreseeable future, and I know you can do this. Just hit the highlights, answer his questions, and schmooze.”

“It's the schmoozing part that has me concerned.” We had an excellent product with the science to back it. I didn't understand the need to kiss anyone's ass. Hell, investors should schmooze us.

*I wonder if this restaurant has a paper bag I can hyperventilate into.*

“You'll do fine. You'll be meeting with Cameron Chamberlain.”

The name didn't ring a bell, but trying to place it was a welcome distraction for my brain, staving off the looming panic attack. “Am I supposed to know who that is?”

She typed something into her phone. “He asked for you specifically. I thought you might be acquainted. Perhaps he's read your articles. It doesn't matter. I need to go. You've got this, Elenore.”

She squeezed my shoulder, and when her gaze met mine, the gratitude and faith in her eyes made me want to be the person she believed me to be. Making people want to develop and perform was another Lysha Moore superpower I envied. Envied but could never reproduce. Before I could respond, she

walked away, setting her phone against her ear. Now on my own, I took a deep breath, turned, and smiled at the maître d', who gestured for me to follow.

As we walked, my mind wandered, abnormal behavior I'd been experiencing all day. No matter how I tried to redirect my thoughts, I couldn't stop replaying my night with Rabbit. From the moment I'd woken up, the man had commandeered my prefrontal cortex. I couldn't understand why. Our time together had been unexpectedly enjoyable, but nothing earth-shattering had happened. After an impromptu Q&A session about jobs and interests, we'd watched more talent show wins on the app. Not the losses—I had no desire to see anyone's dreams get crushed—but watching people shoot their shot and win was one of my guilty pleasures.

At first, Rabbit hadn't understood how I could be interested in watching videos I already knew would end in victory. But the hope and enthusiasm of the contestants had been contagious, and it had swept him up. When a blind girl won the golden buzzer, I'd even caught the tattooed biker discreetly wiping away a tear. Beneath his tough, colorful outer shell, he was a big softie.

And an anomaly.

Despite his blatant interest in me, Rabbit hadn't made a single move all night. Strange, since I hadn't pegged him for a man who practiced self-control. Even more bizarre was my reaction. I didn't know whether to be disappointed or relieved by his inaction. Either way, it only increased my curiosity about the biker.

I wondered what we should do tonight.

The maître d' must have halted while my thoughts were distracted because I had to stop short to keep from plowing into him. As I recovered, he pulled out my chair as if nothing had happened. Across the table sat a traditionally handsome dark-haired man with thick eyebrows and a strong, clean-shaven jawline. He wore his suit like it was an extension of his skin. Standing, he shook my hand, and we introduced ourselves. I explained that Dr. Moore had an emergency and

wouldn't be joining us. He gave no indication of disappointment.

The maître d' flagged down a server who brought me a water glass and cleared away the extra silverware as I settled into my seat. The weight of Cameron Chamberlain's scrutiny as I sipped my water made me uncomfortable. I'd worn my navy skirt suit today. After Rabbit's reaction to the photo of the outfit, how could I not? How he'd sworn and shaken his head, taking a lap around my living room to get himself under control, had made me feel powerful. The inappropriate way Cameron's gaze kept tracing the tiny glimpse of cleavage revealed by my V neckline somehow robbed me of my power. It made me feel cheapened.

Desperate to reclaim my personal sovereignty, I started a dialogue. "Please, tell me about yourself. What sparked your interest in our research, Mr. Chamberlain?"

"Cam, please. It's a pleasure to meet you, Elenore."

I would much prefer to keep the discussion professional, but he was the one with the checkbook, and we needed investors. "You as well, Cam. Thank you for the invitation, and I look forward to answering any questions you have about the clinical trials."

Cameron's attention was on the approaching waiter. "I ordered a bottle of Chianti. Castello di Ama's Vigneto Bellavista is to die for." I opened my mouth to object, but he talked over me. "You simply must try it."

After Cameron approved the sample, the waiter poured each of us a glass and asked if we were ready to order. I hadn't even opened my menu yet, but it turned out I didn't need to. Cameron ordered for me, claiming to know the restaurant's best dishes. Some people doubtlessly found such behavior off-putting, but since I was used to having my meals selected for me, I didn't mind. Besides, if I couldn't eat what he'd ordered, I had a stash of prepared meals in the breakroom fridge.

When the waiter left, Cameron launched into questions about the tests we'd run and our estimated production time. Relieved to be back in familiar territory, I answered as directly

as possible while trying not to get too technical. He was surprisingly well-informed and attentive. The food was excellent, and our lunch went far better than expected, especially considering how it began. More than two hours passed in a flash, and I was almost disappointed when it was time to leave.

“Did you drive?” he asked as we stood and gathered our things.

“No.” I’d ridden with Lysha.

“I’ll give you a lift then.”

I put my coat on, aware of the weight of the Taser in my pocket. “Thank you, but I don’t want to be a bother. I can take an Uber.”

“It’s no trouble at all.” When I hesitated, he added, “I insist.”

“You’re driving?” My face caught on fire as I recognized the invasive nature of my question. This was a potential sponsor. Not someone whose sobriety I should be questioning. Still, I’d had one glass of wine, and he’d consumed the rest of the bottle. “I mean, are you okay to drive? Should I call someone for you?” There. Concern was better than condemnation, right?

He chuckled. “I like the way you speak your mind, Elenore. It’s... refreshing. But there’s no need to worry. I have a driver.”

Of course, he did. “I should have realized. My apologies.”

“I forgive you, but only if you let me take you back to your office.”

It was a reasonable offer accompanied by a friendly, encouraging smile, so I relented. We climbed into a sleek black limousine with butter-soft leather seats, a mini-fridge, and more amenities than my college dorm room.

“Impressive,” I said, settling into my seat. I was doubtlessly supposed to play this cool, but I’d never ridden in a limo before, and I wasn’t an emotionless robot.



Ignoring my social faux pas, he sat beside me.

As in, right next to me.

The vehicle had more seats than our company conference room, yet he sat with his shoulder pressed against mine. I fought the urge to slide away, putting an appropriate distance between us since I worried how that might be construed. We'd had a pleasant lunch. Maybe he was this cozy with everyone?

And then, as the limo pulled away from the curb, Cameron put his hand on my knee.

Shocked, I stared at the offending appendage, willing it to move. When nothing happened, I cleared my throat.

He stared at his phone, ignoring me altogether.

My stomach dropped. The fancy meal I'd just eaten churned in my gut as the meager schmoozing skills I'd developed over lunch abandoned me. Entirely unprepared for this situation, I had no idea how to react.

My inner badass wanted to call him out on his utterly inappropriate behavior, but she was buried under a thick layer of behavioral uncertainty that had me wondering if this was somehow my fault. Had I unintentionally said or done something to indicate that I was sexually interested in Cameron? Because the man did not do it for me. He was handsome and intelligent, and before he'd grabbed my leg, I wouldn't have been opposed to getting to know him better. Still, I felt none of the magnetic pull I'd experienced with Rabbit.

When it came down to it, this was business. I needed to let Cameron know his behavior was unacceptable and any attraction unreciprocated.

“Excuse me, Mr. Chamberlain, but—”

“Cam, please.” He squeezed my knee. “We're friends, Elenore.”

Friends? One business lunch did not make us friends. “Your hand is on my knee.”

“So it is.” He released me, giving my thigh a light smack before withdrawing his hand and returning to his phone.

*What the actual fuck?*

“My family is still on the fence about investing in your company,” he said, not bothering to look up from his screen. “But I, for one, am excited about the prospect. I believe it’s a worthy cause, and I look forward to learning more about the process. Let’s go out for dinner Friday night. Dr. Moore has my assistant’s email address. Send her your address, and I’ll pick you up at seven.”

*Wait. What?*

I couldn’t tell whether he was issuing a heavy-handed personal dinner invitation or ordering me to attend a business meal with his family, but neither option appealed to me. “Regrettably, I can’t make it. I have plans Friday night,” I lied.

His gaze finally lifted from his phone. Coal-gray eyes stared me down as if expecting me to cower in fear. Spoiler alert: I didn’t.

“They can’t be altered?”

“No.” My imaginary plans were carved in make-believe stone.

“Saturday then.”

“My entire weekend is booked, but if you’re looking for someone to present the company to your family, I’m sure Dr. Moore would be more than happy to—”

He grabbed my hand and yanked me against him until I was practically on his lap. “I require your presence. Alone.” His gaze darted to my lips, and his eyes darkened.

Not a business dinner, then. I struggled against his hold, shaken by his sudden intensity and desperate to create space between us. Who was this guy? Before I could move or answer, he dropped his other hand to my thigh again, tracing his way up toward parts of my body he had no business touching.

“You have a brilliant mind. I would like to see what we could... come up with. Together. I bet you prefer a man that takes control,” he husked as he leaned toward me, his aquiline nose skimming my jawline.

*Holy shit!*

I pulled back, alarmed. One second, he seemed reserved and uninterested. The next, he was charming and intelligent. Then this over-the-top erotica hero bullshit. A man who takes control? Had he really just said that? I’d bet he had a Red Room full of sexual torture devices. If he started spouting off about the fine line between pleasure and pain, I’d zap him. Consequences be damned. BDSM was perfectly acceptable in fiction, but getting flogged in real life seemed painful and extreme, no matter how wealthy and influential his family was.

Forcefully shoving his hand from my leg, I extracted myself from his personal space and shifted over a seat. “I... I’m sorry, but that’s not possible.”

The limo rolled to a stop in front of my building. His gray gaze searched mine for an uncomfortably long moment before he released me. I bolted for the door, pulling the handle to open it. Locked.

“Please let me out.”

Cameron chuckled. “Come now, Elenore, I’m not that terrifying.”

But he was. I glanced over my shoulder to find his attention back on his phone. The door opened, and blessed freedom beckoned.

Smoothing my skirt to give myself a moment, I remembered my manners and resorted to the safety of formalities. “Thank you for lunch, Mr. Chamberlain.”

“The next time I see you, you will remember to call me Cam.”

Yeah, right. I had no intention of ever seeing him again. Unfortunately, I’d probably have to, but that was a problem for future me to navigate. I fled, feeling like I had dodged a bullet.

At least for now.

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By the time I made it to the office, there were fewer than two hours left of my official workday. I could return to the lab and bury myself in data until I calmed down and fully considered Cameron Chamberlain's regrettable behavior. Then, I could decide how I wanted to deal with it. That would be the mature, responsible way to handle the situation. But that wasn't how I wanted to do it. No, oddly enough, I wanted to order pizza and beer again with Rabbit and verbally bash Cameron Chamberlain into a blob of expensively dressed pulp. I mean, the man had gone *Fifty Shades of Sexual Harassment*. It would have made for enjoyable reading, but I had a demanding job where certain behavior was frowned upon. It was all fun and games until someone had to explain why they couldn't sit during a meeting.

I'd rather spend my time with a biker named Rabbit, who I'd only known for two days, but he'd already derailed my diet and become someone I could be salty with. Should those marks be in his favor or against him? I was no expert on men, but Rabbit was like nobody I'd ever met. Whether good or bad, his nature was yet to be seen.

Still, I was uncharacteristically hopeful. And just thinking about him made me feel better.

This morning, he'd told me where he planned to spend his day and made me promise to call if Matt showed up or if I felt unsafe in any way. And he was being genuine! He hadn't made a move on me last night. He'd slept on the sofa. I hadn't locked my bedroom door, but he hadn't entered my room. Not securing my bedroom door was probably a conversation for my therapist, but that was beyond the point. If Rabbit had kissed me last night, I would have let him. And if kissing had led to more, I don't know where or if I would have stopped him.

But he didn't kiss me.

Instead, we talked, and he answered most of my questions. We stayed away from the topic of family, and Rabbit clammed up when I asked about his time in the service. Understandable since I'd heard him fighting in his sleep later, and it sounded like he was still at war.

But that was okay. I could deal with nightmares.

It was his other secrets that made me hesitate. Rabbit was a protector. If we decided to explore a relationship, I needed to show him I could defend myself and didn't require a savior.

But protectiveness was an admirable quality.

Tired of second-guessing myself, I pulled out my cell to open my recent messages. He'd texted himself from my phone this morning. I'd been running late and hadn't had time to check the message. Then I'd forgotten about it because I was too busy thinking about him.

I didn't know what was wrong with me, but hopefully, there was an antidote.

Maybe...

Nope. My case was clearly fatal because he'd saved his contact info under Foragoodtimecall, and I would die laughing at his message.

FORAGOODTIMECALL

My (eggplant emoji) is not rabbit-sized.

God, I needed that after the business lunch from hell.

Why would I want someone like Cameron Chamberlain when this nut was staying at my apartment to protect me from my sister's ex? What would Rabbit pull out of his hat next? That he saved puppies? Volunteered with kids?

Thoroughly diverted and unable to resist, I called him. He answered on the second ring.

"Poe. Everything okay? That rat bastard isn't harassing you, is he?"

Concern for me. Yep, that was a hard hitter. I could almost feel my knees getting weak.

*You've only known him for two days. He could be a murderer!*

None of my lady parts cared. I consciously had to keep myself from purring in his ear.

Seriously, what was wrong with me?

I'd never been this interested in a guy before. He called me Postal, but *he* was the complete package. Intelligent, mouth-wateringly sexy, and genuinely interested in me for more than my body.

I was happy we weren't on video chat because I couldn't stop grinning. "Haven't seen or heard from Matt since yesterday. I don't think he knows where I work or anything else about me. We weren't exactly besties. Even before he started beating on my sister."

"He knows where you live, and I wouldn't put it past the bastard to follow you."

I swooned a little, then remembered I intended to convince him I could take care of myself. "And I'm carrying the Taser. I won't hesitate to use it. You know I won't."

He swallowed, and I remembered how his eyes had darkened at the sight of me with it. "I would like to see that."

"Well, I've had a rough day, and I'm heading home early. If Matt Parker happens to be in my way, you might get lucky."

"You're heading home now?"

All his attention homed in on me. It made me shudder. In a good way.

"Yes."

"Keep your doors locked, and don't get out of your car until I get there."

"But then you won't get to watch me Tase the asshole."

"I'll make that sacrifice for your safety."

He'd sacrifice his entertainment for me. That was... curiously sweet. I shook my head, trying not to get all melty. "Do you really believe what I do is up to you?"

He sighed. "No. I can barely handle being responsible for my own damn behavior."

"Then worry about yourself because I will never be the stupid girl who walks into danger."

"I know you won't. But be careful, Poe."

The notes of concern and resignation in his voice made me smile as I slid behind the wheel of my car. Talking to him had lifted a burden off my chest. Now, I was warm and cozy, like I'd been wrapped in my favorite sweater.

"Roger, Roger. See you soon."



## Rabbit

I hauled ass to Elenore's, arriving before she did. Parking my bike in one of the few visitor spots, I made my way to her designated space and waited. She'd be here soon, and though it was foolish to get my hopes up, I couldn't wait to see her again. And not just because she'd left here wearing that goddamn navy skirt set. I'd damn near swallowed my tongue when she'd sauntered into the living room this morning dressed like one of the two photographs I'd quietly stroked myself to sleep to last night.

Looking like the fox that caught the fucking rabbit, she walked straight up to me, patted my cheek, and told me to put my tongue back in my mouth.

It had taken every ounce of my self-control to not rip off her clothes and show her exactly what I could do with my tongue. This woman would drive me crazy, and I intended to love every minute. The way the swell of her breasts peeked out from the top of her neckline....

Damn. I was hard again. Shifting myself so my erection would be less obvious, I tracked her Toyota Prius as it entered the garage and wound its way toward me. Stepping to the side as she pulled into her space, the engine purring like a kitten, I wondered who her mechanic was. From now on, it would be me. There were a lot of shady ass mechanics out there taking advantage of women and the elderly, and I didn't want anyone fucking with Elenore's ride.



She climbed out of the car and smiled, really smiled. Her eyes glittered as she closed the door and headed my direction. I met her halfway.

“Hi.” She sounded almost nervous.

Her soft, sweet scent wrapped around me, and the edges of my vision grew fuzzy. My heart tried to pound out of my chest. Never in my life had a woman affected me like this, but the genuine joy dancing in her eyes was directed at me. Nobody ever reacted like that to my presence. It was... overwhelming, a powerful reward that I hadn't done shit to deserve.

But I fucking wanted it. I wanted to *deserve* it.

For the rest of my life, I would crave Elenore's excitement to see me.

I would slay dragons for that look on her face.

Whatever she wanted, I would find a way to give it to her, destroying anyone who stood in her way. It didn't matter that I had only known her for a few days, I would do everything I could to make her happy.

As I tried to wrap my mind around this new and terrifying realization, I followed her into the building and up to her condo. The entire way, she talked, filling me in about the rich son-of-a-bitch who'd put his goddamn mother-fucking hands on her. Cameron Chamberlain. I didn't know that piece of shit from Adam, but he sure as hell was about to know me. The moment we were behind the privacy of her front door, I couldn't take it anymore. I grabbed her hand, spun her around to face me, and backed her against the entryway wall.

“Where the fuck do I find him?”

Her eyes widened. Then she swallowed and licked her lips. My gaze tracked her motions, and it was all I could do to keep from grinding against her to give my throbbing cock some relief. Self-restraint was never one of my strengths, but I'd never been this out of control about anyone. It was... scary as fuck, but also kind of exciting. Like racing down a winding road when you can't see what's beyond the next bend. Could

be the destination I always seemed to be searching for, could be a fucking five-car pile-up I wouldn't be able to stop in time to avoid. Either way, I was opening up the throttle.

“I take out my own trash, remember?”

Because she was strong and independent, which only made me want to protect her more. There had to be something I could say to set her mind at ease without lying about my intentions.

She must have taken my silence for the lame-ass stall tactic it was because her eyes narrowed at me. “He’s potentially a crucial investor. My company’s survival could depend on his family’s willingness to financially support my program. I mean it, Roger. You can’t hurt him. I’m sharing my frustration with you because I believe you’re someone I can be honest with. This is new to me. Please don’t make me regret opening up to you. If you betray my trust, I will never tell you anything personal again.”

*Shit.* That was one hell of an ultimatum.

“Fine. I won’t hurt him.” How could I, knowing she’d never trust me again? Oh well. There were other ways to get at the bastard. I’d just have to be creative. “I promise.”

She gave me a look that let me know she was onto me and slid away from me to drop off her purse and remove her coat. “So, what do you do when you’re not out choosing violence?”

I followed her into the living room. She sat, but I was still too keyed up to hold still, so I roamed the space as I answered. “In truth, I rarely leave the club. There’s always shit to do there, or at the bar we own next door. Sometimes I work late. The club owns my shop, too.”

“Your shop?”

“Yeah. I’m a mechanic.” One of the few accomplishments I was proud of. I worked hard, and I was damn good at my job.

She studied me for a moment and then grinned. “So, you really do know the best way to sabotage a brake line.”

Grinning back, I nodded. “Sure do.”

“Why didn’t you work today?”

Another conversational landmine I needed to avoid. I’d imagine ‘just be real with her’ would be sound advice for someone else, but there was a lot of shit about me I didn’t want anyone to know. Particularly when that knowledge could influence the way she looked at me. Suppose I admitted my episode or explained that I’d rejected therapy because I didn’t want my brothers to find out how truly fucked in the head I was. Would there be pity rather than joy in her eyes? I didn’t want to find out. Honesty wasn’t a path I could commit to. I would do my best not to outright lie to her, but steering conversations away from topics that could end in the demise of her esteem was a skill firmly in my wheelhouse.

“I’m off this week,” I said like it was no big deal. Then, I returned to our original subject before she could blast me with questions. “There’s lots to do at the fire station. Pool tables, darts, a game room, a couple of big screens someone’s always watching sports on. But the best part about the club is that nobody’s an asshole. Don’t get me wrong, they do some asshole shit.” Tap had recently fucked with the lights in my room, a prank I fully intended to make him pay for, but that shit was harmless. It kept life interesting. “But they’re decent people.”

Other than Brass, one of Link’s first recruits, who’d been caught stealing from the club. But Link had dealt with him years ago. Still, knowing the prez had pulled out a knife and scarred up Brass’s club tattoo had served as a stark reminder that not everyone was entitled to wear the patch. I didn’t always make the best decisions, but I was careful not to cross any lines that would get my ass kicked out. The club was my lifeline, my chance to be something other than the bastard my mom had raised. I didn’t even want to think about who I’d be without my brothers to hold me accountable.

Following this line of thinking gave me a flash of inspiration. “I have an idea.”

“Beer and pizza?” Elenore asked, sounding a bit more into the notion than she had been last night.

“No. We should go to the club.”

She looked at me like I’d lost my mind. “The fire station?”

I nodded as my excitement built. This was fucking genius. Taking her to the club would allow me to spend time with her in a safe space where I wouldn’t be tempted to rip off her clothes. Win, win. “Yeah. You’ll love it. I promise.”

“But tonight’s a work night. And I still have to go to the gym.”

“Skip the gym. After the day you’ve had, you deserve to relax and let loose.”

Her scandalized expression almost made me laugh. “I can’t skip the gym. I go Monday through Friday after work. Every week. It’s a habit I’ve worked diligently to build.”

“Missing one night to blow off steam post-workday stress won’t kill you.”

“Have you tested that theory? What data—if any—do you have to back it up?”

“I skip the gym all the time, and it hasn’t killed me yet.”

Her gaze dipped to my bare forearms. I flexed, and heat flooded her eyes. My forearms did it for her? Seriously? She licked her lips, sealing my doom. If we didn’t get the hell out of her apartment, I was going to jump her. And it was too soon. She needed to know what she’d be getting herself into first.

“Look, Poe, you’re fucking hot. It doesn’t matter how often you go to the gym; you’ll still be the sexiest woman I’ve ever met.”

*Shit.* I hadn’t meant to gush like that, but at least it was true.

She stepped back, making me worry that I’d gone too far. But rather than telling me to get out of her apartment, her brow furrowed in thought as she considered my words. “What if I gain weight?”

“From missing one day at the gym?”

“Poor decisions can turn into bad habits. I might enjoy the day off so much that I never want to work out again. Then what?”

“I’d suggest canceling your gym membership. I hear they’re expensive.”

She gasped, sounding scandalized. “And if I get fat?”

Unable to help myself, I let my gaze roll over her body, allowing every ounce of my appreciation show. “Then there’ll be more of you to grab onto.”

She blushed. “Roger, I’m serious.” But the heat had rushed back into her eyes, and a smile played across her lips.

“So am I. Look at you. Seriously! Hot. As Fuck. No amount of weight gain or loss will change that.”

She didn’t look convinced. “I doubt you’d still find me attractive if I was morbidly obese.”

I gave her statement the honest consideration it deserved. “Gotta admit, I’m not too fond of the word morbidly. Sounds hazardous to your health. I’ll tell you what, there’s a gym in the club’s basement. Anytime you want to work out there, I’d be glad to pump iron with you.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Is that a euphemism?”

I shrugged, enjoying the conversation far more than I should have. Why was it so damn fun just to talk to her? “Could be. Look, I can respect your hustle, but you shouldn’t miss out on a good time because you’re worried about your weight. Size doesn’t have shit to do with why you’re sexy as fuck. It’s your...” I gestured wildly, trying to encompass all the things that made her exceptional. “Your *postal-ness*. The whole damn package.”

Her lips quirked. “Now you’re making words up.”

“Doesn’t make them any less true.”

“But a big part of my personality is my dedication to succeed. Bailing on my responsibilities could prove to be a slippery slope. Tonight, I skip the gym. Next week, I’m jobless and selling my body for crack cocaine.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa. We gotta build up to drugs slowly. Skip the gym, party with bikers, call in sick to work tomorrow.”

She gasped again, this time barely fighting a smile. “I could be stripping for dollars by next week.”

Like hell, she would. At least not for anybody but me. And now I couldn't stop thinking about peeling her out of her clothes. “Let's not plan more than one day ahead lest someone think our bad decisions are more than a spur-of-the-moment lapse in judgment. I like to stay away from anything that might be considered premeditated.”

“Good point,” she conceded.

“Thank you. So, tonight, we'll forget about tomorrow. We'll shoot pool, throw darts, and have a good ole' time with my friends Jack and Jim.”

The light caught her irises. They were more brown than green today, sort of amber. Beautiful and dangerous. Like the whiskey I'd just referenced.

“So... you're saying I should abandon my responsibilities, drink, and make poor life choices?”

I snapped my fingers and pointed at her. “Yes! That's what I want my tombstone to say. What do you think they'll put on yours? Worked her ass off and died of boredom?”

“You're a horrible influence.” But she was smiling.

“The worst. So, come on. What do you say? One lousy day off work. That's not too much to ask. And after abandoning you with that asshat, your boss owes you a comp day.”

“Your logic is frightening.”

“Thank you.” I bowed. “Besides, it'll give you time to figure out what you want to tell her about your lunch with that fucker.”

“I don't know that I'm comfortable drinking with a bunch of strange men.”

I chuckled. “You’re lookin’ at the strangest of the lot. The rest of ’em are harmless.”

“I won’t be in any danger?”

Bikers, in general, had a shit reputation, so her concern was valid, but not even a gang of one-percenters could get by me to hurt this woman. “None. I swear. Besides, you should vet my brothers and see for yourself that it’s okay for Tina and Dylan to be around them.”

“You think Tina and Dylan will wind up spending time at your clubhouse?”

“Sure will. As soon as Kaos sweeps her off her feet.”

Elenore eyed me. “Careful, Roger, or I might think you’re a closet romantic.”

“No closet about it, I’m romantic as fuck. You’d know that if you weren’t over there judging this book by its cover. Come on, Poe. You know I won’t let anything happen to you. I’m even willing to bet you’ll have a good time.”

Her teeth sank into her bottom lip as she reached for her phone. Long, slender fingers flew over the buttons, and then she lowered the phone. “I didn’t lie to my boss. I asked for a personal day, and whether we do this will depend on—”

The phone beeped.

Elenore glanced down. “Crap. She said yes.” Meeting my gaze, her eyes lit up with cautious excitement. “What do I wear?”

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“Again, you don’t have to fucking blackmail me, Rabbit. You could have just asked.” Red splotches mottled Morse’s face, cluing me in to the fact I’d really pissed him off this time. Quite the feat, considering I hadn’t been in the club for ten minutes yet. Just long enough to drop Elenore off with Shari so I could have a word with the eyes of the club about what I’d do to him if he told anyone my plus one for the night was

Tina's sister. Why did I care? Because it was nobody's damn business, and I didn't want to catch any grief for it.

"You would have helped me?" I asked, unable to take him at his word. "Without the proper motivation?"

"Yes! You may be a bit fucked-up, but you're not the monster you think you are. That woman's here with you of her own free will." He froze. "Wait. She is here of her own free will, isn't she?"

"What the fuck, man? Of course, she is. If I'd kidnapped her, I wouldn't have left her at the bar with Shari. I would have figured out how to avoid the cameras and get her up to my room."

He gaped at me. "A word of advice. Don't say shit like that in front of the others."

"I'm not stupid. I only trust you because I've got something on you. Snitch, and I'll tell the entire club you're into gardening porn."

"I am not into—"

"Or that you're a voyeur, but of gardeners. I don't know which of those is worse."

His head dropped forward, and he closed his eyes, rubbing the bridge of his nose. It appeared I was on Morse's last nerve. Bonus to an already fantastic day.

"Want me to get my ass out of your office?"

"There is literally nothing I want more."

I fought a grin. "Then do me a favor."

His head whipped around, and he gaped at me for a long-ass minute before sighing. "What the fuck do you need?"

"Some asshat investor is harassing Elenore. His name is Cameron Chamberlain."

Morse's eyes widened. "Gerald's son?"

"That supposed to mean something to me?"

"Of the Chamberlain Corporation?"



I shook my head. “Still nuthin’.”

His eyes bugged out, and he plucked at his keyboard until he brought up a website showing the company’s value.

I whistled. “That’s a hell of a lot of zeroes.”

“Yeah. One of the richest families in Seattle. They own half the waterfront.”

He clicked a few more buttons, bringing up a photograph of a clean-shaven yuppie who looked like he could give Elenore the fucking moon. I instantly wanted to break his nose.

“This him?” Morse asked.

“Probably? Look, all I know is that the fuckface is rich enough to throw a bunch of cash at Elenore’s company, and he thinks it gives him the right to put his hands on her. Can you ... I don’t know ... look into him and see how dangerous the pervert is?”

He blinked, clearly stunned by the request. “Yeah, brother. I’ll see what I can find.”

“Thank you.”

Boasting a shit-ton of computers, servers, and other nerdy shit, the tech office was every geek’s wet dream. Monitors covered the wall on my right, showing live camera footage of all three of the club’s properties. Nothing happened in the common areas of the fire station, the Copper Penny, or Formation Auto Repair that wasn’t caught on camera.

When I’d first found out about the cameras, I’d considered them a violation of privacy. But now I knew better. Not all the vets we try to aid want help. Some would rather eat a bullet than live with the images in their heads. An average of 22 American vets commit suicide daily, and we damn sure didn’t want anyone to take their life in our club. Not if we could help it.

The tech crew watched for other shit, too. Illegal drugs, sexual abuse, and theft would automatically get any recruit or member tossed out on their ass, but fist fights were a common

occurrence. Havoc headed up the security team, and the big man made sure everyone knew to disengage immediately when he gave the order. Nobody wanted to be on his cranky side. Someone was always on security duty, but they roamed the buildings until they were needed. Monitoring the video feeds fell on the shoulders of the tech team.

Out of the corner of my eye, I'd been watching the bar where Elenore sat talking to Shari. If their body language was anything to go by, they were really hitting it off. But another figure had popped up on the scene. Sage. And as he approached Elenore, he showed a lot more of his teeth than was necessary. I didn't want that nosy motherfucker anywhere near her.

“Gotta go.”

I made it almost to the door before Morse called out my name.

“Forgot to mention, I'm not the one on duty tonight. My shift ends in a couple of minutes.”

“Then who is?”

He pointed to the wall of monitors at a screen that covered the parking lot. A familiar semi-matte black Harley Softail Fat Boy Special parked. “Tap.”

I swore. Vehemently.

After his third-degree questioning when I'd left my keys in Elenore's apartment, that bastard was the last person I wanted to see. Elenore had suffered through a stressful day, and she needed to relax. And I needed to not get thrown in jail for beating the shit out of him if he tried to get in my face about being with her. He'd see it as protecting her—which I couldn't blame him for since I'd do the same if she hadn't made me lose my mind—but I'd lose my shit all the same. The bottom line was that it wouldn't end well.

“Disguise her,” Morse said. “We only watch when something catches our eye. Make her not so eye-catching.”

I stared at him, half tempted to knock the fucker out. But she was eye-catching, which meant every guy in the club

would try to catch an eyeful of her. They might not *do* anything, but their filthy eyes sure as hell didn't need to be on her.

“I gotta go.”

I ran for the bar.



## Elenore

I gaped at Rabbit's retreating back, trying to make sense of what had just happened. He'd argued like a rabid attorney for me to skip the gym and come to his club. When we finally arrived, he'd rushed me through the entryway and to the bar, where he'd introduced me to Shari, calling her by the most inappropriate title, then sat me down on a stool and told me he'd be right back.

He disappeared around a corner, leaving me to wonder how long I could avoid the woman behind me and stare at nothing before she noticed.

She cleared her throat.

Damn. That didn't take long. Trying not to melt into a puddle of humiliation, I spun around to face her, putting on my most apologetic smile. Shari was... wow! Shari was a stunner. Platinum blonde hair with perfectly styled beach waves, makeup done to perfection, and enormous breasts that had to be fake but made her look unattainably gorgeous. Why would Rabbit call her such a horrible name?

"Poe, is it?" she asked.

"That's the name he gave me. I'm... so sorry about... what Rabbit just said. I'd like to say he doesn't normally call women... whores." My tone softened on the last word, not wanting anyone to hear us. "But honestly, I haven't known him all that long. In fact, I'm not even sure how he convinced me to come here."

Her expression grew concerned. “You don’t want to be here with him? Did he force you to do anything?”

Realizing where she was going with that line of questioning, I waved my hands in front of me. “No. Nooo. It was nothing like that. He’s been...” What had Rabbit told them he was doing at my house? And why was I wondering if we should have gotten our story straight? We’re both grown, consenting adults. And yes, I had been percolating the idea of fulfilling mutual sexual satisfaction with Rabbit all day. But was that really so far-fetched? Sure, he had a lot of tattoos, and it occurred to me I’d learned very little about him last night since he’d kept encouraging me to talk. He was an attentive listener and appeared genuinely interested in my safety and well-being. That already put him light years ahead of anyone on my limited list of sexual partners. If he was anywhere near as intense between the sheets as he was during every moment we were together, I was in for one incredible night.

As soon as I worked up the courage to seduce him.

I needed to figure out this flirting thing. So far, I’d been treating him like a friend. What in the hell was I supposed to do to make him want me? Scratch that. The man had stolen a picture of me in lingerie. That hadn’t shown my face. If that wasn’t a cry for sex, I didn’t know what was. But how did I show my reciprocation of his interest? I’d never really dated, and all my sexual partners had been blunt about their intentions to bed me. It was more like a contract for intercourse than any sort of romantic engagement.

I wanted something more with Rabbit and couldn’t stop wondering if he might want the same. Or maybe he felt personally responsible for the safety of every woman he knew?

But then he’d insulted this woman, and now I would have to go to bed alone.

“Oh, honey, I insisted they all call me a club whore.”

I blinked twice as my brain shut down and attempted to rewire itself. I must have misheard her. “Why on earth would

you do that?” My hand had flown to my chest. Good God, was I clutching my invisible pearls? I forced my hand down.

My mother had slept around, and the small-town collective had deemed her a whore. I’d never much cared for what small-minded people talked about, so it hadn’t bothered me like it had Tina. Besides, I’d known something my big sister hadn’t. Mom had accepted payment for sex. Not exclusively—she’d also worked full-time waiting tables—but she was a single mother who did her best. I’d found out from one of her customers but never told Tina. She was already angry enough at Mom for dying.

“Because I know what I want my role here to be. I’m not looking for a husband, and they damn well better know better than to look for me. But I get lonely. And some of these guys are excellent snugglers. I’m the one defining the relationship right from the beginning. Letting them know I like to get down but will never be anything more to them than just a fuck. These guys have been through a lot. The last thing they need is someone dangling forever in front of them if they’re just here to scratch an itch. Whore is easier to say than itch scratcher.”

Holy shit, was everyone in this club fascinating? Shari was so confident and comfortable in her own skin, positively at peace with who she was. I leaned closer to keep our conversation private. “I’ve read that women with no intention to breed are often treated differently in society. Do you find that to be the case?”

Her turn to blink.

Fair, since the question had likely been too personal. Small talk never had been my strength. I tended to skip introductory questions and get straight to the dreams and nightmares of a soul. What made a person tick? What trauma had they experienced? How were they overcoming their life challenges? “I mean, are you uninterested in finding a partner completely? Or is that just for now?” I asked, but judging by the fall of her expression, that question was no less intrusive.

“Some people are irreplaceable.” Sorrow flooded her eyes, and she looked away. “You just meet them and know your life

will never be the same. Then they're gone. And the best thing you can do is plug the hole they left behind because nobody can ever replace them." She turned to face me and fixed the smile back onto her face. "But enough about me. I want to know all about you."

I stared at her, wondering what to say. Seriously, how did one respond to *that*? I liked the meat and potatoes of a conversation but was beginning to see the necessity of at least a palate cleanser first. She'd just poured out her heart to me about a lost love. Was that the level of information we were giving complete strangers now? Because I wasn't comfortable with it in the least. Sure, I'd not-so-subtly asked how people received her life choice, but that was data collection. This was personal.

And oddly enough, the reminder of human mortality only made me more determined to get Rabbit in my bed. No wonder one in eight men under age thirty-five bring condoms to funerals.

"Let's start with your preferred beverage. What can I get you to drink? We have two local beers on tap: a Belgian ale and a stout. Or I can mix you up a cocktail if you'd like."

Stronger. As I'd learned from the handful of college parties my roommates had dragged me to, alcohol was, in fact, liquid courage laced with regret. I wanted Rabbit. Even more so after Shari's tale of lost love. Life was cruel, and good people didn't always get what they deserved. It was up to me to enjoy the life I lived. I just hoped I didn't regret it in the morning.

Why was I stressing about this? We'd agreed to leave tomorrow to its own problems, so tonight, I needed to borrow courage from the captain. "Rum and Coke?"

My trainer would have me doing burpees if she knew what I was up to, but I had only ever climaxed through clitoral stimulation, and Rabbit seemed like a man who knew where the G-spot was and precisely how to hit it. And I'd ask him to do so as soon as I was buzzed enough to blame the alcohol for my stupidity if he said no.

Shari dropped off my drink, and I took a sip. Mmm. Chemicals, caffeine, and alcohol. Why did all the harmful ingredients have to be so delicious? I'd have to ponder that problem some other time because something Shari had said kept tugging at my attention.

“Has Rabbit forced women to come to the club before?”

She shook her head. “No. He's never brought anyone here.”

Interesting. “But you were concerned...”

“No, we're careful. A lot of the vets are fighting demons. Sometimes, they manifest in unexpected ways. We keep our eyes and ears open around here so we can help wherever we're needed.”

Her attempt at brushing off my question only heightened my curiosity. “And Rabbit has demons?”

Her expression hardened. “What about me makes you think I would tell you anything about Rabbit?”

The woman had just overshared her own personal love story. “Oh, now we're being discreet?”

She tossed a washcloth into the sink. “My business is mine to share. But Rabbit's isn't. If you want to know about him, he's the man you should ask. Better yet, keep your eyes and ears open. If you care enough, you'll stick around to figure it out for yourself. If you don't, you don't deserve to know.”

“You... *you* care about him, don't you?”

“Like he's blood.” Her face scrunched up in disgust. “But no relation. That would be gross, considering how many times his head has been between my legs.”

Rage surged inside me like a tidal wave, drowning all rational thought with the urge to grab Shari by the hair and slam her face into the bar. Maybe she wouldn't be so intimidatingly gorgeous if she were missing her two front teeth. Better yet, I could smash this glass against the bar and take a shard to those annoyingly high cheekbones.



She studied my face like she could see her wipeout coming. “What’s wrong?”

I held up a finger. “Give me a moment. I’m not finished planning your dismemberment.” Shocked, I slapped my hand across my mouth. The words had just spilled out.

What the fuck had come over me? It was one thing to fantasize about brutalizing my foes, but since when was casually threatening strangers my thing? Rabbit had abandoned me at the bar in a biker club, and I’d just threatened one of his... uh... previous sexual partners? How would she react? Was I about to get jumped by all her other lovers? Should I pretend to use the restroom and escape?

With both hands, I strangled my drink, attempting to get myself under control. “I... I shouldn’t have said that.”

I wouldn’t apologize since I still wanted to slash up her face. But now that the wave was receding, a little voice in the back of my head informed me I had no right to be angry about Rabbit’s hook ups. Regardless, unfamiliar emotions continued to roil within me.

“Then why did you?” she asked.

It was an honest question, so I gave her an honest answer. “Jealousy is new to me.”

Her expression turned thoughtful. “Are you jealous? Or territorial?”

“Good question. Can I think about it and get back to you?”

“Yes.” Her expression sharpened. “But in the meantime, be careful with Rabbit. Break his heart, and I’ll break your fucking face.”

“Noted. And I appreciate the direct honesty of your threat.” Turnabout is fair play, after all. She’d given me loads of new information, but all I could focus on was Rabbit’s alleged experience with oral. I’d slept with one guy who’d attempted to go down on me. He’d reminded me of a dog cleaning a wound. I could have possibly worked with that, but his mouth hadn’t stayed down there long enough for me to wiggle myself into place.

What would the ministrations of an accomplished master of the tongue feel like?

Shari's attention shifted, and she beamed a warm smile at an approaching dark-haired man. "Hey, Sage."

"Hey, Shari."

He flipped up the hatch in the bar and slid behind it to hug her and grab a pint glass. She snatched the glass from him and slapped his hand. He nuzzled her neck, and she giggled and swatted him away.

"How you doin'?" he asked.

"Good. Much better." She set the glass beneath a beer tap and started pouring. "Thanks again for our session yesterday."

Session? Was that what she called her coital times with the bikers?

"My pleasure." His dark gaze gave nothing away as it slid to me. "Who's your friend?"

Shari winced, and her smile turned apologetic. "Sorry. This is Poe. She's here with Rabbit."

They shared a look that told an entire story. Too bad it was in a language I couldn't read. Afterward, Sage held his hand out and introduced himself as the club psychologist. Ah. Session. Got it. We shook.

"You're here with Rabbit, huh?" Sage asked, taking the stool beside me.

"Yes," Shari said. "And I'm sure you have all sorts of questions, but Rabbit left her in the safety of my care."

She plunked the pint down in front of him. "You should run along now before he comes back."

Sage's smile turned chagrined. "Right," he said with an annoyed huff. Then he tipped his glass to both of us and walked away.

I studied Shari and was more than a little impressed. Rabbit had people who cared about him, and they were loyal and protective. It only made him more intriguing.

Pounding feet drew my attention, and I turned to find Rabbit racing toward us. Alarmed, I watched for signs of pursuit, but nothing appeared to be chasing him. Eyes wild, he waved for me to follow him. “Come on. Come on!”

Startled, I clambered to my feet.

“Take your drink.” Shari hastily handed it to me.

I accepted it with one hand as Rabbit snagged the other, pulling me deeper into the club. We jogged past a couple of doorways, and Rabbit waved at a man who called his name as we hit the stairs. He towed me up two flights, and then we turned down the hall, hurrying past marked doors that reminded me of a college dorm. Finally, he slid to a stop, unlocked a door, and tugged me into a dark room. It wasn’t pitch black—light filtered in around the corners of a blackout curtain—but it was too dark to make out anything more than the vague shapes of furniture. We were both breathing hard from the unexpected mad dash.

“What’s going on?” I wheezed. It didn’t matter how often I worked out, stairs still made me huff and puff.

“Tap’s here.”

“Oh-kay?” I had several questions, but first, I needed to know where we were. “Can we turn on the lights?”

Rabbit slapped at the wall and swore.

“What?” I squeezed his hand, enjoying his fingers intertwined with mine.

“My brothers like to fuck with me.”

“Did they take away your lightbulbs?”

“Nope. Worse. Way fuckin’ worse.” He cleared his throat and spoke up. “Welcome to Flaccid Avenue.”

The lights flicked on.

I laughed, realizing what had happened. “They automated your lights.” Sure enough, a plastic plate was where his light switch should be.

“Yep. Fuckers.”

“Do you often play pranks on one another?”

“Sure do. Don’t worry. I’ll come up with a way to get him back.”

“Good. I want to hear about it. Don’t disappoint me.”

He chuckled. “Scout’s honor.”

“You were no boy scout, Roger.”

“Nope. I wanted to be but didn’t have a ride to the meetings. Besides, I usually had to babysit Rose.” He released my hand and strode to a chest of drawers. I wanted to learn more about his family but felt the topic was off the table, so I took in my surroundings. A worn sofa was situated in front of a flat-screen television hanging on one wall. A dresser was against the wall to the right of his wooden headboard, and a nightstand was on the left. All the furniture was mismatched but cozy. A microwave rested on top of a dorm-sized fridge, and the shelf above it held several bottles of liquor. I didn’t know one brand from the next, but some bottles looked expensive.

“You a big drinker?” I asked as my stomach sank. Alcoholism would be a solid strike against him.

He followed my gaze and shook his head. “I like an occasional snifter of whiskey but don’t indulge often. Got a couple bottles for Christmas the year before last and decided to become a collector. Maybe I’ll become a whiskey connoisseur or some shit like that. Why? You wanna try some?”

I held up my drink. “I should probably stick to rum. I don’t often indulge either, but I know better than to mix liquors.”

“Wise.”

The room was clean but devoid of personality. He’d given me the impression he’d been a club member for a while, but everything about the bedroom was temporary.

“Pearl Jam, the Offspring, or Alice in Chains?” he asked.

Why was he asking about old bands? Was he planning to play music? I couldn’t think of a single Alice in Chains song,

and most of the Pearl Jam songs I'd heard were slow and moody. The Offspring was a punk band that seemed more Rabbit's speed, so that's the band I chose.

"Put this on." He tossed something at me.

I caught the faded gray cloth and set my drink on the dresser to hold it up. A T-shirt with the Offspring logo across the front. "What's wrong with what I'm wearing?" I hadn't dressed in anything special, just a pink T-shirt with my gym's logo, jeans, and sneakers.

"We're disguising you so Tap won't know who you are."

"Interesting. Is there a reason we're hiding my identity?"

"Yes. He's a nosy bastard who needs to learn to mind his own business. Besides, it'll be fun."

Rabbit was definitely keeping something from me, but this was kind of fun, so I played along. I put his shirt on over mine. Though Rabbit wasn't much taller than me, he was much larger. His shirt hung big and baggy.

He took one look at me and frowned. "You're still gonna stand out." He plucked a Mariners baseball cap from his sofa and tossed it to me. "Put that on."

Feeling a lot like Key and Peele donning a disguise that would fool absolutely no one, I pulled my hair through the hole in the back of the hat, giving myself a ponytail as I slid it on.

"What if Tap catches on to us?"

"Then you tell him you're fucking me and that our relationship is none of his goddamn business."

I eyed him. "I have no problem with the second part of that statement, but is the lie necessary?"

"Technically, no, but you've had a rough day. Watching Tap's eyes bug out of his head will make you feel better."

I laughed. "For *my* benefit, huh?"

"Abso-fuckin-lutely. We should head down."

“Wait. Before we do, I have to ask... How safe is this place?”

He frowned, and his expression turned murderous. “Why? Did Sage...?”

“No.” What was with everyone assuming the worst of each other? “But your reaction reinforces my concerns. Will I be in danger?”

“No. I told you I’ll play designated driver tonight. I won’t drink a sip, and I sure as hell won’t let anything happen to you. You can count on that, Postal. All you need to do is relax and enjoy yourself. I got you. I promise.”

Oddly enough, I believed him. “Okay. Thank you.”

The smile he flashed me was decidedly savage. “You any good at throwing darts?”

Was I ever? I had been a master at darts since my freshman year of high school when Tina had started insisting I accompany her to parties. The first one had a dart board, which was far more interesting than drunk teenagers. I taught myself to throw. It required about eighty percent science and twenty percent skill. I had the science down, but what I lacked in skill, I made up for in perseverance.

Besides, it wasn’t like there was anything else to do at the parties.

Tina promised I’d never find a boyfriend if I bested every guy available, but back then, I wasn’t interested in dating, anyway. Besides, weeding out the poor losers was a solid precursor to dating. And I was about to witness how Rabbit reacted when I kicked his cotton-tailed ass.

“I’m... adequate.”

He chuckled. “Right. Babe, I doubt you’ve ever been just adequate at anything in your life. Come on. Let’s go make some money.”



## Rabbit

We dodged cameras for a solid two hours before Tap busted us. I was usually the one who caused a stir, but this time, it wasn't me who drew his attention. Elenore wasn't just good at darts, much to the chagrin of my brothers. She was unbeatable. We spent almost two hours taking their money before they realized not even the three rum and cokes she'd consumed could skew her aim.

We'd drawn quite a crowd, but that wasn't what caught Tap's eye.

No, that happened afterward when I'd thrown down a sniping challenge and led her to the grouping of chairs centered around a fifty-two-inch television connected to a gaming console.

She took one look at the setup and jammed her index finger into my chest. "I don't play video games, Roger. I'm a mature adult."

The declaration would have been more convincing had she not slurred her words. Mixed drink number four was almost gone, and I planned to ask Shari to keep the rum out of Elenore's next drink. Better yet, maybe I should find her a bottle of water. Four drinks over two hours wouldn't do shit to anyone else in this club, but the way she kept listing to the left led me to believe Elenore was a lightweight.

Regardless, I couldn't drag my gaze away from her. Sweaty from the gym, she'd been hot as fuck. She was

breathhtaking in her navy skirt suit, looking like she was about to take over the world. But Elenore dressed in my old Offspring T-shirt with her baseball cap on backward—so it didn't shade her vision and mess with her dart throws—was fucking irresistible.

My goddamn hands moved without my consent, sliding over her waist to pull her against me. Her head fell back so she could meet my gaze. Her eyes sparkled with mischief as she tangled her hand in the front of my shirt as if to keep me in position. But there was nowhere else I wanted to be. The soft curves of her body pressed against me, and we gulped the same air. The sweet scent of rum on her breath reminded me she was a good two and a half sheets to the wind.

While I was completely sober.

And like a goddamn fool, I'd promised her she could trust me. I needed to create distance between us before carrying her up to my room. Thankfully, I was a master at pissing people off.

"I understand." I peeled her fingers from my shirt. "Girls can't shoot. Even in a video game. I get it."

She shoved me, and I stumbled backward. "You listen to me, and you listen good." Holding up a finger, she drained her glass and placed it on a coffee table. Glaring me down like a misbehaving child she was about to scare straight, she said, "I am an excellent shot. Take me to a gun range right now, and I'll prove it."

I eyed the empty glass. "Maybe when you're sober. *If* you don't suck too much at the game."

"I don't suck at anything."

I quirked a smile. "That's unfortunate."

She snorted. Looked surprised at herself and then laughed at the sound. "Fine. Show me what to do. And don't cry too hard when I kick your ass."

God, I loved her competitive streak. I started up the game and showed her what to do. Then, I proceeded to snipe her character in the head.



“You jerk face!” She leaned across the distance between our two recliners to punch me in the shoulder.

“You’re kinda violent when you drink.”

“I’m always violent. Alcohol diminishes my reservations.”

“At least you still talk like a snob.” I killed her character again, wondering if I should go easy on her. But we were drawing a crowd now, and every one of my asshole brothers was rooting for her. Even after she’d robbed them blind at darts. Fucking traitors, every single one of them.

A bullet grazed my character, and I ducked him behind a rock. Elenore grinned at me, and the manic gleam in her eyes was somewhat terrifying. “Is the bunny wabbit hiding now?” she teased.

I peeked around the rock, but she nailed my character in the head before I could fire off a shot. Everyone cheered as the death message flashed across the screen, and I reloaded. She killed me again as I was settling into position. I made the next kill, but she took me out three more times, winning the game by one kill. The minute “Victory!” flashed across her screen, she launched herself out of her chair into the most ridiculous superhero victory pose I’d ever seen, one fist pointed at the sky, the other at her side like she was about to punch someone.

“Take that! Girls can’t shoot, my ass. Do not play with me, Roger. I will hook up with your dad and make you call me mommy.”

I chuckled. Drunk Elenore was something else. “You’d have to find the motherfucker first.”

Her expression fell, making me regret my words, but everyone closed in around her, urging her on. The traitorous bastards were still congratulating her when Tap practically ripped my arm off as he yanked me away from the crowd and confronted me.

“Is that really Elenore Owens?” he asked through gritted teeth.

“Is that her last name?” I hadn’t known it. Rolling my shoulder to ensure it was still in its socket, I played it cool.

For now.

“What the fuck are you doing?” he demanded.

“Getting my ass kicked by a girl. You should try it sometime. Maybe it’d make you less of an uptight dickwad.”

Zombie tried to high-five Elenore, but they missed, and she stumbled forward. We were far enough away from the group they couldn’t hear us, but I kept one eye on Elenore. I didn’t think my brothers would try anything, but I’d made her a promise, and I didn’t want to fuck it up.

Tap sighed and leaned against the wall. “I never should have said that shit in front of Elenore’s place.”

I eyed him, suspicion engaged. “What do you mean?”

“Everyone in this club is dealing with shit.”

I paused a moment, wondering how the hell to unpack that. “Are you... Are you trying to apologize?”

He released another sigh. “Forget it.”

He started to leave, but I stopped him. “I’m not trying to be an asshole. Well, not completely. I legitimately can’t tell if you’re fuckin’ with me.”

“No. Yeah. I’m sorry, okay? Sasha and I talked about it, and she pointed out that I might not have handled our last conversation in the best possible way.”

Knowing Sasha, I’d bet she kicked his ass. The thought made me smile.

“The point is, I shouldn’t have said shit.”

I was so damn shocked he could have knocked my ass over with a feather. In my astonishment, I must have taken my eye off Elenore because she surprised me by joining us, bumping her shoulder against mine.

“Hey, Tap.” She tilted her glass toward him in greeting. It was a fresh drink, and whoever had served her would get an earful from me. She slid her arm over my shoulder and leaned against me. “I see you’ve met Roger. We’re together, but that’s none of your business.”

I stared at her, shocked. That wasn't exactly what I'd told her to say, but it was close. Had I known she would actually do it, I would have brought out my phone and recorded Tap's slack-jawed reaction.

When he recovered, he held his hands up and backed away. "Yes, ma'am."

I leaned over and breathed in the scent of her shampoo, amazed and unworthy. She'd stood up for me. There wasn't anything I wouldn't do for this woman. In the following hours, I did, however, learn that I was a horrible babysitter. And she was sneaky! I swear, every time I turned around, she had a fresh drink. Thankfully, it was a weeknight, so everyone retired relatively early. By the time the common areas cleared out, Elenore had given most of her darts winnings to the bar and was in no shape to ride on the back of my bike. Instead, I looped her arm over my shoulder and half-carried her upstairs to my room.

"You know what?" she asked as I ushered her through my door.

I waited for her to continue, but instead, she released me and leaned against the back of the couch, stroking it like it was made of velvet or something. "What?" I asked.

She startled and peered up at me. "I'm glad you're a sneaky bastard who stashed your keys at my place." At least she was still speaking in mostly complete sentences.

"You are, huh?"

"Abso-frickin-lutely." She laughed, cracking herself up. "Today sucked, but tonight was fun."

Leaving Elenore to pet the sofa, I made my way to the bed. I'd only slept on the sheets once since I'd last changed them, but I tossed them in my laundry basket and put the clean set on anyway. I hadn't made a bed since I'd been discharged from the military. It was pointless since I was usually the only one in my room and didn't give a shit if it was made. But I surprised myself now, going through the motions to make her comfortable.

“I’m glad you enjoyed it,” I said, fluffing the pillows.

“Are you upset with me?”

Surprised, I turned to study her, taken aback by the concern written all over her beautiful face. “Why would I be upset with you?”

“I can be a bit... competitive. I like to win, which tends to be a turn-off for most men.”

Judging by the way my cock had been rock hard all night, I didn’t think there was a thing she could do that would turn me off. “Only those suffering from some serious little-dick energy. I don’t have that problem.”

Her gaze shot to the front of my jeans. “No. I suppose you wouldn’t.”

I barked out a laugh, wishing I could pull down my pants and show her exactly what she did to me.

Eyes sparkling with mischief, she pushed away from the sofa, stepping toward me. “Do you want to see a magic trick?”

The only trick I wanted to see was my dick disappearing down her throat, but saying so would make me an asshole. Especially since she was drunk. I nodded. “Sure.”

She smacked a hand to her back, wincing as she overextended her elbow. “Wait. I have too many clothes on.”

She pulled off her borrowed tee and tossed it on the bed, sucker-punching me with a glimpse of creamy pale skin. Against all odds, I was trying to do the right fucking thing here and keep my filthy hands off her. Couldn’t she help me out just a little? Obviously not, because she reached up her shirt and unclasped her bra. Her breasts shifted into their natural position, hugged by her tight-ass shirt. Hard nipples tented the front of the fabric, making my hands itch and my mouth go dry.

She was just... perfection, and she was... *fuck*. She was removing her bra. Without lifting her shirt, she yanked one bra strap over an arm before struggling with the other. Then she

pulled the entire black lace brassiere—it was too fancy to be called a bra—through an armhole and tossed it aside.

“See? Magic.”

The real magic trick would be me not devolving into my primate brain and fucking the hell out of her tonight. Just when the situation couldn't get any worse, she palmed her breasts, lifting and lowering them as she sang some song about milkshakes and atoms. And pizza.

It was the hottest thing I'd ever seen.

Unable to help myself, I let my thumbs dip under her T-shirt and sample the softness of her skin.

She sobered. “That's what I want for my last meal.”

“Milkshakes, atoms, and pizza?”

She nodded. Then she shook her head. “I don't think I'm mentally cape. Cape. Capable of sharing this or any information right now. Besides, there are other things better suited to take up our time.”

Her hands dropped to my zipper, and my self-control snapped.

Then she puked all over me.



## Elenore

I woke up alone in an unfamiliar bed. An alarm clock on the nightstand swam into focus through my gritty eyes. The glowing red display showed the time as 9:24 a.m. The only other light came from a pale border around blackout curtains. Memories of the night before trickled in like obnoxious camera flashes, each sending a shock of agony through my brain. There were no words in the English language to describe the taste inside my mouth, and I had to brace myself as I caught a pungent whiff of afterparty penitence. The combination of cleaning products, vomit, and stale booze made my stomach roil.

Contrary to popular belief, alcohol doesn't kill brain cells. But if one drinks enough, it will make them wish for death. Proving the point, I threw back the covers and sat up, only to experience what felt like steel spikes hammering into my head. The edges of my vision darkened, making me regret the decision to move. Or breathe, for that matter.

"I'm never drinking again," I swore, pressing a hand to my temple in a failed attempt to stop the assault.

A shuffling in the darkness alerted me to the fact that I wasn't alone. "Welcome to Flaccid Avenue," Rabbit said, his tone raspy with sleep.

The overhead light turned on, blinding me and making my head spikes explode into mind-shredding shrapnel.

“Holy fuck.” I squeezed my eyes closed and prayed for an expedient death. Or at least a plunge into unconsciousness until the pain subsided to a more manageable level. How much had I drunk last night?

“Sorry.” The hint of humor in Rabbit’s tone made me question his sincerity.

Memories trickled in like raindrops, each feeding my expanding pool of dread. Soon, I’d recall every moronic, humiliating detail of last night. Unlike some people who experienced *en bloc* blackouts when they drank, alcohol never inhibited my brain from storing short-term memories. Even idiotic behavior I’d do almost anything to forget.

Like vomiting on Rabbit.

The memory elicited a worrisomely aggressive gurgle from my stomach seconds before bile crept up my throat. “I’m going to be sick.”

“Bucket on the floor beside you.” The urgency of his words was mirrored in the pounding of feet as he hurried toward me.

Squinting through the head-splitting pain, I fumbled for the bucket, which was thankfully empty, and bent over it. However, I must have expelled my entire stomach last night, including the lining, because all I could do now was dry heave. And man, did it hurt.

Behind me, the bed dipped, and hands brushed my hair back, holding it out of my face. “You’re okay. I’m here. I got you,” Rabbit soothed with a practiced tone.

Another memory flashed, this one of me kneeling in front of a toilet with Rabbit holding back my hair. Apparently, we’d been in that position a few times last night, a realization I could have done without. Now, I didn’t know how to feel. About him, about being around him....

Rabbit had taken care of me.

Besides Tina and Mom, nobody had ever really done that before. My aunt and uncle had been guardians in the loosest sense of the word, providing food and shelter but little in the

way of affection or concern. Once, when Tina and I came down with the flu, they essentially locked us in our room and delivered meals to our door.

Having never been in a committed romantic relationship, I was admittedly naïve about the common practices of such, but I wasn't ignorant of typical human behavior. Rabbit had attempted to cut off my alcohol supply last night, and I'd thwarted his attempts, insisting I was a grown-ass adult who knew my limits. A declaration that hadn't aged well. Regardless, he hadn't abandoned me. Instead, he'd calmly walked me down to the bathroom and helped me into the shower, fully dressed. Careful not to touch me inappropriately, he'd cleaned me off before calling up Shari to remove my clothes.

*“We’re keeping your panties on,” she told me. “And I promise you they’ll be there all night. Rabbit won’t take advantage of you in this state. He’s got a reputation for being crazy, but he’s a good man. I hope you get to know him well enough to appreciate what I mean.”*

Looking down at myself, I confirmed I was still dressed in what she'd given me to wear: Rabbit's Offspring T-shirt that I'd discarded before I'd vomited and a pair of drawstring shorts about two sizes too big. The panties she'd refused to remove were still in place, and there was no telltale sign of soreness between my legs. Rabbit had taken care of me, just like he'd promised he would.

He rubbed my back. “You okay?”

I set the bucket down, willing my gag reflex to stop contracting so I could turn and face him, even though my chest tightened with anxiety and I lacked the courage to meet his gaze. “I'm so sorry about last night.”

He shrugged off my concerns. “Why? I'm not. Haven't had that much fun in... well, ever. But you are a lightweight. Next time, you might want to think about setting a limit with the bartender. They won't serve you—or anyone plying you with drinks—after you hit it.”



“That makes me sound like an alcoholic with no self-control.”

“Or... like a woman with a prominent competitive streak who flat-out refused to let a handful of bikers drink her under the table.”

Had I... said that last night? Sure enough, the memory came filtering in, making me want to groan in irritation at myself. It wasn't unusual for my competitive streak to get the best of me, but the results weren't usually this excruciating. “In retrospect, that was not my brightest moment.”

He beamed me a smile. “Mistakes fertilize the soil of life.”

“Insightful. Did you just make that up?”

“Yeah. It sounded better than what I was thinking: mistakes are the literal shit of growth. Necessary, but messy as fuck.”

Laughter bubbled up my overtaxed throat, but I swallowed it back, wincing at the pain. “Don't make me laugh. It hurts.”

“I know what you need.” A drawer opened, and something rattled. “Drug of choice?”

Clutched in his hands, he held several variations of over-the-counter painkillers. I accepted the ibuprofen, washing down the medicine with the entire bottle of water he handed me.

Rabbit watched me with barely suppressed amusement. “Need anything else?”

I sniffed, and once again, my stomach roiled. “We really need to air out this room.”

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By the time I brushed my teeth and washed my face, the ibuprofen had kicked in, and my clothes were dry. Rabbit left me to dress in his room, insisting he knew the best hangover cure and would meet me in the kitchen. When I joined him, he was making us omelets, hash browns, and coffee. I offered to

help, but he refused my assistance, instead pulling up a chair and instructing me to sit. As he worked, he entertained me with ridiculous stories about the bikers I'd met last night. I laughed until my cheeks hurt, marveling at how much I enjoyed his company. Despite spending most of the night with my head in a bucket, this was by far the best date I'd ever been on. And I wasn't even sure it had been a date.

As we ate, I sneaked glances at him. I'd considered him attractive since we first met, but the more I got to know him, the sexier he became. He asked me several questions and wasn't intimidated by my knowledge. The way he listened without interrupting and appeared genuinely interested in what I had to say was hands down the most potent aphrodisiac I'd ever experienced. It made me wonder what he'd be like in bed. Would he pay attention to my reactions and make it pleasurable for me? Judging by the rigid bulge in his pants, he was thinking about it, too.

The bike ride back to my place was torture, but in the best way. Now that my head no longer throbbed and my stomach was mostly settled, I was acutely aware of his firm abs beneath my hands as I kept my nose buried in his leather vest, breathing in his masculine pine scent. The bike vibrating between my legs didn't help matters. My skin felt painfully tight, my body achingly empty as we reached my condo. Tension charged the air between us as we made the short trek upstairs to my apartment in silence. I wanted to kiss him as soon as he closed and locked the door, but I hesitated. I'd made my sexual interest known last night, and he'd rightfully turned my drunk ass down. This time, should I wait for him to make the first move? Studies show men appreciate women who initiate sex. However, I didn't want to appear intimidating or desperate.

While I was still trying to decide how to make a move without terrifying the man, he plopped down on the sofa and turned on the television, opening the app I'd used to watch talent show shorts and patting the cushion beside him.

As he queued up the first video, I determined it was time to convince him we had better things to do. Taking the seat he'd

gestured to, I leaned over his lap, grazing his chest with my own as I reached for the magazine on his other side.

Rabbit sucked in a breath.

Fighting back a grin, I scooped up the magazine and languidly wiggled back into my seat. I'd unintentionally settled my hand against his upper thigh to support myself. As I nestled back into my space, I left it there.

Rabbit appeared to be holding his breath. The tent in the front of his jeans had grown and now looked painfully crooked. He adjusted himself, and I realized I was staring.

“Your penis looks cramped. That can't be good for blood flow.”

His eyebrows shot up. “You... you think I should take it out?” He sounded hopeful yet hesitant.

I opened my magazine and pretended to scan an article. “I don't want you to be uncomfortable.”

He studied my face as if looking for a deeper meaning, but I was careful not to give anything away. This was just sex. Hopefully mind-blowing, world-rocking, earth-shattering sex, but I was trying not to get my hopes up. His heated gaze traveled down the length of my body, and I felt as if I were teetering on the edge of a raging forest fire. One wrong move and I was toast.

Or, I could find out I enjoyed dancing in the flames.

“I am. Uncomfortable, that is,” he said, his voice low and husky as his gaze dipped to my pants. “Are you?”

His attention blistered me, but I reveled in it and fanned the flames. “I'll remove mine if you remove yours.”

He swore, and his eyes darkened, but instead of acting on my offer, he froze and made no attempt to remove his jeans.

I sighed. Subtlety was getting me nowhere fast. It was time to kick this little journey into the next gear. “Roger.”

He tried to say something, swallowed, and tried again. “Yes?”

I ripped my shirt over my head and set it beside me on the sofa.



Elenore

Rabbit immediately homed in on my lacy bra-covered breasts like they were as priceless as the Hope Diamond.

“Can I...” He cleared his throat. “May I touch you?”

Intending for him to do much more than simply touch me, I moved, throwing one knee over his lap to straddle him. Surprise lit up his face, and a devilish grin tugged at his lips as I settled onto his lap. Since I still hadn’t answered his question, I grabbed both his hands and planted them on my bra cups.

Surprise turned to awe as he gently squeezed and then started petting me through the soft fabric. “Your tits are fuckin’ incredible.”

He turned his hands and grazed my sensitive nipples with the backs of his fingers one at a time, sending shockwaves of pleasure directly to my core.

I sucked in a breath as I processed the delicious feeling, but I wanted more. And since Rabbit didn’t respond to subtlety... “This is the part where you carry me to my bedroom.”

He chuckled but dropped his hands to grip my ass and stood. I wrapped my legs around him, lost in the press of his firm bulge against me.

I expected him to start walking, but he nuzzled my neck with his nose instead. “Kiss me first.”

All too willing to oblige, I pressed my lips against his. Fireworks exploded against my eyelids, and my need for him became a cavernous, bottomless pit. Our tongues tangled clumsily and then danced, exploring and tasting. When we came up for air, I was vaguely aware of a scenery change. We'd made it to my room. Stopping at the foot of the bed, he set me on my feet and stepped back as his heated gaze swept over me. I wanted to object at the sudden distance between us, but we'd need the space to undress to take this to the next step. I reached for my bra clasp, ready to get this party started, but he stilled my hands with his.

“Let me.”

Unable to refuse, I dropped my hands to my sides. Callused fingers trailed over the bare skin of my arms, from my wrists to my shoulders, and then down my back. He took his time locating the clasp. He pulled it away from my skin, and his hands were shaking. I opened my mouth to reassure him this was just sex and nothing to be nervous about, but the reverence in his eyes took my breath away.

The clasp popped free.

He watched with rapt attention as the straps slid down my arms. Goosebumps rose in the wake of his gaze as heat pulsed between my legs. He was so intense, his attention too consuming. The annoying little voice in my mind advised caution, but my bra hit the floor, and he broke from his trance. His gaze snapped back up to my face, and the longing in his eyes made my knees weak.

I'd never felt more desired in my life.

I don't know which of us moved first, but our lips crashed together in a hot, passionate claiming that drove all thoughts from my mind. My hands raced over the front of his body in a frenzied exploration. At the same time, he caressed the bare skin of my arms and torso with feather-soft brushes of his fingertips. He tore his lips from mine to trail soft kisses along my jawline, and I growled in frustration.

He chuckled. “What's the hurry, Poe? We have all day. I've been fantasizing about you since the moment we met, and

I'm damn well gonna take my time savoring you. When I finally sink my cock into your pussy, I want you drenched and needy for me."

How much more drenched and needy could I get before I combusted? I was panting now—yes, panting—unable to draw enough oxygen into my lungs. Empty and aching to be filled, I had to purse my lips closed to keep from begging him to just fuck me already.

"I know what you need, and I'll give it to you. Trust me."

Another soft kiss to my jawline, followed by a goosebump-inciting stroke down my back that ended in a surprisingly rough ass-grab. So many sensations. My brain could hardly keep up.

"But I intend to learn every inch of your body. Discover all your erogenous zones so I can claim every fucking one."

Typically, I encouraged education, but the ache between my legs demanded he fuck me now, study later. Still, that annoying little voice of reason wasn't keen on the idea of being claimed. This was just supposed to be sex. Sure, if we continued to show signs of compatibility, it might develop into a committed relationship. But that would be down the road. Rabbit was worrisomely protective. And I still didn't know what demons he was fighting.

*What am I getting myself into?*

"Stop thinking and relax," he growled, and his mouth retook possession of mine. As he deepened the kiss, he pinched my nipples, rolling the calluses of his thumb and index finger over my sensitive skin.

Thoughts and worries fled once more as I lost myself to the sensations. Rabbit kissed me like he'd been waiting his whole life for the privilege, and the manner in which he worshipped my mouth with his tongue was empowering and intoxicating. All my neurons were saturated in sensations. Desperate for him to be inside me, I fumbled for his fly.

A whimper escaped me as he grabbed my hands, keeping me from my prize.

Releasing my lips with a low growl, he said, “I’m setting the pace.”

My inner control freak wanted to argue, but he wrapped one arm around my lower back and drew me against him, angling my torso upward. When he dipped his head to lick my left nipple, all that came out was a groan. Overwhelmed by the mix of agony and ecstasy, I squirmed and attempted to rub myself against him like a cat, fighting for more contact as he held me still through another measured swipe of his tongue. The bastard languidly circled the areola before drawing the hardened flesh into his mouth. All the while, he continued to fondle my right breast, blissfully ignoring the sensory struggle he was putting me through. When we both groaned this time, his heated rumble against my responsive skin sent blood racing straight to my vagina. Not only was he fully aware of what he was doing to me, he was torturing himself. The self-control he exhibited while tuning me to his ministrations only made me want to attack him more. I’d never been so turned-on in my life.

Pulling back, he released my nipple with a pop, eyeing the opposite breast. I covered it with a hand, forcing him to meet my gaze. The blue of his eyes had darkened and now blazed with lust, making my brain short-circuit. It took me a moment to remember why I’d stopped him and even longer to form my request as if my vocabulary had been deleted to make room for more base emotions.

“R-remove your shirt first.”

His biceps and forearms flexed in the most mouth-watering ways as he reached over his head and gripped the fabric, tugging it up and over his head. All I could do was stare. My God, the man was glorious, all hard lines and corded muscle. Colorful tattoos decorated most of his upper body, and the art only added to the mouth-watering perfection. Temporarily distracted by the intricate seascape design that covered his left pectoral, I traced a line with my fingertip, following it to his nipple.

He shuddered and closed a hand around my finger, pulling it away. “Later,” he rumbled. “It’s still my turn.”



Before I could object, he attacked my fly and tugged down my jeans. A flash of trepidation hit me, courtesy of yesterday's panties, which I was still wearing since he hadn't washed them, and I'd had nothing else to put on. I instinctively pulled away. As if reading my mind, he clutched the fabric and tore it in two before my insecurity could interrupt the mood. The unexpected show of aggression probably should have been concerning, but my body's reaction had nothing to do with fear. Heat pooled between my legs, and I gasped as he released the ripped fabric, and it fluttered to the floor.

Fully exposed and vulnerable, I faced him, trying not to wilt beneath the heat in his eyes.

"Oh yeah, I'm definitely gonna explore every sexy inch of you." His gaze scorched a trail over my body. "I'm gonna touch you. Everywhere. First with my hands, then with my tongue."

He licked his lips for emphasis, and my core quivered in anticipation.

"Then finally, when you're thrashing and shuddering beneath me, I'll fill you so full of my cock you'll never want another. From here on out, I want my name to be the only one you scream."

My mind cried *red flag!* even as my body melted against his. Possessive promises shouldn't be this freaking hot. They should terrify me. Or not, since it was just dirty talk of no real consequence. We'd known one another for less than a week, so he couldn't seriously mean what he'd said. Regardless, my body craved the depravity he'd promised, easily overriding my mind and making me whimper in response as he led me to the side of the bed and pulled back the covers.

"I intend to make you come so hard you see stars."

"You'd be the first," I replied, still breathless as I slid between the sheets.

He paused, eyes widening. "No shit?"

I regretted opening my mouth as a wave of self-consciousness dampened the moment. My brain reasserted

itself. “That’s not uncommon. Studies show that only about fifteen percent of women orgasm during their first sexual encounter with a new male partner.”

He smirked, and if I had still been wearing panties, they would have melted off. “Good thing I ain’t new.”

“You’re new to me,” I clarified.

His gaze rolled over my naked body, making my skin tingle. I closed my fists, resisting the urge to pull him down on top of me and remorseful of my decision to bring up orgasm statistics in the first place. Now was not the time to talk about pleasure but to finally experience a release that wasn’t self-induced.

“Let’s make a wager. If I don’t make your fuckin’ toes curl as you scream my name, I’ll... I’ll eat one of those nasty-ass health meals in your fridge.”

I swallowed, knowing every coin has two sides. “And what happens if you win this bet?”

His pupils dilated. “I get to spend the rest of the day between your thighs, making you come over and over again.”

“What’s the catch?” My voice sounded breathy and needy, even while my idiot brain requested clarification. But I couldn’t help myself. I needed him. Now.

He leaned in closer, his breath kissing my cheek as he said, “No catch. Just pleasure.”

I reminded myself to breathe. “Deal. But clothes aren’t allowed in my bed.”

He grinned and unbuttoned his fly. “That so?”

I nodded, watching him disrobe. He wasn’t wearing any underwear, and as soon as his pants were down, his penis sprang free. Thick, long, and veiny, the tip glossy with pre-cum. The sight increased my anticipation even as the glint of metal caught my eye.

“Is that a piercing?”

His grin widened. “Sure is.”

And soon, I would feel it inside me. That would be a novel experience as well. “Condom?”

“Stop trying to rush me.” He plucked a handful of foil packets from his wallet and tossed them on the bed.

My eyes widened at the sight.

“Those come later. After I feast.”

Before I could ask for clarification, he pounced. Climbing on top of me, he pulled the blankets over our heads and resumed his exploration of my breasts, caressing, suckling, and kneading. It was the most exquisite of tortures, making me writhe, pant, and moan. Frustrated and desperate for release, I whimpered. He chuckled as his hands and lips meandered south over my belly and sides. He really did intend to explore every inch of me.

When I couldn’t handle it anymore, I begged. “Please.”

“Please what, Poe?”

“Please. More.”

One-syllable words were all I could manage. I feared he’d demand more, but he took pity on me. His tongue swiped up my seam.

My body bolted upward. Had I been a cat, I would have hung from the ceiling. As it was, I levitated for a second before crashing back down. He’d worked me up so well that I was already on the edge.

“Like that, huh?”

I swallowed, still trembling from the sensation. “I... uh... it appears d-delayed gratification has some... uh... unexpected benefits.” Good God, I couldn’t even form a complete sentence.

“Yeah? Well, let’s keep experimenting. For science.”

“For science,” I agreed as anticipation of his next lick threatened to send me into a frenzy. The last thing on my mind was science, but I would have agreed to almost anything to get his mouth on me.

His tongue returned to my labia in another agonizing game of unhurried exploration. Pressure built and compacted until I was a bomb about to explode. With the blankets tented around us, I watched him lap at me, his eyes half-lidded as he held my gaze. As the last threads of my control unraveled, I fisted the sheets and swore. Then Rabbit slid one finger inside me and rolled my clit between his lips, sucking.

*Yes. Yes! Ohmigodyes!*

Millions of indescribable sensations washed over me. Rabbit's eyes brimmed with ecstasy as he watched me come undone.

“Oh, God. Oh. Fuck!”

“My name,” he growled. “I want my name on your lips.”

He added a second finger, curling both forward to pound my G-spot.

“Yes, Roger. Oh. Right there.”

I shattered. My eyes slid closed to discover that stars were, in fact, dancing behind my eyelids. My entire body went limp as my bones dissolved into gelatinous goo. I was a puddle of pleasure, a liquified being of unstable matter.

His fingers slid from me, and he lowered his mouth to my pussy, lapping up the mess he'd made. It was too much. My hypersensitive flesh couldn't handle any more sensations, but I lacked the energy to move or protest in any way.

He crawled up my body, and I convinced my eyes to open. Pride showed in his blue eyes, his pupils still dilated with lust. Licking his lips, he stared down at me. “So fucking sweet. I could eat you every day for the rest of my life.” He brushed the wild strands of hair from my face and looked into my eyes. “I love you, Poe.”

I'd never been so shocked in my life. Ever. It was as if someone had dumped a bucket of ice water over my head. I scrambled to sit up, sliding out from under him to press my back against the headboard. “No, you don't,” I blurted as my previously satiated system now prepared for fight or flight. Was this Rabbit's mystery affliction? Did he make it a habit of

professing love to women after a single sexual encounter?  
“You can’t. You barely know me.”

The prideful satisfaction drained from his eyes, and he started to reply, but my bedroom door opened.

“El?”

*Crap!* Tina was here. Panicking, I shoved Rabbit off the bed. Naturally, the blankets went with him. His body hit the floor, and he cursed. I yanked on the covers, pulling them up to my chin while leaving him exposed. But he was on the opposite side of the bed from Tina. All he had to do was stay down, and he’d avoid being seen.

Tina slapped a hand over her eyes and turned away. “El?” she repeated, her tone uncertain.

“It’s not what it looks like,” I lied, trying to come up with an excuse—any excuse—to explain our situation, but my mind drew a blank.

“Are you... okay?” Tina asked.

Rabbit snorted and pushed himself to his knees, doubtlessly ready to lay into her for assuming I hadn’t wanted this.

“Yes.” I huffed out a laugh. “Just stupid.”

The instant the words left my lips, I knew they were a mistake. Rabbit didn’t make a sound, but he didn’t have to. His rigid posture and the hurt in his eyes said it all.

“Is that... Rabbit?” Tina asked.

Still kneeling on the opposite side of the bed in all his naked glory, he gave her a two-finger salute. “Hey, Tina, how you doin’?”

“She’d probably be doing better if you’d get dressed,” I snapped, the discomfort of the situation saturating my tone. I’d have to be ashamed of that later. Once I had time to process it.

Rabbit’s torso was fully exposed, showing off the muscles I couldn’t get enough of. Tina still had her hand covering her eyes, but the fact he’d let her see him naked irked me.

Unreasonable, considering my panic-driven actions had led to his state, but I couldn't help myself. I didn't want anyone else to see him like this. Only me.

“What’s wrong, babe?” Anger laced his tone. “Don’t wanna share me with your sister?”

Was he for real? He’d just told me he loved me. That he wanted to spend every day between my legs. I’d obviously hurt him, and now he was immaturely returning the favor. “You’re diabolical.”

He grinned, but it was... off. Unsteady and fake. “Why, thank you.”

“I... I think I should come back later.” Tina took a step back, preparing to escape.

“No, don’t go. Rabbit was just leaving.”

“Like hell I was.” He stood.

Stood!

His... somehow still erect penis was front and center, out there for all to see. Tina would have gotten an eyeful of Rabbit if her gaze had not been averted. Simultaneously, I wanted to throw the sheets over her head and shove him back down. Neither option was plausible, so I sat frozen.

“I won that bet, and I’m not goin’ anywhere until you pay up. Although, of course, I might be willin’ to go double or nuthin’.”

Tina fled.

I stared at the door, wondering what to do. Rabbit was visible in my peripheral, but I couldn't face him. Had he just given me the best orgasm of my life? Without a doubt. Was he insane for declaring his feelings after an impossibly short time? Absolutely. Had I reacted in the worst possible way? Also yes.

Too many emotions clouded the relevant facts, and since I couldn't see any way to salvage the situation, I forced myself to meet his gaze.

And instantly regretted it.

His eyes were a raging storm of hurt and anger. If I had been standing, the sight would have brought me to my knees. As it was, it knocked the wind out of me, making it impossible to talk.

Insta-lust, I could understand, but insta-love was a fabrication. It had to be. Logic dictated that whatever feelings he possessed for me were primarily built on attraction and, therefore, unsustainable. What if we weren't compatible? We'd blaze hot and burn out. That way would only lead to tears, and I had a feeling neither of us could handle getting hurt.

"Right." Rabbit agreed. He dropped his gaze and moved, collecting his clothes. "I'll go so you're not tempted to do something... stupid."

I didn't stop him. I couldn't. The man had just given me the best orgasm of my life, and I didn't want him to go. It'd be crazy to let him go. But I'd have to be certifiable to ask him to stay.

He sat on the bed and pulled on his pants, both legs at once.

Tension thickened the air, threatening to suffocate me with regret. I liked Rabbit and didn't want to hurt him, so I tried to help him see reason. "You don't love me. You can't. It's too soon."

He fastened his jeans and tugged on his shirt. "Don't tell me what I do or don't feel."

I winced at the anguish and frustration in his tone. "Sorry."

"Me too." He sighed. "Bye, Elenore. It was nice knowing you."

My eyes stung, and my throat squeezed closed, preventing me from replying.

Rabbit turned and walked out of my life.



## Rabbit

“Who else has a story they want to share?” Havoc asked from his position at the front of the class.

A few years ago, the club started an anti-bullying campaign at Helping Hands, a low-income preschool a few blocks from the fire station. Once a week, five Dead Presidents volunteered for an hour with the kids. So many of my brothers wanted to be involved that we had to rotate volunteers. I got to spend one day a month with the kids, which were usually my favorite days. I’d always enjoyed hanging out with kids. The little bastards tell it like it is and can be funny as shit.

Right now, I should be sitting here trying not to laugh my ass off after Boxcar Billy’s story about how his big sister baked Ex-Lax into a batch of cookies to deal with a bully who kept stealing his lunch on the bus. But we weren’t supposed to condone retaliation of any sort, and the pride in Havoc’s eyes said more than any words ever could. Like the rest of us, the big man had grown attached to the kids and was proud of their resilience and quick thinking. Besides, what these kids needed had nothing to do with the board-approved anti-bullying curriculum we taught every week. They needed us here. Someone showing up for them week after week. We came, we listened, and we really fucking cared.

Would I have turned out better had any man—had anyone—in my life done that for me?



Today marked three weeks since I'd walked out of Elenore's life, and I couldn't stop reflecting on all the shit I could have done differently while we were together. The problem was, there wasn't a single thing I'd change. Even the part where she reached into my chest and ripped my goddamn heart out. Despite all odds, I'd gotten to know her. She'd slept in my fucking bed. Unfortunately, it no longer smelled like her since I had to break down and change the sheets. You get used to sleeping on clean sheets, and it's hard to go back. I missed her scent, though, and I'd been trying to find a way to get Kaos to get me something that smelled like her. Maybe if I blackmailed him....

Sage elbowed me. "You okay?"

I glared at him, still pissed he was here. We never volunteered on the same day, and I had a sneaking suspicion Flint's "dentist appointment" had been a figment of Wasp's imagination. That fucker was meddlesome, and it was beginning to piss me off.

"Just peachy."

I really wanted to flip the bastard off, but I refused to get kicked out of the preschool program because of the asshole. So, I faced forward and listened, realizing Missy Mae was talking. We'd given all the kids road names, and they were hella proud of them.

"My lil' brother's car was broken, so I... I was fixin' it, but my big brother, he... he took it away. He said girls can't fix cars. It made me angry, so I punched him. And *I* got in trouble. But he... he shouldn't have said that."

Missy Mae was always indignant about something, but I understood her tone in this case.

"You know, Rabbit there is our head mechanic." Havoc gestured to me. "What do you say, brother? Can girls be mechanics?"

"Ff-for sure. Some of the best mechanics in the business are women. If you wanna work on cars, you da—ang well

should. Do well in school, do some time in the service, get ASE certified, and then come see me. I'll hire you."

The smile Missy Mae beamed at me warmed the hole where my heart used to live and made me think I might need to make that job opening in a decade or two.

"Thank you, Rabbit. Who's next?" Havoc scanned the raised hands, calling on a boy who'd insisted on the road name Buster Brown. He told us that was what his favorite uncle used to call him.

Elenore was an aunt.

*I wonder if she wants kids someday.*

The thought came out of left field, blindsiding me. Before that moment, I'd never even considered having a spawn of my own. But now I couldn't stop imagining an adorable little brunette girl with her momma's ever-changing hazel eyes. She would be cute as sin and probably just as dangerous.

Too bad she wouldn't be mine.

My chest suddenly felt too goddamn tight. Desperate for a distraction, I tugged my phone from my pocket and opened the messaging app. I intended to message Rose and see what sort of trouble she was planning to get into this weekend, but a different name caught my attention, and I couldn't resist. I clicked on the thread and re-read the last two messages sent.

POSTAL

Are you okay?

When that text hit my phone, I hadn't received it since I'd been sitting in a jail cell after being arrested by Seattle's finest right outside Elenore's apartment. It was a misunderstanding that had led to an episode but, at the time, had driven home my unsuitability to be Elenore's man. Well, that and her referring to the best day of my goddamn life as stupid.

*"You don't love me. You can't. It's too soon."*

Squeezing my eyes closed, I tap, tap, tapped on my thigh, trying to lower the volume of Elenore's voice in my head. I

refused to mute it—even if I could—because even now, it was still my favorite sound.

The second text came three days ago and has been fucking with my head ever since.

POSTAL

I miss you and hope you're doing well.

My guts twisted into a compound knot just thinking about it. What the hell did she mean, she missed me? I lost my head and got emotional, and she kicked my ass out. Then, after we both went radio silent for weeks, she messaged to tell me she missed me? What the fuck was I supposed to do with that? I still couldn't believe I'd dropped the love bomb. Yes, I'd been overwhelmed with emotions at the time, but what the fuck happened to playing it cool? Why did I have to be such a goddamn fuckup? Had I just kept my big mouth shut, I'd probably still be in her bed, my face between her legs.

I could still taste her on my tongue.

My phone almost slipped from my hand when it buzzed with an incoming text. My pulse spiked, then dropped again. It wasn't her.

MORSE

Stop by my office when you get back.

My first instinct was to send him a middle finger emoji, but I refrained. Mostly because Havoc had finished speaking, and it was time to go. In a daze—like I had been since I'd bolted from Elenore's bed—I followed my brothers out of the preschool. Since downtown parking was sparse and cost an arm and a leg, we'd left our bikes back at the club. While we hoofed it the three blocks home, I considered ignoring Morse's demand and heading back to the shop. But I had the day off and nothing else to do. Left to my own devices, I'd only obsess over Elenore. Well, even more than I already did. So, I popped into Morse's office. He was alone, sitting at his computer, but stood when I entered.

“Hey.” He pushed in his chair, considered it, and then settled his hand on the back of it. Expression unreadable, he said, “Get the door, will ya?”

Having never seen him look so nervous, my curiosity was piqued. I reached back and closed us in. “What’s goin’ on?”

He leaned a hip against his desk, eyeing me like he was sizing me up. “I need a favor.”

“Okay?”

“A friend has been having some engine trouble. I need you to take a look at her Audi.”

“You know that’s literally my job, right?”

He frowned. “Yeah. Well, her asshole mechanic quoted her over four grand for the repairs.”

I let out a low whistle. “That’ll leave a mark. What did he say is wrong with it?”

“Timing chain.”

Pulling out my phone, I opened the app that showed labor and pricing for vehicle repairs, selecting the vehicle make. He gave me the year and model, and I plugged in the pertinent information and groaned at the approximate man hours. “Her mechanic’s a little high but not too far off. Parts alone will run her just under a grand, and the labor’s intensive.”

“She can’t afford that. She’s a single mom who barely makes enough to survive caring for an elderly woman.”

Dots started connecting in my head. “Is this the widow you’ve been creeping on?”

His mouth drew into a straight line, and he looked away.

In no mood to put up with his shit, I made my displeasure known. “Don’t wanna talk? Fine. Find a different mechanic.”

Turning, I headed for the door. If Morse didn’t trust me enough to disclose the identity of his mystery charity case, I couldn’t care less about helping his ass.

“Wait.”

I could almost hear his pride being set aside as I gripped the doorknob.

“You gonna tell me what I want to know?”

“Why do you care?”

Contemplating his question for a beat, I scoffed. This whole damn conversation was getting on my nerves. “You know what? I don’t.”

He chuckled, but there was little humor in the sound. “I know you’re a coward, but I never pegged you for a liar.”

Spinning back around to face him, I said, “Then tell me why the fuck *you* think I care.”

I figured it was a rhetorical question, but he surprised me when he said, “Same reason I sent you to Elenore’s.”

“Because you’re a sick fuck who wanted to watch me crash and burn?”

“No, because people like you and me... we’re the underdogs. The outliers. The crazy fools nobody expects to win the girl. I want you to beat the odds and find your happiness, but my motives are admittedly selfish, too. Maybe if you win your woman, I might have a shot at winning mine, too.”

My gaze shot to the screen that should show Elenore’s door. It was dark, just like the last several times I’d come down here, hoping for a glimpse of her. Tap had picked up the equipment after Matt’s arrest. The Parker prick had attacked Tina outside Elenore’s. We’d captured the entire ordeal on video, and it would be a long time before any judge let that piece of shit see sunlight.

With Matt behind bars, Elenore was safe. She no longer needed the club’s—or my—protection. Which meant I didn’t have a goddamn thing to offer her.

“Yeah? How’s that workin’ out for you?”

Morse frowned. “Don’t know yet. But I haven’t given up on you.”

His answer just pissed me off. I gave up on myself a long time ago. How dare he hold onto the hope I'd forsaken? "Well, maybe you should."

"Why?"

What an ignorant question. "Because she's going places and doin' shit with her life. She doesn't need a fuckin' anchor draggin' her ass down."

He studied me for a beat. "And that's how you see yourself? As an anchor?"

"I sure as hell ain't a lifeboat."

He shook his head. "Always such a goddamn martyr. Look, I don't know why you believe you're a piece of shit who doesn't deserve happiness, but the pity party is getting old. Do you have all your shit together? No, but I'll let you in on a secret. None of us do. You're not the only one struggling, brother. But you know what? We never would have voted to patch you in if you weren't one of us."

Easy for him to say since he wasn't the one trying to keep my skeletons hidden in the closet. "You don't know half the shit I've done."

Morse stared past me, his eyes growing distant. "I once bombed the wrong village."

Shocked, I gaped at him. Nothing like blindsiding a person to get their undivided attention. He sure as hell had mine now. I'd known he'd been a drone pilot for the Air Force, but he never talked about it. Like, ever. Few of my brothers discussed the shit they'd seen and done. I had a list of questions but forced my jaw closed. If he was finally willing to talk, I wouldn't interrupt him.

"There were families in the village." He continued, still not looking at me. "Children. Not a lot of them, but one is too many. I'd been running surveillance, searching for a sign of the piece of shit we were hunting down. When the strike order came, I did what I always did. My fucking job. The intel was wrong, and the mark wasn't even there. All those people died

for nothing.” His voice was raspy with self-recrimination. “You think you’re the only one with stories?”

“You were acting on orders. I have only myself to blame.”

“So?”

I blinked, unsure what he wanted from me. “So what?”

“All that shit’s in the past. The question is, what’s your plan for the future?”

Did I look like a planner? Because it required all my focus to make it day by day. I shook my head. “No plans.”

“Ah. I see. You made a play for the woman, fucked it up, so now you’re just gonna give up. That’s pathetic.”

Was he trying to get under my skin? “Sorry my fucking life isn’t entertaining enough for you.”

“Don’t be such a drama queen. Either you use the resources given to you and figure your shit out, or don’t and be miserable for the rest of your life. Nobody’s entitled to happiness. You have to work for it. Sometimes, you even have to fight for it.”

“You’re not even gonna ask about my story?”

“Absolutely not. Start sobbing on my shoulder, and I’ll knock your fuckin’ teeth out. You want a therapist, go see Sage.”

Ugh. Not Morse, too. “I don’t need a shrink.”

He shrugged. “Fine. Choose misery. Whatever.”

“This whole take-life-by-the-horns speech is kind of rich coming from you.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Your gardener... Does she know you’re stalking her?”

“It’s not stalking. I’m watching out for her like I promised her husband I would.”

“Keep telling yourself that, brother.”

He sighed, staring up at the ceiling, likely praying for patience. “Will you help her or not?”

“Of course, I’ll fuckin’ help her.” It was insulting he’d even asked. “Want me to do it pro bono?”

“No. She’s too prideful. She’ll never go for that. Do what Wasp did for Ol’ Lady Williams.”

Ol’ Lady Williams was the wife of a brother we lost to cancer last year. An electrical problem recently fucked up the headlights and wipers of her Kia Sorento. She didn’t have the funds to fix it and was too prideful to let us do the work for free. Since we weren’t about to leave her stranded without a vehicle, Wasp made up a military grant program. Had her fill out a form and everything, letting us know exactly what she could afford. The club would have eaten the cost had Kaos not flashed his fat-ass checkbook. The former hockey player had more money than he knew what to do with, and keeping a military wife’s car safe so she could continue chauffeuring her grandchildren had been a worthy cause.

“You want Kaos to pay for it?” I asked.

Morse’s face scrunched up. “No. Hell, no. Bring it to me. I’ll cover the expense, but your ass better not overcharge me for labor.”

“Have her bring it in today, and I’ll donate the labor.” I wasn’t on the clock, so the hours I spent working on it wouldn’t pull me from paid jobs. And it would keep me busy for the rest of the day. Win, win.

Morse considered me for a moment, his expression unreadable. Then, he seemed to come to a decision. He pulled out his chair and sat down. “Pull up a seat. I want to show you something.”

Though I was suddenly suspicious, curiosity eventually won. The tech team didn’t care much for company, so the pickings for furniture were slim. I grabbed a folding chair and parked my ass beside him. He clicked on an icon, selected a folder, and scrolled through video files until he found the one he was after. The player started, and I instantly recognized



Elenore. She wore my Offspring T-shirt and turned her borrowed baseball cap backward, preparing to spank my brothers at darts.

My chest cracked open. The mind-numbing pain I'd experienced when gathering up my clothes and preparing to walk out of her life returned with a vengeance. She smiled on the screen, and someone took a rusty switchblade to my fucking heart.

Slice. Slice. Slice.

“Fuck!” I shoved to my feet, unable to handle one more second of her gorgeous face while also lacking the ability to drag my attention from Morse’s screen. “What the fuck, man? What are you doing? Why would you show this to me?”

I'd been good. So goddamn good—continuously resisting the pull to go to her—trying to convince myself it was better this way.

He paused the video and zoomed in on her face before scrolling out to follow her line of sight. “Because of that right there.”

Eyes bright and full of affection, Elenore was smiling at *me*.

“I’ve watched the footage a handful of times. She doesn’t look at anyone else like that, brother. Only you.” He pressed play and let the footage roll, pausing again to zoom in on me. “And then there’s you. I’ve known you for years, and I sure as shit have never seen you that happy. She’s good for you. I don’t know what happened between you two, but this...? This shit looks real.”

“I fucked it up.” The admission was an oversimplification, but it was all I could get out before my throat closed up.

“Then un-fuck it. I’ll help you. I’ve got a plan.”



Elenore

“Oh my God, you *are* alive!” Tina exclaimed, leaping to her feet. “I was afraid aliens had kidnapped you and have been sending texts to cover your disappearance as they probed you in the ass.”

My sister was rightfully miffed since I’d dodged her phone calls the past three weeks. I’d gone from harassing her several times a day, ensuring she was safe, to total tech silence. The last time we’d spoken, she’d called to inform me that Matt had attacked her outside my apartment, had been arrested, and was now facing a lengthy list of charges. She and Dylan were safe now but had chosen to stay with Kaos for the foreseeable future, a decision I was exceedingly grateful for since I appeared to be experiencing a crisis of my own.

During our call, my questions about the attack and resulting arrest distracted her. Rabbit hadn’t even come up. Tina’s third-degree was inevitable, and the anticipation had affected me more than I’d like to admit. I’m direct and pragmatic, but the situation with Rabbit made me feel out of control. Even thinking about discussing him sent me into mini anxiety attacks fueled by feelings I couldn’t comprehend. So, I’d sent every one of her calls since then to voicemail, immediately texting back messages like “Super busy. Can’t talk right now. Everything okay?”

She’d put up with my evasion tactics much longer than expected, but her last text had made it clear she was done.

TINA

WTF, El? Enough of this BS. You WILL meet me for lunch on Friday at the café next to your lab. If you don't show, I swear I will march next door and drag you there by your hair. We need to talk. Don't try me, sis.

My sister had never been one to make idle threats, so here I was, walking into her outstretched arms. “Har-har. You’re so funny,” I said snarkily as we embraced. “Where’s my favorite nephew?”

“Your favorite nephew bailed on you to work out with Kaos. They’ve started hockey training, and I don’t know which of the two is more obsessed.”

I sat across the table from her. “That dirty little traitor! I’m supposed to be his favorite person in the world. What can I do to regain his love and devotion? If I have to challenge Kaos to an in-game sniping contest for the love of my nephew, I will.”

Tina’s eyebrows rose, and a smile tugged at her lips. “I heard you’re quite the savage sniper. Zombie told me he’d never seen anything like it. But there’s no need to shoot my boyfriend. Dylan loves and needs you both.”

It sounded like she and Dylan had been spending time at the fire station. The memory of my short time there made my chest hurt. I shoved the unwanted emotions aside, stored that data away for future questions, and focused on her statement. “Boyfriend, huh? You put a label on it?”

She nodded. “I know we’ve only been together a few weeks, and it’s totally insane for me to jump into another relationship so quickly, but he’s... he’s incredible, El. I keep searching for red flags, but all I see are green lights. Even his family is amazing. Don’t get me wrong, they are a lot to take in, but they’re so welcoming and caring. It’s like... an actual family.”

“Bizarre.” I deadpanned. *We* were an actual family. Albeit not a normal one, we’d always had each other. I was happy for my sister, ecstatic that Kaos’s family had welcomed her and

Dylan into their fold. But some prevailing juvenile fear of abandonment had me terrified about being replaced.

“Indeed. And they want to take care of us. They keep stopping by and dropping off food like they’re afraid we might starve to death without them. It’s wild. We eat dinner with the entire family at least once a week. They all love Dylan—even when he’s a smartass—and are all about supporting his hockey career. Seriously, the season hasn’t even started yet, and the family is asking for his game schedule so they can come and support him. I thought they were just showing curiosity to be polite, but Darius insists they really do plan to attend Dylan’s games. I mean, who does that? Are they even human?”

Darius. I liked that name far better than Kaos. It struck me then that I’d never even asked Rabbit’s real name. The hollowness in my chest grew painful, so I pushed those thoughts away.

A waitress approached and took our orders. When she left, Tina’s speculative gaze settled on me. Dreading the lecture that was sure to come, I attempted to pick up the conversation where we’d left off.

“They sound perfect for you and Dylan. The family you’ve always wanted.”

“Yeah, except now my sister has abandoned me, which is unacceptable. They want to meet you, too. In fact, they’re all about family holidays and are already insisting you join us.”

I didn’t bother to mask my horror. “Why on earth would they want me there?”

She rolled her eyes. “Because you’re family. And nobody should spend the holidays alone.”

I evaded her scrutiny. “I enjoy being alone. In fact, I prefer it.”

My work slacks didn’t spontaneously burst into flames—because science—but they definitely should have since I was lying through my teeth. It was true that I had previously enjoyed being alone, but that was before Rabbit had bounded into my life and turned my emotions upside down. Now, alone

felt... well, lonely. In fact, the past few weeks had been the loneliest of my life, which made no sense because I was an introvert. Introverts didn't get lonely. Alone was usually my happy place, but try as I might, I could no longer convince myself I preferred it.

Tina eyed me like she also expected my pants to catch fire. "We'll circle back to that later. But first, how are you? How's work?"

I let out a breath and genuinely smiled at her. Work was safer territory. "Busy. We're on the third round of trials and getting desperate for more funding. Lysha has been organizing an investor dinner for next weekend, so I've been putting together a presentation for potential investors."

Tina sat up. "Will you be the one presenting?"

I nodded. "Unfortunately. Unless I can develop a highly contagious illness next week that would enable me to call in sick. I'm open to suggestions if you have any."

She snickered. "I'm sure you'll do fine."

I had serious reservations about my upcoming presentation but kept them to myself. However, something had been bothering me, and I needed advice from my socially adept sister. "One of the potential investors asked me to be his date for the dinner."

Tina's eyes widened in surprise. "That sounds..." she said, trailing off, seemingly at a loss for words.

"Like coercion? Yes. I'm reasonably certain that's what he's going for. Get this—he didn't even put forth the effort to ask me himself. Instead, I received a call from his assistant, inviting me to be Cameron's date for the night. The asshole made it sound like Cameron was doing me a favor that only a fool would refuse. We need his company's support, so instead of brushing him off, I told him I already had a date."

"Do you?"

I shook my head, surprised she'd asked. She knew me better than that. "No. But I figured I could claim my date had a family emergency and had to cancel on me at the last minute."

She nodded. “Good idea.”

“I thought so, too, but Cameron’s assistant insisted, claiming Mr. Chamberlain expects to have questions about his possible investment and would appreciate ‘direct access’ to me,” I air quoted, “so I can alleviate any concerns.”

“He said that?” Tina asked, her tone positively scandalized. At my nod, she added, “The guy sounds like a total creep.”

“Oh, he is.”

I told her all about the lunch I’d shared with Cameron Chamberlain, followed by the disturbing limo ride and the spattering of phone calls and flowers I’d received since, only pausing when the waitress served our food.

“Stalker alert,” Tina said when we were alone again.

“Right? Anyway, I told the assistant I would see if I could get out of my date and would let him know first thing Monday morning.”

“What are you gonna do?”

“I don’t know. But I’ll figure something out.”

“What about Rabbit?”

His name conjured the memories I’d been trying so hard to repress. The sound of his laughter, the teasing glint in his eyes, the way he looked at me like I was his favorite dessert. Each fragmented flashback stabbed me in the chest. His concern as he washed me down in the shower. The hurt and betrayal oozed from his eyes as he dressed and stormed out of my apartment. Everything I’d packed away came flooding back, devouring my carefully constructed mental walls and filling me with the crushing dread of regret.

My eyes burned, and I wanted to drop my head to my hands and bawl, but it was lunchtime, and we were in the middle of a crowded restaurant next door to my lab. I had to wrestle my emotions under control.

“Oh, sweetie.”

Tina's voice was full of compassion. I didn't have to look up to know she was moving, no doubt preparing to come around and give me a hug. It was the last thing in the world I needed, so I held up a hand and assured her I was fine. She didn't look convinced, but she settled back into her seat and allowed me a moment to compose myself. Knowing I would need to give her something, I struggled to piece together a string of words.

"Rabbit and I are..."

*Over:*

The word stuck to the roof of my mouth like peanut butter. Dropping my head, I let out my breath and tried again. "He left shortly after you did. I've sent him two texts, but he hasn't responded."

"Start from the beginning. How did the two of you... Why was he in your room?"

Once again, bottling up my emotions, I recalled the events that led up to Rabbit's presence in my bed in the same way I'd detail a scientific paper. Nothing but the facts from the beginning to the end. Most of them, at least. When I finished, I met her gaze and said, "So that's that."

"Wait. After I interrupted you, he just... got dressed and left?"

Unable to hold her gaze, I looked away and nodded.

She had to know I hadn't told her everything, but rather than demand I spill all my secrets, she surprised me by saying, "He was arrested, you know."

My head snapped up. "What? When?"

"He showed up when Darius was making Matt regret his poor life choices."

How had I not known this? After the attack, Tina had been so upset she hadn't said a word about Rabbit, and I hadn't asked. And I'd been avoiding her calls ever since. "What happened?"

This time, it was Tina's turn to let out a breath. "So much. I would have filled you in had you answered your damn phone." Her tone had an accusatory edge, justified, but still.

I narrowed my eyes at her. This was no time for that hindsight nonsense. "I'm here now."

She huffed. "Anyway, Rabbit showed up during the fight. He didn't lay a hand on Matt, but the cops took one look at your... I'm guessing, boy toy, and they figured he was probably guilty of something. It didn't help that he was armed and—"

"Wait. Armed with what?"

"Rabbit always carries a gun. But he has his concealed carry. He also keeps a knife in his boot."

Where the hell had he hidden the gun? It was odd that I hadn't noticed, but perhaps that was why he'd insisted on undressing himself.

"Anyway, the cops roughed him up while restraining him, and he spent the night in jail before Emily, the club president's ol' lady, could get him out. She's a lawyer."

"Roughed him up? Is he okay?"

Her lips twitched, but she didn't smile. "Yes. He's fine."

I released my breath. "Good. Why did they rough him up?"

"Said he was resisting. Emily called bullshit, though. And she's apparently been making friends in high places."

"Wow." The word was wholly inadequate, but I didn't know what else to say.

"Yeah. So, there's that."

"I... He didn't answer my texts."

*He rejected me. I tried reaching out... After I rejected his overture of love, that annoying little voice of reason reminded me.*

She frowned at me. "You already said that."



“It seemed important enough to reiterate.”

“Why?”

Her questions chipped away at the wall I’d carefully constructed to hold back my emotions. The construction was flimsy, and it had been eroding for days. Still, I depended on it to keep me functional. “Because it doesn’t make sense. We had an incredible time together, and I thought...” Words failed me.

“*What* did you think, El?”

I shook my head. “Never mind. It’s crazy.”

Whatever she saw in my expression caused her eyes to widen in surprise. “Wait. You actually like this guy, don’t you?”

*Yes.* “No. That would be impossible, considering I don’t even know him. Look, we spent a couple of days together. That’s it. He also gave me the best orgasm of my life and told me he loves me.”

Her eyebrows shot up. “I think you left some details out of your story.”

Lowering my voice, I said, “I told you he went down on me.”

“But you neglected to add how much you enjoyed it. And you definitely didn’t mention his declaration of love.”

I cleared my throat, smoothing the linen napkin on my lap to keep my hands busy before finally replying. “It was meant to be a factual, non-biased recount of the activities that led up to him leaving my apartment. Adding the emotions would only skew the story toward my point of view.”

She blinked and then shook her head.

“What?”

“According to Darius, Rabbit’s a mess. What did you say after he told you he loves you?”

I winced. “You came in. And I...”

It took her a moment, but I could practically see the wheels spinning in her head. She paled. “You kicked him off your bed and said you were being stupid.”

There was nothing wrong with her memory. “In my defense, it was extremely unwise to engage in sexual activity without first having a conversation about expectations. We made a bet based on orgasms. I had no way of knowing Rabbit expected more than sex from me.” I recognized the lie as soon as I said it. Rabbit had given me plenty of signs. Hell, I saw how much he cared every time he looked at me. I hadn’t ignored the evidence; I’d merely reasoned it away. “We’d known each other less than a week, T. That is inadequate time to develop feelings for a person.”

She folded her arms over her chest. “That’s about how long it took Darius and me.”

I opened my mouth to refute her claim, but I couldn’t. My sister was happier than I’d ever seen her, and anything negative I said would cheapen their relationship. I would not stoop to that level, even to justify my own relationship concerns. “You’re happy. It looks good on you.”

Her expression softened. She unfolded her arms, reached across the table, and grabbed my hands. “Listen. For as long as I can remember, you have always used logic and science to explain everything. But this is love. It doesn’t make sense. Matt Parker was perfect on paper. When I married that man, I would have sworn on my life that he wouldn’t hit me because, hello, that’s what marriage is. I bet on that man because he made sense. He took care of me, he wanted me, and he had nice parents. Seriously, how can someone with nice, normal parents be so fucked up?”

“Excellent question.”

“And now there’s Darius, who also looks good on paper. I really freaking love this man, and I’m terrified he’s gonna turn out to be a monster.”

Her admission completely threw me off guard. I’d been so worried about her apparent lack of caution that it hadn’t even

occurred to me she had her own concerns. Despite the courage of her actions, Tina was afraid of repeating her mistakes.

She needed me, and I should have made myself available to her. No wonder she was looking for a new family.

“I’m sorry I didn’t answer your calls.”

She gave me a watery smile. “It’s okay. You won’t do it again.”

That sounded alarmingly like a threat, but I earned it. “Noted.”

“There’s something else.” She released my hands and looked me over. “Kaos is getting patched in at the club tonight. There’ll be a party afterward. Dylan and I are going, and it would mean a lot to all of us if you came.”

“Tonight? Don’t you think that’s short notice?”

She gave me the stink eye, reminding me I had been the one ditching her calls, then nodded. “Hopefully, that won’t give you enough time to devise an excuse not to come.”

“Ouch.” I winced.

“Don’t give me that crap. You know I’m right. I’m your big sister. I’m always right.”

“Is that why you made me help you with your high school math and science homework when I was still in middle school?”

Her lips twitched in a suppressed smile. “Hush. This is my moment in the sun. Let me bask in it.”

“Fine. Bask away. In the meantime, what does one wear to a biker patch party?”

She tapped her fingers together, and her grin spread, turning her into a cartoon villain. “That depends on your motivation to attend.”

“To... watch Kaos get his Boy Scout patch?” Hadn’t that been established? Where was she going with this?

“Okay, good, but could it be at least a little to see Rabbit, too?”

I rolled my eyes, covering the stab of his name to my heart.

“Seriously, I have never, ever seen you get choked up over a guy. What is it about him?”

Since it would do no good to dispute her claim, I gave her question serious consideration. “It doesn’t matter. He hasn’t returned my texts.”

“Your two texts. *Two*. In how many weeks?”

I shrugged, unable to see her point. I had reached out. He hadn’t reached back. End of story.

She studied me a moment longer. “Morse said Rabbit thinks you’re too good for him.”

I stared at her. “Morse, the technician who works with Tap?”

She nodded. “That’s the one. The bikers gossip like you wouldn’t believe. And they’re all hoping you’ll give Rabbit a chance. Well, as long as you don’t hurt him. The consensus is that he’s a good guy who deserves to be happy. And you make him less of a miserable bastard, so they’re pulling for the two of you to work your shit out.”

“Are you aware you’ve developed the vernacular of a biker?”

She grinned. “Absolutely. I’ve been working on it.”

“That’s weird. You know that, right? This whole thing is bizarre. You and Kaos. Rabbit professing his love for me. Me feeling like something vital has been missing since the moment he walked out my door. None of it makes sense.”

I tried to ignore how her eyes softened because it made mine sting again.

“That’s love, El. It’s only weird because you’ve never experienced it before.”



## Rabbit

I stood in the back of the church hall, the room we used for mandatory club meetings, and watched as Kaos was officially patched in as a member of the Dead Presidents MC. I was happy for my new brother. He was a solid dude, born to be a Boy Scout.

*Boy Scouts on Bikes*, Elenore's voice whispered in my ear.

Yearning hit me like a goddamn lightning bolt, practically driving me to my knees. I couldn't seem to go five minutes without thinking about her, and every memory fucking hurt. But I must have been a masochist because I craved the pain. Hell, I even went out of my way to ensure I suffered. I'd even watched the ridiculous movie she'd nicknamed me for.

According to Elenore, I didn't know her well enough to love her, but I wasn't buying that bullshit. My days had been straight-up miserable without her. If that wasn't love, I didn't know the meaning of the word. Take tonight, for example. I was at a party with the best bastards I knew. I should be getting plastered and celebrating the addition of my new brother. Instead, I was moping by the door, waiting for the opportunity to pat Kaos on the back so I could make my escape.

What I didn't expect was for him to drop his voice so only I could hear him say, "Good luck tonight. I hope shit works out for you, man."

Before I could ask what the fuck he was talking about, I got jostled out the door. Morse tugged me away from the crowd and turned to face me with the impatience of a three-pack-a-day smoker waiting for delivery. I hadn't exactly been at the top of my game for the past few weeks, but I wasn't out here dropping balls.

"What?" I asked, annoyed that he couldn't tell me what he wanted without the dramatics.

"What do you mean, *what?* I told you I had a fuckin' plan."

Great. The asshole was being cryptic again. "And did you happen to finally share your supposedly brilliant plan with me?"

"Yes. I texted you today. Right before you got off work."

"Phone's dead." Which was rapidly becoming the norm for my cell. Whenever the thing had so much as a bar of power, I used it to look at pictures of Elenore on the internet. Or to watch the videos Morse had sent me links to of the night she'd partied at the club. It had been almost a month since I'd seen her, and I kept waiting for the yearning to recede, but every day, staying away from her sucked a little more.

I'd been surviving until Morse had shown me those goddamn videos. How was I supposed to leave her alone, with that image of her smiling at me like I was something special? Every sexy inch of her had lit up with the smile she'd directed at me. I'd made her happy. She might never love me, but at least I had that. Would it be enough to encourage her to give us a shot?

Morse narrowed his eyes at me. "Are you drunk again? Jesus, Rabbit, I told you to stay sober tonight."

He had? That must have also been via text. "I've had two celebratory shots, along with everyone else. I'm not drunk. At least not yet." But I would be soon. Alcohol dulled the edges of the pain, making it easier to accept. I wasn't getting blackout drunk, just buzzed enough to cope with the regret.

He shook his head at me in disgust. “Well, you better get your ass to the parking lot because Elenore will be here any minute.”

I blinked. Slowly. My brain refused to grasp the meaning behind his words. They all made sense individually but strung together like they had been... “Poe’s comin’ here?”

“I told you I had a plan,” Morse insisted. “Now get your ass to the lot and greet your woman before someone else scoops her up. There are a lot of single—”

I didn’t stick around to hear what else he had to say. If Morse wasn’t messing with me, and Elenore was on her way, I... I didn’t know what the fuck I’d do. But I sure as hell wouldn’t miss the opportunity to see her. Spinning on my heel, I left Morse mid-sentence and sprinted down the hall and to the side entrance to the parking lot. Arriving just as it opened, I dodged the swinging door, only to get an eyeful of the surprised beauty standing on the other side. Elenore. My brain and feet must have experienced a disconnect because I kept running. I plowed into her, sending us both stumbling back out the door. I wrapped my arms around her, distributing her weight and planting us both so we didn’t fall over.

As one, we jerked forward and froze. The door slammed behind us with a resounding thud. My throat suddenly had its own goddamn heartbeat, and that fucker was running a marathon. She’d kept her hair down, and it had gone in every which direction, surrounding me with her soft, sweet scent. She smelled like an angel, like light and love and contraband. Definitely illegal—forbidden—but I couldn’t bring myself to care. She’d closed her eyes in the tussle and now opened them one at a time to focus on me. She must have been wearing heels because we were nearly eye to eye. The light was too dim to make out tonight’s eye color, but they’d grown as big as saucers when she’d recognized me.

“Roger.”

My nickname was a whisper on her dark red lips. The shade was much bolder than she usually wore, and I couldn’t drag my gaze away. Fucking fascinating. I’d never been much

of a student, but I could study her lips all day and would never get bored.

And holy shit, what the fuck was wrong with me?

This woman was turning me into a pathetic little bitch boy, but I didn't give two shits. I just wanted to be with her. To be *inside* her. She pushed out of my arms and straightened, clearing her throat. Her hair hung in waves that looked so damn soft I had to reach out and touch one.

She drew in a sharp breath.

Like fucking silk. The strands were so soft and shiny I wanted to pet her like a cat. Instead, I pulled the curl to my nose and sniffed it before tucking it behind her ear.

Our lips collided. I wasn't sure who'd initiated the kiss, but I sure as shit didn't let the opportunity go to waste. I swept my tongue into her mouth, giving her a preview of what I wanted to do to her pussy. She released a whimper, and I chased it with a groan. Her warm body pressed against me, making all sorts of promises I was more than onboard with. I was mentally mapping out the fastest route to the stairs when Elenore downshifted and pulled back.

"I... I have to go to Kaos's... uh... thing."

Bright-eyed and rosy-cheeked, she watched me as if trying to decide whether to bolt or stick around. She wanted me. It didn't matter how fucking love-drunk I was. That kiss had been an invitation to party in her pants. At least, I hoped so, but I wasn't dealing with a full deck. The moment she'd said my name, all my cards went flying, and now the King of Cocks was running this show, screaming FUCK YES! and commanding me to get her inside.

And then get inside her.

"Text Tina. Something came up," I suggested, barely capable of stringing together a sentence and unable to pry my gaze from her lips. They were swollen from our kisses. Sharpie must have manufactured her lipstick because it wasn't the least bit smudged. That was unfortunate. The primate



inside me wanted to wear it like a brand smeared across my lips and circling my dick.

“His... boy scout patch. That’s what he’s getting.” She cleared her throat. “It’s a ceremony, I believe. I should... be there. To support my sister’s boyfriend.”

My mind was so focused on her that it took me a moment to figure out why she was talking about Kaos. “He got patched in during church. What’s going on in there...” I stabbed a thumb toward the fire station. “Is the afterparty?”

Her brow furrowed. “Did you say church? Is this some kind of weird biker cult?”

I chuckled, shaking my head. “No. Religion’s got nuthin’ to do with it.”

“Well, that’s promising, at least. But I still need to go in there to show my support.”

I finally dragged my gaze from her lips to take in the rest of her and about lost my shit. “You want to go in *there*? Dressed like *that*?”

Her tight-ass Harley-Davidson T-shirt with the logo outlined in gemstones across her fan-fucking-tastic rack was a sight to behold. As was the black leather miniskirt that came just beneath the swell of her ass, revealing more than a hand’s width of the creamy, pale thighs I couldn’t wait to wear as earrings. Black leather high-heeled boots covered her from knee to toe, and I planned to have her keep those on when I fucked her. At least for the first round.

“You look like a goddamn biker Jessica Rabbit.” Seriously, forget fictional characters; I’d be jerking off to the image of Elenore dressed like this for the rest of my life. “You’ll make every dickhead in there think about sex, and I do *not* want to kill my brothers.”

“What do you want to do?”

Chancing that our kiss had turned her on like it had me, I snaked one arm around her waist and drew her closer. She pressed against me, settling her hands against my pecs. Heat

flooded her eyes at the contact, urging me on. I ground myself against her, showing her how hard she'd made me.

"Take you up to my room. I won a bet. I'd like to cash in on it now."

She dropped her hand to the front of my jeans and ran her fingers up my shaft. "Did I give you the impression you're in control?" Her fingers wrapped around me and squeezed. The pain was firmly on this side of pleasure, but it still made stars dance before my eyes. For the past month, nothing but my hand had touched me. All my blood and brain cells rushed to my dick, prepared to do whatever it took to keep her from stopping.

"This is a... new and unexpected... side of you," I said between cock squeezes.

"I think it's the clothes. They make me feel powerful. I think I like it."

I did, too. So goddamn much, I was already picturing her in a leather corset. *Fuck*. I closed my eyes and tried to think about sports and cars and shit. Elenore was the only thing on my mind. And she was wearing knee-high boots, a thong, pasties, and wielding a whip.

"No. You're in total control," I told her honestly.

She gave my cock another squeeze through my pants. "Good. I believe I'm also angry that you didn't return my texts."

"That's fair." It was. Ghosting her had been a dick move. At the time, I'd believed my actions to be justified, but what I'd done had hurt her. I could see that now, and I regretted it. "But I'm glad it brought out this side of you. Unreserved. Confident... Naughty."

She gave me one last squeeze and released me. "I'm not bad, I'm just drawn that way."

She was quoting *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*. Had she also watched it, missing me?

Stunned by the possibility, I let her lead me inside and through the crowd to find Tina standing in a cluster of ol' ladies, who were likely welcoming her into their fold.

I'd long ago accepted that people are individuals and shouldn't be painted in broad strokes based on shit like gender, race, and sexual orientation. It's what's inside a person that determines whether they're someone I want to know. The ol' ladies... they were all something special. I'd never seen them be mean and catty or team up on each other like girls used to do in high school. These chicks worked together, even forming a non-profit to help other women out of shitty situations. Every time I saw them, I wondered what my mom would have been like if she'd had friends like the ol' lady tribe. Maybe she wouldn't have looked for support in asshole men. Rose needed friends like them.

Elenore, as well. A better man would have left her with them and given them space, but I wasn't leaving her side. My brothers kept throwing interested glances at her, so I closed in to stand at her back. Her skirt was so fucking short that if she bent over, she'd give everyone a show, so I blocked the view. Folding my arms across my chest, I glared at the room. I'd done a lot of weird shit in my time; nevertheless, something about tonight's behavior must have been extra concerning because everyone stopped what they were doing and stared at us.

I fought the urge to pound on my chest and scream, "She's mine, fuckers!" Instead, I gestured for everyone to turn around and mind their own goddamn business.

Tina pulled Elenore to the side, and I followed. "What's going on?" she asked, her tone both amused and concerned.

"We made out in the parking lot," Elenore replied, her tone almost clinical. "I believe I may have inadvertently started the launch sequence."

"The launch sequence?" Tina didn't seem to pick up on the innuendo. "Is this a cry for help? Do you need assistance? Should I call Kaos?"

I'd been silently chuckling over Elenore's phrasing for foreplay, but I bristled at the insinuation she wasn't safe with me.

"No. I may not be an astronaut, but I'm still a scientist. I'll figure it out."

"Did someone drug you? Blink twice if you need help."

Elenore waved her sister off. "I've got everything under control. Isn't that right, Roger?" Her gaze made a slow perusal of me that about melted my jeans off.

The woman was trying to drive me mad, and it was working. Removing my cut, I wrapped it around Elenore's ass because it covered a hell of a lot more than her skirt and wouldn't show her business when I took her out of here. When I straightened, my thumbs grazed the swell of her breasts, causing lust to flash in her eyes.

"W-what are you doing?"

"It's been a month, Poe. I'm not waiting any longer." I slung her over my shoulder, carefully keeping her ass hidden beneath my cut.

Tina took a step forward and opened her mouth, likely to object, but Kaos appeared at her side and wrapped an arm around her waist. I nodded at him and turned to leave with my prize.

Catcalls broke out across the room, but I couldn't care less. I flipped the jealous bastards off as I marched past with my hand planted in the center of Elenore's ass. To my surprise, she didn't protest as I climbed the stairs to my room, where I slowly slid her down my chest. The press of her body felt incredible against mine, and I had to fight the urge to rub myself against her, showing her precisely how hard she made my cock. Had I not been concerned she'd hightail it out of there, I probably would have. But the next few moments were crucial to any future she and I would have. Since the moment I'd plowed into her, I'd been developing a plan.

The bottom line was that I didn't need Elenore to love me back. Sure, it would be advantageous, but love wasn't

necessary. There were other needs I could fulfill, and I planned to make myself so damn useful she'd have to keep me around. Thanks to the club girls, I had tons of experience in the bedroom and took direction like one of Hollywood's leading men. Since they only fucked around with those who made it worth their while, I learned early on to pay laser-focused attention to the noises women made.

Elenore's moans had taught me a great deal the first time I'd been between her legs. I'd discovered several pleasure points with my tongue and fingers I couldn't wait to exploit with my cock. I would work her over until she forgot her own name, doing shit to her body that would make her crave my touch. She might not love me, but I could damn well make her need me.

Determined, I gently set her on her feet and studied her. Hazel eyes—wide with surprise and an emotion I hoped to hell was lust—stared back at me.

*Definitely lust. I can work with that.*

At least, I should have been able to, but my fuck-up game was strong. And so goddamn reliable, I couldn't stop myself from blurting out the truth. "I love you!"

At the same time, she said, "We should talk."

Not the ideal conversation starter for either of us, but at least she didn't freak out this time.

Did I mention her lips were bend-me-over-and-spank-me naughty girl red? And she had a goddamn cupid's bow I'd commit a felony to lick. We were well beyond talking the moment she squeezed my dick and promised to punish me. Desire—not fear—widened her pupils as I lowered my hands to her hips and tugged her hard against me. Now, she was mine.

"We. Can talk. Later."

Turned out she had, in fact, started the launch sequence. Still, I half expected her to start spouting statistics at me, but she nodded. "I'm good with that."

Once I got the door open to usher her inside, locking it firmly behind us, our clothes came off so fast it was impossible to tell who took off what. Stark naked, we looked one another over. I'd seen her naked once before, but that had been almost a month ago. There were things I'd forgotten. Like that mole just beneath her left nipple. I needed to taste it. The next thing I knew, we were a tangle of body parts inching toward the bed. Her scent, her taste, and the feel of her skin overwhelmed me, making me feel goddamn high. It wouldn't have surprised me had I started floating. In fact, that might come in handy. I couldn't stand for an inch of my skin to be separated from hers, but I also really wanted to make it to the bed. All I kept thinking about was how close I'd come to losing her. How walking out her door had been the biggest fuck-up of my life.

She would eventually tire of my issues, but I'd be foolish not to embrace whatever time we had. To feel the weight of her incredible tits in my hands. To experience the taste of her nipple on my tongue.

Elenore moaned.

I lowered her to the bed and once again drank in the details of her body, wishing like hell for a photographic memory. "You're gonna have to punish me later. After I show you how much I missed you." I licked my finger and lowered it to circle her clit, watching how she bucked in response. "Can I take back the reins?"

Eyes hooded with lust, the question seemed to confuse her momentarily, but she finally nodded. "You can drive. For now."

I chuckled and lowered myself to her body. Unlike last time, I didn't take the scenic route. A month without her taste had been too long. Her sounds guided me as I feasted between her legs, licking, sucking, and fingering her through two orgasms before my cock couldn't take the neglect anymore. She was still spasming from her second release when I suited up and drove home.

*Fuck.*

Elenore's cunt damn near squeezed the life out of me. I probably should have taken the first stroke slower, but my brain was still disengaged, and all I cared about was getting inside her. What I didn't expect was the strange prickling of my eyes. I blinked that shit away and got myself under control. This was about her goddamn pleasure, not mine. I was determined to show her the best damn time of her life. Maybe then she'd reward me with more access to her body.

I pulled out and drove back in.

"Holy shit!" Elenore said with a gasp.

"I didn't hurt you, did I?" Concern for her comfort drained the urgency from my groin.

"No." Her eyes were glassed over. "Do that again. But harder."

I slowly pulled out and slammed back into her.

She gasped, which was even better than a groan, so I did it again. And again. Elenore liked it a little rough. Filing that detail away for later, I gripped one of her ass cheeks and shifted her position, driving myself even deeper.

A groan.

Fucking music to my ears. She was in my bed, her pussy spasming around me, and it was heaven. The best day of my life. I fucked her harder and faster, chasing her orgasm like it was my last goddamn meal. I would be the best dick she'd ever had. The only one she ever wanted.

She screamed my name as I fucked her through orgasm number three before flipping her over and lifting her ass into the air.

"How are you still hard?"

Her appreciation only stroked my ego as I grabbed her hips and lined myself up.

"I won the bet," I reminded her. "I'm fuckin' you all night."



## Elenore

After a wild and crazy night of orgasms, I woke up alone in Rabbit's bed. I'd plugged both our phones in at some point last night. His cell was gone, but mine had a text notification.

FORAGOODTIMECALL

I missed you too. Thank you for coming last night. And coming and coming. (rolling laughter emoji) I'm in the kitchen. We take turns serving breakfast on the weekends, and I pulled duty today. Come down and eat when you get up.

I searched the room for my discarded outfit only to find it and realize slutty biker chick wasn't suitable breakfast attire. Making a mental note to pack a bag if there ended up being a next time, I rifled through Rabbit's drawers until I found sweats and a T-shirt. After a quick shower in the communal ladies' room, I pulled my hair into a ponytail and headed downstairs.

Tina was seated at one of the long dining tables across from a grizzled older biker who stood up and waved goodbye to her. As I approached, Tina vaulted to her feet and reached across the table to the man imploringly.

"But won't you stay for breakfast, Tank? I'd be more than happy to make you a plate."

"No, thank you. I'm good. The ol' lady's at home with our daughter. Best not to leave them waiting."



“Okay.” Tina looked confused yet resigned. “I’ll see you around.”

He said goodbye and left, and she turned to me.

“What was that about?” I asked.

Tina sat, pulling me down beside her. “To be honest, I’m not sure. He sat down and introduced himself, told me about his wife and their FIVE-YEAR-OLD DAUGHTER.” She whisper-yelled the last part.

I understood why she would find that part unsettling. “*He* has a five-year-old daughter. Hm. His wife must be much younger.”

“You think?”

She shook herself, doubtlessly trying to free herself from society’s constraints to believe she’d be okay with that. Tina had always cared what people thought of her, and now that she’d aligned herself with this biker club, she’d worry about how society saw them, too. I didn’t understand why. I valued humanity overall, but I’d destroy everyone else to save the handful of people in my circle. Rabbit was now among my people.

“But it’s fine,” Tina continued, interrupting my thoughts. “They’re consenting adults, none of my business, socially acceptable.”

I bit my lip so I wouldn’t smile and poured myself a cup of coffee from the decanter on the table. Finished, I angled it toward her, but she shook her head, claiming she’d had enough.

“Where are your guys?” I asked.

“Kaos is in the kitchen with Rabbit.”

“Kaos pulled kitchen duty the morning after he got patched in?”

“Yep. It’s a mandatory tradition.”

“And Dylan?”

“He stayed with Carisa last night.”

Carisa was one of Kaos's cousins who was already getting buddy-buddy with my sister. I narrowed my eyes at Tina, letting her know I meant business. "My position as Dylan's favorite aunt will not be usurped."

She held up her hands to ward me off. "Relax. Nobody's trying to usurp you. I would have asked you to take him had you not been otherwise occupied." Wiggling her eyebrows suggestively, she added, "So. Are you and Rabbit together now?"

"We didn't actually talk about it."

Her jaw dropped. "You didn't over-analyze it from every direction, calculate the likelihood of it falling apart, and prepare a pie graph?"

"First of all, I've been analyzing relationship data for the past four weeks. And pie charts are for infants; it was a stochastic model. But last night, we just... physically reconnected."

"You hooked up."

I nodded. "Several times."

"I really want to girl talk this out with you, but I'm terrified you'll drop one detail too many, traumatizing me for life. Besides, I have news to share. You'll never guess what happened last night before Kaos was patched in."

"Matt hanged himself in jail?"

Her eyebrows shot up. She looked at me like I had a giant spider on my forehead and frowned. "No. I wouldn't be excited about that."

"Right. Of course not." Moderately disappointed my sister didn't share my enthusiasm to see her ex six feet under, I tamped down my fixation. "What happened then?"

"Darius signed the paperwork to adopt Dylan."

It was my turn to stare at her like she was sporting an arachnid headband. "You're letting a stranger adopt your child?"

“You don’t understand. This isn’t about me. It’s about what’s best for Dylan. He’s not just getting Darius—who is amazing with my kid, by the way—he’s getting an entire family. A host of people who already love him and have committed to caring for him should something ever happen to me.”

She sounded crazy. “Nothing will happen to you.”

“El, Matt tried to kill me. If I’ve learned anything over the past year, it’s that I might not be around forever.”

Which was something I tried very hard not to think about. “He’s in jail, where he should rot.”

“But there’s a chance he’ll get out. Look, this club somehow convinced my ex to relinquish custody of Dylan. I don’t want to know how they made that happen, but I’m glad they did. Now, I won’t have to worry about him.”

“What about me?” The desperation in my tone made me wince, so I cleared my throat and tried again. “In your absence, I would raise Dylan.”

“And if something happens to you?”

“Why are you inventing a scenario where both of us are dead? Statistically speaking that—”

“Please don’t reason with me right now. That’s not what I need.” She lifted her water glass and drained it before toying with the glass.

I sighed, feeling like I’d somehow dug a chasm between us. Tina was my best friend, but I would never fully understand her. Despite our shared genetics, we were too different. “What do you need from me?”

“Support. Understanding. El, you and I know first-hand how quickly life can snatch the rug from beneath your feet. But we always had each other. If something happened to you and me, Dylan would be completely alone.”

I now understood her concern. “But his grandparents...?”

“What grandparents? You mean the ones I called to set up visitation with Dylan because, you know, I’m not a total bitch

and want my child to have some freaking family!”

Good god, what had they said to her? I hadn't seen her this worked up in a long time. “I take it the conversation didn't go well.”

“They blocked my calls. Blocked their grandson.”

“Bastards.”

“Yeah, well, who knows what Matt has told them.”

“No. Don't make excuses for those cuntwaffles. It's highly likely that he showed signs of his narcissistic, abusive behavior before, and they chose to ignore it. Why didn't you tell me?”

She laughed, sounding more manic than amused. “Bitch, you have been dodging my calls. Thanks for reminding me, by the way. I'm still super pissed at you for that. We were reconnecting when I was living with you, but then you freaking ghosted me. This no-communication bullshit won't work for me. I miss you. You may be an island that doesn't need anyone or anything, but *I* need *you*. At least... in my lake. And there should be an accessible bridge between us.”

“That metaphor got away from you, but I believe I catch your drift.”

“I don't want to crowd out your solo vibe, but I need you to at least be accessible.”

“Understood. I'm sorry I ghosted you, but I reasoned you'd ask about Rabbit, and I wasn't ready to discuss him yet.”

“Then you pick up the phone and tell me certain topics are off-limits. Look, I know this relationship shit is new to you and will take some time to process, but you don't get to block me out. You never would have pulled that shit when we were kids.”

“Of course not. You would have beaten down my door.”

She frowned. “Yeah, I would have. That's a practice I never should have stopped.”

I returned her frown. “You don’t get to shoulder all the blame for that since I’m clearly an expert at pushing people away.”

Tina draped an arm over my shoulder and pulled me against her. “*Were* an expert. Past tense, since next time I *will* break down your door.”

A smile tugged at my lips, and I let it loose. “Deal.”

We slipped into the kitchen, and I said good morning to Rabbit, who appeared delighted that I’d raided his dresser.

“You look damn good in my clothes,” he said, giving me a thoroughly inappropriate public display of affection that included an ass-grab and a lingering kiss.

Squirming out of his embrace, I grabbed a plate and dished myself up some of the scramble waiting in the warmer. Pancakes were also available, but I had no intention of going crazy with the carbs. Last night’s sex marathon had doubtlessly burned a lot of calories, but I couldn’t let Rabbit derail all the cravings I’d worked so diligently to curb.

The guys had finished cooking and were now cleaning up the considerable mess they made. Tina and I offered to help, but they chased us back into the dining room, insisting we were guests.

The dining room was still mostly empty, but people were trickling in. An attractive dark-haired man with a serious guy-next-door vibe nodded to us in greeting as he shuffled into the kitchen, coffee thermos in hand.

“Who’s that?” I asked when he disappeared behind the swinging door.

“Morse. He heads up the tech team.”

“Right. The guru who remotely helped Tap set up the camera outside my door.”

I took a seat, popped a perfectly proportioned mix of sausage, cheesy egg, and potatoes in my mouth, chewed, and swallowed, once again impressed by Rabbit’s cooking prowess. Granted, I didn’t know who had cooked what, but

this was delicious. It tasted like the comfort I used to overeat in search of. This could be dangerous.

“If I attempt to go back for seconds, hamstringing me,” I said.

“Deal.” Tina sat beside me. “So... I’ve been thinking about this investor dinner problem of yours.”

The kitchen door swung open, and Morse walked through carrying a plate of food and his thermos. He sat at the next table, facing away from us, and I caught the body language of someone who didn’t want to be bothered. I ignored his presence and focused on my sister.

“Have you come up with a solution?”

“I could ask Kaos to take you.”

“That’s sweet, but I don’t know. Perhaps I should just give in and go with Cameron.”

“The entitled douchebag who made a move on you? No. I’m not comfortable with that.”

I fought a smile, amused by how easy it had been for her to slip back into bossy big-sister mode. “Noted. I’ll take your concern under advisement.”

Her eyes narrowed at my sass. “Have you thought about taking Rabbit?”

For a split second, but had quickly dismissed the idea. “I don’t know if he’d be comfortable among my peers.” Nor did he seem the type to wear a suit. He would look incredible dressed to the nines, though. Perhaps we’d have to do a little dress-up roleplay.

“He might surprise you,” Tina said. “You should talk to him about it, at least. If you’re serious about this guy, you need to let him in past your defenses.”

Was I serious about Rabbit? Yes. The past month without him had been miserable, and I had no desire to repeat the experience. However, his intensity continued to concern me, and we still needed to talk.

“I’ll consider it,” I said, unwilling to agree to more.

Tina beamed me a smile. “Look at you, socially maturing and communicating.”

I rolled my eyes at her and swallowed my bite. “No promises.”



## Rabbit

*“You can’t let her go anywhere with Cameron Chamberlain.”*

Morse’s ominous warning played on repeat in my mind as I hung out with Elenore on Saturday and Sunday, trying to figure out how the fuck to broach the topic. Morse had pulled me aside before we’d left the fire station Saturday morning to make sure I grasped how goddamn dire the situation was. As I’d asked, he dug up the dirt on the bastard who’d gotten handsy with Elenore, finding a whole slew of alarming shit. Cameron Chamberlain had never been convicted of any crimes, but the number of sexual assault charges against him was staggering. The fact they were sealed also bore witness to the power of money and influence. Thankfully, sealed files were no sweat for Morse and Tap. I didn’t know whether to be terrified or proud of them, but I was sure thankful we were on the same team.

Still, the tech team could be shady as shit, which was how Morse had found out Cameron had invited Elenore on a date to some investor dinner. Morse had overheard Tina tell Elenore she could take Kaos as a date instead. Over my goddamn dead body. I trusted Kaos and knew he wouldn’t try anything, especially since Tina had that man whipped. But I wanted a relationship with Elenore, which meant I needed to be there and support the shit that was important to her. She loved her job, and she believed in what they were doing. I wanted to be part of it. Hell, I might even make a donation.



It sure as shit wouldn't hold a candle to what Cameron Chamberlain would invest, but I didn't care. Just thinking about that fucking sexual predator putting his hands on her ignited a fire in my veins. I wanted to hunt him down and cut his goddamn hands off. That'd put an end to him touching without permission.

Too bad I'd promised Elenore I wouldn't physically harm the bastard. I'd have to find another way to humble his ass. But that was a problem for another day because, right now, I needed to convince her to let me be her date. To a fucking hoity-toity investor dinner, a tatted-up mechanic had no business attending.

But how? I could try honesty, but then I'd have to explain how I'd learned about the dinner and the threat Cameron Chamberlain posed. That could get tricky. Instead, I took the easy way out and invented a dinner of my own.

"I'd like you to meet my sister," I blurted.

It was Sunday afternoon, and we'd just stepped back into her apartment after taking a yoga class at her gym. Yeah, I'd done yoga for the first time ever, and that shit was embarrassingly hard. But Elenore had been so pleased to have a partner she'd invited me back to her place, so I had no regrets. Besides, I was more limber than ever, which could come in handy the next time I got my lucky ass back into her bed.

She set her keys and Taser on the entryway table. When Tap had removed the surveillance equipment, he'd let her keep the weapon, which was good since she seemed to have developed a connection to it. The Taser would likely have to be pried from her cold, dead hands. But she looked hot as hell with it in her hand.

"I'd like to meet Rose." She agreed.

"Good. I'll set something up. How about... dinner Saturday evening?"

Sneaky and underhanded, yes, but my behavior was easy to justify. Especially since I really would like to introduce the

two most important people in my life to each other. Eventually.

Her expression fell. “I can’t, Saturday. I have a work dinner.”

“Oh?” Feeling like the worst kind of manipulative asshole, I followed her into the living room, reminding myself this was for her protection. Elenore’s safety had to be the priority, which meant I needed to be at that fucking dinner, no matter what. “Is it just for employees?”

She perched on the sofa, her posture perfect. Did she ever get tired of sitting so goddamn straight? The only time she relaxed was when I convinced her to. Countless orgasms and persuasion to relax were two services I’d happily provide. Add personal chef and gym partner, and I might persuade her to keep me around. Granted, I wasn’t thrilled about becoming a gym rat, but it was one more hour I could spend with her, so how could I resist? Besides, the way she basically eye-fucked my forearms whenever they caught her eye was all the motivation I needed to stay in shape.

She watched me out of her periphery, her expression pensive. “No. In fact, I’ve been considering asking you to be my date, but I have some concerns.”

She’d been thinking about asking me? It took a moment for that tidbit to sink in before what she’d said next became a boulder in my stomach. “Concerns?”

She gestured for me to sit beside her, and though I wanted to stay standing so I could pace, I couldn’t resist the invitation. I sat, and she took my hand in hers. Thin, soft fingers interlaced with mine, my shoulders relaxed.

“I know about your arrest.”

And just like that, I was as tight as a bowstring. Shit, was that what she’d wanted to talk about Friday night before I’d distracted her? Who the fuck had blabbed? Had they told her about my episode, too? If she knew, why hadn’t she bailed on me? Questions pooled on my tongue like a foul taste, but I swallowed them. Questioning the scientist was a door that

swung both ways, but if I didn't approach it, it wouldn't smack me in the face. I hoped. "Oh-kay."

She gave me a moment but plowed ahead when I didn't continue. "I need to know if attending this dinner is within your physical and mental capabilities."

To anyone else, the question probably would have sounded cold, but I'd been getting to know Elenore. Whenever she was uncomfortable, her speech grew technical. I was so busy wondering if she realized she had that tell that her words took a moment to sink in. As soon as they did, I got defensive.

"It's a dinner, Poe. I can handle it."

"Are you certain? About fifty people will be in attendance, and—"

"I can handle it." I *would* handle it.

She nodded, though she didn't look convinced. "Okay. Do you need a suit?"

I did, which was how we spent our Sunday afternoon shopping for something acceptable for me to wear. Elenore didn't seem to care about price tags. Nor did she seem particularly interested in what I had to say about the matter. Dragging me along like a goddamn kite, she marched right up to the woman at the counter and asked for professional help. A stylist then led us around the store, collecting suits for me to try on. We passed a man who looked me over and scoffed, shaking his head, but Elenore stepped up beside me and took my hand, glaring at him.

The situation probably should have emasculated me, but nobody had ever stood up for me before. She was basically a nerdy warrior princess, and that shit was hot. So hot, in fact, that I was too turned-on to be anxious about anything. Just being in her aura made everything better. She kept brushing my hand and promising me erotic rewards with her eyes. Her attention made me forget I was broken. With her by my side, I could accomplish anything. Hell, I wasn't even worried about the dinner anymore.

*An evening with rich assholes who will see me comin' and wanna put me in my place...? I scoffed. Piece of fuckin' cake.*

Elenore followed me into the dressing room. She didn't come into my stall but had me model the suits for her. I probably should have strummed up some indignation at how she asked me to turn in a circle so she could check out my ass, but her lust-darkened eyes only made me put on a show. I swung my hips and smacked my own ass, making her laugh. Fucking music to my ears. I tried on every monkey suit she passed to me, even though I suspected she'd already selected the one she wanted but was getting her rocks off by making me model. If suits turned her on, hell, I could be a little uncomfortable. Then later, I'd make demands of my own.

"I don't even know your real name," she said, startling me. I was heading back into the stall to try on identical suit number five.

"It's not important. I never use it."

"It is important. I'll need to add it to the guest list for the dinner, and they usually check IDs at the door. What's the name on your license?"

"Thaddeus James," I admitted as I slipped into the stall.

"Thaddeus James." She sounded like she was rolling it over her tongue. "That's an interesting name."

I removed the suit jacket.

"Is there a story behind it? A family namesake?"

This was the part I'd been dreading, the reason I never brought my name up. "My mom was an All My Children fan."

Silence, then she asked, "As in the soap opera?"

"Yeah."

"Oh. My mom used to watch soaps, but I found the drama too stressful. Were you named after a character or an actor?"

"Thaddeus James Martin, who went by Tad, was her favorite character. And since her last name was James..." I spread out my arms, inviting her to take me in. "You caught

me. Named after a daytime drama character. Nothing screams trailer trash louder than that.”

“That’s not true. Your dad could have been your uncle.”

I barked out a laugh, shaking my head as I dressed, relieved that there was nothing but good-natured humor in her tone. Despite her many objections, I paid for my own goddamn suit. Oddly enough, my standing up to her only seemed to feed her libido because she kept her hand on my cock the entire ride back to her place. I stayed the night, and we got little sleep.

---

The rest of the week passed in a blissful blur. We met up at the gym after work every day before heading to her place, where we’d shower together, which always ended in sex. Then we rotated between my cooking and her healthy meals that weren’t actually half bad. Next, we’d stumble into bed, where I’d eat her pussy until we both passed out.

Before I knew it, it was Saturday and time for me to get ready to rub elbows with Seattle’s elite. Elenore had gone to the lab early that morning to prepare some last-minute data. One of her files had become corrupted, so they’d had to call in IT and figure shit out. She’d intended to come home to prepare for the evening’s fundraiser. But even more unforeseen issues required her time. Wanting to make the day easier on her, I’d delivered her clothes and makeup bag to the lab so she could get ready there. She sounded frustrated and distracted when she took them from me. I wished like hell there was more I could do to help her, but everything she ranted about sounded like gibberish.

“I won’t be able to pick you up, so I’ll send a car for you,” she said, walking me to the door.

I shook my head. “No need. I can Uber.” I hadn’t used the app before—since I always had my bike—but some brothers who didn’t live at the fire station used it when they’d had too much to drink. How hard could it be?

Turned out pretty damn hard since my debit card wasn't in my wallet. By the time I tracked it down to the grocery store I'd stopped by yesterday, I didn't have time to pick it up. Instead, I got dressed in my suit and rode my bike to the hotel hosting the dinner. I'd thrown on my cut over my suit since club rules stated I wasn't supposed to ride without it. The shit-ton of sideways looks this earned me on the highway stung like fire ants nipping at my skin.

The valet didn't know what to make of me. I resisted the urge to flip him off as I drove past to self-park, pocketing my ticket. That was when I realized the ride had scuffed up my shoes. Something glistened on my left pant leg. It was likely grease I'd accidentally rubbed off the chassis. I'd pulled my long hair back into a low ponytail, but the ride had whipped several strands free. I felt like a goddamn dandelion puffball. One strong wind, and I was likely to fall the fuck apart. Desperate to keep myself together, I approached the entrance. But the universe continued to conspire against me.

The bellhop's gaze went to the front of my cut and then the ink covering my hands before rising to meet mine. "How can I help you?"

His tone made it clear he'd prefer it if I turned and walked away, which was what I wanted to do. But I was here to keep Elenore from a lecherous motherfucker, so I ignored the concern in his eyes and marched right up to his little booth, removing my cut and draping it over my arm. Someone had released a hive of bees just beneath my skin. Right now, they were just flying around in there, riling me up. I was twitchy and wired, anticipating the sting to come. It would knock me on my ass, if the last episode was anything to go by. I'd been a goddamn fool to believe I could do this. I needed to get to Elenore. She could calm me down. If I could just see her, everything would be okay.

"I'm here for the investor dinner," I said, realizing Elenore hadn't told me the name of her company.

Thankfully, the bellhop didn't need it. Downright gleeful to be passing me off, he gestured to a registration table outside a ballroom. Thanking him, I moseyed over to the table, doing

my best to pretend I belonged. The scuffs on my shoes kept mocking me, as did that unfortunate glistening spot on my pant leg. My suit chafed. The fucking tie damn near strangled me. Everything was too tight. Too *wrong*. A blind man could see I didn't belong here, which was why I wasn't offended when the security guard manning the dinner entrance asked for my name.

“Rabbit.”

His eyebrows shot up, and a smirk skewed up his face. “Rabbit?”

*Fuck!* Like an idiot, I'd given him my road name. I smack, smack, smacked myself on the forehead.

“Tad. I mean Thaddeus. Thaddeus James.”

He chuckled, studying the clipboard in his hand. “I think I would have stuck with Rabbit. Doesn't matter. Neither name is on the list.”

My chest squeezed tight. I rubbed at it, trying to loosen it up. It was getting hard to breathe. “There must be some mistake. I'm here as Elenore's date.”

“Elenore, who?”

Another man watched our exchange from the door, his eyes gleaming with amusement.

Suddenly, I couldn't remember Elenore's last name. How could I forget something so important? That's right, because I was a fucking idiot. The buzzing beneath my skin grew louder, making it impossible to concentrate. My heart raced. It felt like it was about to burst out of my chest. Why wasn't my name on the list? Elenore had promised to add it, and that wasn't something she'd forget. Didn't she want me here? Had she changed her mind? Did she wake the fuck up and see I didn't belong here with her?

“I need to get to Elenore.” I stepped forward, trying to peer past them into the room. If I could get a glimpse of her, I could flag her down. She'd settle this.

Alarm flickered over the guard's face. He moved to intercept me, flexing as if preparing to pick me up and remove me himself.

“Sir, I need you to leave before I call the police.”

Why wasn't my name on their list? She wouldn't have forgotten. Not Postal. She wouldn't have forgotten me.

*Did she do it on purpose?*

The thought was a punch to my gut. “But she needs me.” I couldn't let that entitled asshole get his hands on her. I had to get in there.

But there was a human wall in my way.

And I was no longer sure she wanted me there.

*No. She wouldn't do that.*

Then why wasn't my name on that goddamn list? The question played on an endless loop in my mind. And why were these rent-a-cops looking at me like I was shit they needed to scrape off their shoes? I didn't know what to do. Did I try to race past them and chance them fucking tackling me? Did I scream her name? Both options would likely embarrass the hell out of her, land me in handcuffs, and end any shot I had with her.

But I couldn't leave.

*I could text her.*

The realization pushed back the anxiety that kept rising in my chest. I mentally reinforced the dam containing it and pulled my cell phone out of my pocket. The fucker was dead.

The bees beneath my skin detonated, exploding the dam. Panic flooded my system, throwing me back in time.

*“Run!” someone shouted at the same time I heard the gunfire.*

*We were under attack.*

And I did what I always did.

I turned and ran.





Elenore

Rabbit wasn't coming.

He was scheduled to arrive a half hour ago. But with less than five minutes until Lysha would call everyone to their seats, there was still no sign of Rabbit. I'd sent him a text fifteen minutes ago and received no response. Had his rideshare driver murdered him? I kept drifting toward the door as if being near the entrance would somehow summon him to my side. Worry for the biker churned in my gut. Rabbit understood how vital this dinner was to me and had insisted on being my date. He wouldn't bail on me; I was sure of it. Something must have happened.

My brain conjured up a memory I'd long repressed.

*An ominous knock on the door. Tina and I weren't supposed to answer when Mom wasn't home. She hadn't returned from her date last night, but that was nothing new. The knock came again, and Tina peeked through the peephole and turned to face me, her eyes huge.*

*"It's a cop," she whispered.*

*The feeling of dread I'd been trying to ignore reeled me forward. I took my sister's hand, and together, we opened the door.*

*"There's been an accident...."*

The past had gripped me so suddenly and profoundly that I didn't notice Cameron's looming presence until it was too late.

He faced me, leering at the way my dress's neckline plunged to show the slightest hint of cleavage. His attention made me want to cover myself. Had I seen him in time, I would have pretended I was on a critical mission, which was how I'd avoided him thus far tonight.

"Elenore." His voice practically molested my name, sending a shudder of unease up my spine and kicking my fight-or-flight instincts into overdrive.

Careful to keep my expression professional, I returned his greeting. "Hello, Mr. Chamberlain."

He frowned and scooted closer, his gaze dropping to my cleavage. "What do I have to do to get you to call me Cam?"

Fighting the urge to cover all my exposed flesh and backpedal, I stood my ground, refusing to be bullied and determined to steer the conversation in a safer direction. "Is there something I can help you with, sir?"

His expression turned thoughtful, still eye-fondling my breasts. It made me want to squirm.

"Sir. I like the sound of that honorific on your lips. Forget Cam, Sir is what I want you to call me from now on."

*Dammit!* I'd stepped right into that one, having forgotten all about his tendency to roleplay BDSM book characters. Instincts told me this asshole wouldn't respect a safe word.

"I couldn't help but notice you're alone tonight. Did something... happen to your date?" he asked.

It wasn't his question but his delivery that made the hair on the back of my neck stand on end. All I heard was *come get this candy in my van, little girl.*

*No thanks, I'll pass.*

"I'm sure he's just running behind."

As if summoned, movement caught my eye. I turned toward the door, hoping to find Rabbit hurrying in. He'd tell me his driver had gotten lost taking surface streets to avoid an accident, and that's why he was late. But it was only a member

of the hotel staff. He gave me a tight smile and hurried into the room.

“You’re a logical woman,” Cameron said. “What do you believe the odds are of him showing up late?”

I didn’t let my smile fall. “I’m sorry. Did you say there was something I can help you with?”

He sighed. “I understand. Having your date no-show for such a crucial dinner for you must be embarrassing. Don’t worry. I have an idea. I’ll send my date home, and we’ll tell everyone there was a mix-up.”

I swallowed down the revulsion attempting to claw its way up my throat. Was he for real? The man was *still* staring at my chest.

“Thank you for that... generous offer, but I’ll be quite busy with my presentation tonight. I fear I’d make an awful date. Besides, I haven’t given up on Thaddeus yet. He’ll be here.”

“You mean Rabbit?”

I went deathly still as the dread in my stomach turned to peridotite. And with a density of more than three grams per cubic centimeter, that would prove problematic. If I didn’t get my bearings soon, I might topple over. Because I suddenly felt faint.

I had told Rabbit about Cameron and then made ultra-protective biker bodyguard turned boyfriend promise not to lay a hand on the other man. If Rabbit had gone back on his word, we would have a problem.

“Have you... met Rabbit?” Oh, God. Was Cameron cornering me to tell me he’s suing my intensely protective boyfriend and pulling his family’s funding?

“No, but I saw him, and though I admire your altruistic behavior, not even a Stuart Hughes suit could fix up that man. The Armani you dressed him in didn’t have a chance. The hair, the beard, the tattoos...” His lip curled in disgust. “You’re lucky he wasn’t allowed in. My father would be concerned to find out you’re affiliated with a gang.”

*Wait.* The blood in my veins ran cold. Cameron had seen Rabbit? Tonight? “What do you mean he wasn’t allowed in?”

“His name isn’t on the list.”

“Yes, it is.” I had added it myself. Confused, I excused myself and tromped to the check-in desk. I grilled the security team until they revealed *someone* had informed them I’d recently split from my boyfriend, who was now stalking me and needed to be removed from the list. I could guess who that helpful *someone* had been.

“When we told him he wasn’t on the list, the guy wiggled out,” Security Guard Julian said. “He kept twitching and acting crazy. I think he was on something. He shot out of here like the devil was chasing him.”

“Got on his bike and peeled out,” the second guard added.

“He was riding his motorcycle?”

They both nodded. “Yes, ma’am.”

Interesting. What had happened to the rideshare plan? The guards clearly believed he was using, but I couldn’t believe that. Though I hadn’t known Rabbit all that long, I’d seen no evidence of drug use. The Dead Presidents had a strict anti-drug policy. Rabbit wasn’t foolish. He wouldn’t jeopardize his home and his employment for a quick high. It had to be something else.

As my emotions bubbled like a Mentos in a soda can, I focused on the facts at hand. All the data I’d collected supported Rabbit having over-the-top protective instincts. He’d done something horrible to his sister’s abusive ex and essentially offered to commit homicide for me. He wouldn’t have just left. Not without trying to call me or answering my text.

Something was seriously amiss with Rabbit.

Was *this* what Shari had been trying to warn me about?

Had something happened to Rose? Or to somebody at his club?

Whatever it was had to be serious. Which meant, I had to find him. Now. Damn the logic of potentially endangering my job for a man I'd known for a month. Lysha could give my presentation with her eyes closed. All evidence pointed to the situation being serious. And I couldn't squelch this feeling that whatever it was, I had to see it for myself. I had to find him right away before he had a chance to cover it up.

Because if he was using drugs, I might have to kill him myself. And though I didn't believe that was the reason, I really had only known the guy a month. A fact I seemed to be fixating on, but it didn't stop me from finding Lysha and informing her I had a family emergency and had to go. Then I left, feeling Cameron Chamberlain's glare burning a hole in my back the entire way.

I ignored him. Finding Rabbit was my priority. I'd deal with Cameron's privileged ass later.

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When I arrived at the fire station, Rabbit's bike was lying on its side only feet from the side entrance. I gave it a cursory once over, relieved it appeared undamaged. I'd been half expecting to find it in a ditch somewhere. The guards had called his behavior erratic, and judging by his parking job, drugs weren't entirely out of the question. Against all rational thought, I'd gotten attached to the biker. I might not murder him, but I would seriously kick his ass if he was doing anything he shouldn't be. Then, I'd hide him in my apartment until he cleaned up and could return to the fire station. Or perhaps I'd just keep him with me.

After I tortured him for being self-destructive.

And *not* the kind of torture I suspected he'd like.

I entered the building and almost ran into a familiar face. The man I'd seen at breakfast last Saturday morning stood in front of me with his arms crossed, blocking the way. I tried to dodge and go around him, but he mirrored my movements and cut me off.

Could he not see I had somewhere to be? Annoyed, I huffed to a stop. “Hello... Morse, right?”

He nodded, his gaze sweeping down to take in my outrageously overpriced cocktail dress and three-inch Jimmy Choos. I expected his inspection to pause at my breasts since I showed a fair amount of cleavage. Instead, he treated me like a piece of art he briefly admired before moving on. Unlike Cameron Chamberlain, who’d barely spoken to my face.

“Yes, Elenore. What are you doing here?”

“I’m here for Rabbit. He was supposed to be my dinner date tonight, but...” I trailed off, hesitant to reveal the events of the night. If he was doped up, I didn’t want them to know. Yes, I was willing to cover for the man, but I would make him pay. “Is he here?”

Morse studied me, his expression wary. “Why do you want to see him?”

This line of questioning had gotten old quick. I folded my arms, but was careful to hold his gaze. “Because I’m worried about him and need to make sure he’s okay.”

He twisted his lips to the side. “You left your dinner early.”

It wasn’t a question, so I didn’t answer.

I studied Morse more closely, wondering exactly how much of my personal information he’d pilfered when Tap had set the camera up outside my apartment.

“You’ve been keeping tabs on me.”

He arched an eyebrow. A confirmation without saying a word.

“Why?”

“Rabbit shouldn’t have been at that dinner. He endangered himself to protect you. I had to make sure you were worth sacrificing for.”

Interesting. “And what did you find out?”

“That Rabbit’s a grown-ass man who can decide that for himself. And that you might be good for him. Hell, you might

be exactly what he needs.”

I didn't know how to respond, so I picked apart his previous statement until I found the detail that kept bugging me. “Why did Rabbit believe he needed to protect me at my company dinner?”

“Cameron Chamberlain is dangerous.”

Strangely, the news didn't surprise me. “Sex offender?”

“Yep.”

“You were listening in on my conversation with Tina.”

It wasn't a question, so he didn't answer. Morse would be fun to hang out with. I could never date him. Even if Rabbit weren't in the picture, only one of us would survive. And I wasn't entirely sure it would be me. There was something about this man that said *I have a file on you*. I wondered what his military job was.

“If you're expecting an apology, don't hold your breath. Rabbit rarely leaves club property. He left for you. He can't handle crowds outside these walls, yet he tried. For you. He's my brother. I'll do anything to protect him.”

“Good.” I stared him down. “Because I will, too.”

He searched my eyes and nodded, waving me off with a hand. “Be sure you tell *him* that. He's in his room. That's where he always goes.”

*Always*. As in, this happened often. I was still trying to digest that tidbit when Morse added, “I hope you're a warrior because he's worth fighting for.”

“Wait. Is there anything I should know?”

“Sage can help him.”

I nodded numbly, unable to speak. That must have been the extent of advice he was willing to share, because Morse stood aside. I slid past him, hurrying to the stairs. Rabbit's door was closed when I reached it. I knocked and called out his name. No answer. I tried the doorknob, surprised when it turned. Filling my lungs with air to shield me against what I'd

find, I opened the door and slipped in. The room was dark. I slapped for the light switch before remembering that wasn't how things worked around here.

“Welcome to Flaccid Avenue.”

I blinked as the lights turned on, taking in the room in screen shots. Rabbit's suit jacket lay across the bed, but there was no sign of the man. Curious, I looked around, preparing to march back downstairs and wring Rabbit's actual location from the tech guru. Movement from the closet caught my attention. I crept over and peered in. Both rolling door panels were pushed to one side. Rabbit sat huddled in the dark corner behind them, his head resting on his knees, thighs pressed to his chest.

“Roger?” I asked.

When he didn't respond, I rolled the closet doors to the opposite side. Still no reaction. Eyes squeezed shut, lips muttering, his tense body rocked back and forth.

This wasn't drugs.

My experience with recreational drugs was limited, but I'd seen people jacked up on molly and Adderall, and none of them had looked like this. Rabbit seemed... terrified. He was trembling.

This looked like a panic attack. I'd seen plenty of those before. One of my college roommates used to get them while she was waiting on her grades. They never got this bad, but she had a prescription to help her manage them.

*Rabbit rarely leaves club property. He left for you. He can't handle crowds outside these walls, yet he tried. For you.*

Morse's words came back to me like puzzle pieces fitting into place. Was this a panic attack? Rabbit was here, yet not. I settled a hand on his shoulder, and he didn't so much as stir.

Where were his people?

Morse was clearly aware that Rabbit was going through something, yet he'd left Rabbit alone. If I wasn't so worried



about my zany biker, I'd march downstairs and give the tech asshole a piece of my mind.

Then again, it was probably some stupid bro code thing. Like seeing another heterosexual man's vulnerability would make their balls fall off.

I needed to stop trying and convicting everyone in my head. I should have known he wouldn't have used drugs.

The material of my dress was scratchy on the outside, so I removed it and lowered myself to sit next to him in my provocative lingerie. Had he been lucid, he would have ravaged me by now. Rabbit looked at me like I was carbon. Like without me the world would cease to exist.

I needed to stop letting the length of our acquaintance minimize the depth of our feelings.

"Roger? I hope this is okay." Draping my arm over his shoulder, I pulled him close. He was rigid and unresponsive, nothing like the man who'd kept finding reasons to touch me over the past week. Physical touch had to be his primary love language, but now, not even my body draped around him could trigger a response. Worried, I moved to my knees and wrapped my arms around him, my breast pressed against his arm as I nuzzled the side of his neck. He smelled like Rabbit: a mix of sandalwood, leather, and motor oil that made me feel lightheaded. I squeezed closer, breathing him in.

*He tried. For you.*

"You should have told me you were struggling," I told his unresponsive form. My eyes burned, making me want to close them. Instead, I watched him for signs of comprehension. "I could have helped you." This didn't have to happen. He didn't have to be huddled in his closet alone. No wonder his self-image was shit.

Realization dawned, stinging my eyes. "You hide because you don't want anyone to know." I laid my cheek against his shoulder. "Dammit, Roger. Why? Are you too proud to ask for help?"

Predictably, he still didn't answer, but his muscles shifted beneath my cheek. A violent tremble shook his frame, reminding me rabbits weren't prideful creatures. They were anxious little animals that ran and hid at the first sight of danger. Was that how he saw himself? Why his road name was Rabbit? I blinked away tears.

He moved again, and I reluctantly released my hold around him. As my hands slid down to my sides, I leaned back to take him in. "Roger? You with me now?"

The arms holding his knees to his chest loosened and fell away. One leg slowly straightened, stretching out in front of him before the second joined it. His movements were notably stiff as he leaned his upper body against the wall. When his eyelids finally opened, he stared straight ahead.

"Yeah." The word was barely above a whisper. He cleared his throat. "I'm here."

He still wouldn't look at me.

"Why are you alone on the floor of your closet?"

He shrugged. "It's a tight fit."

Was he trying to make light of the situation? "Do your brothers know? Have you told anyone what you're going through?"

His silence confirmed my suspicions.

I practically growled in frustration. "Oh my god, *why*? These people genuinely value you. They're protective. Just now, Morse wouldn't even let me in until I convinced him I'm here because I care about you. He wants to help."

Rabbit deflated, dropping his head to a hand to squeeze the bridge of his nose. "It's not that simple."

"Cool, because simple is boring." I frowned as anger flared in my chest, stoked by frustration and hurt. He hadn't trusted *me* with the truth, either. "You could have come to me. The ability to figure shit out is one of my strengths. I've been called relentlessly curious a time or two."

“And what if there’s nothing to figure out?” His head snapped around, and he finally met my gaze. “What if this is just me?”

His eyes were wild and tortured, fracturing something deep inside me. The realization that he didn’t believe he was worth saving honestly did me in. Couldn’t he see that in a world full of pawns and puppets, he was exceptional and unique?

And he loved me. Possibly enough to commit multiple homicides if my life was in danger. I should find that last bit alarming, but it frankly made me want to rip off my panties and ride him because he was exactly the man I believed him to be. He had issues he needed to sort out, but who didn’t? Now that I thought about it, what really pissed me off was the man who’d put Rabbit in this condition.

“I’m going to murder Cameron Chamberlain,” I gritted out through clenched teeth. “You’re in this closet because of him. Because *he* removed your name from the list. His actions drove you deeper into your insecurities, and I will make him pay for thinking he can mess with my man. Because, like you, I protect what’s mine.”

I liked throwing his words back at him. And I loved the way confusion furrowed his brow as they sank in. Then, he looked at me as if seeing me for the first time. Instead of typical underwear, I’d opted for a crotchless black bodysuit with a complicated strap design. I’d purchased the slutty sister of Milla Jovovich’s *Fifth Element* bondage outfit as a thank-you for being my dinner date. Due to recent circumstances, it instantly morphed into a you-zany-fool-when-you’re-in-trouble-run-to-me-not-away outfit. And I planned to use it to lay down the law.

I had a brilliant idea.

“Am I—?” Rabbit’s gaze bounced upward for a split second before once again gobbling up his reward. He took in the garters circling my thighs and visually caressed his way up to the tiny lace thong beneath the crisscross of straps strategically placed to showcase my best assets. The diagonal Xs covering my nipples but barely containing my breasts

caused his pupils to dilate. And though he wasn't touching me, the guttural sound he made went straight to my core and sent flames racing over my skin.

My throat was a desert. I swallowed, coughed, and swallowed again. "Are you what, Roger?"

His gaze finally snapped up to meet mine. "Am I... yours? Your man?"

I'd shifted away to give him room, but the raw longing in his blue eyes tugged me back to his side. I pressed my forehead against his and breathed in his air, admitting the truth. "Yes."

I barely got the word out before Rabbit stood, scooping me up in a masculine show of strength that made all my feminine instincts swoon. I looped an arm around his neck, copping a feel of his firm pecs as he carried me to the bed. Lying me down, he removed his clothing like a mental patient ripping off a straitjacket.

Was it wrong that the sight turned me on?

Now that I knew his secret, I was even more impressed with him. He had put himself in danger to protect me, after all, and seriously, what woman could resist that? Rabbit was mine. And he was never shaking me.

Apparently, Rabbit wasn't the only one obsessed. I hadn't seen that coming.

Gloriously naked, he stood beside the bed, scrutinizing my complicated strap bodice, his expression almost comical.

"How do I get it off?"

"No need." I opened my legs to give him a peek at the design. "The panties are crotchless."

He lit up like he'd won the golden buzzer on a talent show. Rather than jumping up and down and tearfully thanking the judges, he pounced on me and attacked my neck, making me laugh. We desperately needed to discuss what had happened, but now was not the time. He needed me, and I needed him. We both sobered, and he pressed his lips to mine in a gentle

caress. Callused fingers traced the lines of the straps, teasing my skin as he deepened the kiss. His granite-hard cock pressed against me, leaking hot pre-cum onto my belly. He shifted his weight, removing his lips from mine to kiss down my body. As talented as his tongue was, I needed the comfort of a deeper connection. Suspecting he needed it, too, I latched onto his arms and halted his downward progress.

“I want you inside me.”

He lunged for the nightstand, but I stopped him again.

“I’m clean, and I’m on the pill.” I’d never had unprotected sex in my life, but I’d never been in a relationship before, either. If we were doing this, nothing should be between us. No secrets, no lies, and definitely no latex.

“You mean I can....” He swallowed and nodded, and the hopeful shift in his expression made my chest tighten again. “I’m clean,” he assured me.

His lips returned to mine, this time with a reverence that made my eyes burn. Trembling fingers lined his cock up with my entrance. He slid into me, releasing my mouth to hiss out a curse. I agreed with his sentiment. Sex felt immensely better without a condom. Rabbit’s gaze snagged mine and held it captive as he pulled out and thrust back inside me.

“You’re mine, too.”

I ground my hips against him and squeezed his cock deep inside me, loving how he filled me up. “Okay.”

“And I’m never letting you go.”

“I’m counting on it.”

He thrust into me again, another languid stroke. “Love you, Poe.”

“Love you, too, Roger.” It didn’t make sense, but it was true.

He froze and his eyes went suspiciously glassy. Swallowing, he dropped his gaze. He made love to me, his strokes slow and purposeful as we joined. He was the proton

to my neutron. In exchanging particles, we'd formed a nucleus, and now we were fused for life.

I only hoped it was enough to motivate him because I perceived what needed to happen next.

Sated, I wanted nothing more than to fall asleep beside him, but I couldn't.

Not yet.

I traced a skull tattoo on his forearm with my fingers, working up the courage to speak.

"What's wrong?" he asked, doubtlessly picking up on my mood.

"I... Have you considered therapy?"

He chuckled, and his tone was full of self-mockery. "Fuck. They got to you, too."

Who? The bikers? Had they suggested therapy, too?

"Roger—"

"No. I'm not talking to Sage."

It took me a moment to remember the man Shari had introduced me to who'd wanted to question me. "Okay. We'll find you a different therapist."

"No. No therapists."

"Why?"

"I don't want to talk about it."

I'd been hoping he would open up to me, but apparently, Rabbit required more motivation. Pulling away, I rolled off the bed to stand and search for my dress. It hung off the sofa, so I marched over to retrieve it.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

"Home. I see you've made up your mind, so there's no reason for me to stay."

He sat up, confusion furrowing his brow. "I said no to therapy. Not to you."

“Yes, but I love you. Which is why I won’t sit here and watch you self-destruct. There are tools and methods to get you through this—and I will help—after you commit to making the effort.”

He scooted off the bed to stand, his expression lost. “So... that’s it? You’re leaving.”

My stomach twisted into knots, but I ignored the discomfort to openly leer at Rabbit’s incredible body. Letting my appreciation show, I sauntered over, still dressed in my strappy bodice and crotchless thong. He was fully hard by the time I stood before him, so I reached out and stroked his hard cock. I would miss it, and hoped it wouldn’t take Rabbit too long to pull his head out of his ass.

Perhaps I could shorten the time frame.

“No, I’m fighting for you the only way I know how.”

His face twisted in anger, but I could tell it wasn’t directed at me. “Have you ever considered maybe I ain’t worth the fight? Soldiers.... *Men* run into battle. You were in danger, and I fucking fled and hid. I’m a goddamn coward, Poe. There’s no fixing that.”

Now, we were getting somewhere. I rewarded his vulnerability by squeezing his cock. He swore and bowed his head.

“Look at me,” I said.

His tortured gaze met mine. Though they were still brimming with self-loathing, now something else exuded from his baby blues. Determination. And the man didn’t believe he was worth fighting for. Silly fool.

“You’re belittling my man, and I don’t like it. You’re no coward, Roger. A coward doesn’t face his fears. You did, and you did it on your own. Imagine how much more you can accomplish with access to resources.” Maintaining eye contact, I stroked him until his hips started to rock. “I bet you’ll take over the world. You’ll gift it to me, and I’ll let you rule beside me.”

“What about you? Don’t you think you also might be a tad fucked in the head?”

“Most definitely.” He’d have to do better than that to throw me off my game. I owned my shit. “I have abandonment issues like a motherfucker and probably should find a decent therapist. Look, Roger, we both know you won’t be able to stay away from me.” I licked his neck before lowering to circle his nipples with my tongue. “You’ll talk to Sage, and then you’ll come to me...” I slowly wiggled to my knees, bringing my mouth millimeters from his cock.

He sucked in a breath, growing impossibly harder.

“And when you do, I’ll give you the best blowjob of your life.” I licked the head.

He moaned.

Having given only a handful of blowjobs previously, I may have been stretching my resume a bit. Rabbit would doubtlessly give me unlimited chances to perfect the skill. Unable to stop myself from teasing us both some more, I slid my mouth over the head of his cock, swirling my tongue around his slit. Pulling my mouth off with a pop, I looked up at him through my lashes. “Talk to Sage.”

Rabbit swore. Loudly. “This is sexual blackmail.”

Grinning, I stood and put on a show, slowly sliding into my dress and shoes before closing the distance between us. I loved that my heels made us almost the same height. It made it easier to see the desire burning in his eyes.

Good. He wouldn’t make it a week.

“Yes, it is. I’m fighting for you now, and I fight dirty. Cowards lack the courage to ask for help. You... you’re no coward, Roger. Don’t make me wait too long.”

I kissed his nose. Then, ignoring his dumfounded expression, I turned and walked out the door.





## Rabbit

Someone kept hammering on my skull.

I'd been ignoring the relentless pounding for what had to be an eternity, but it wouldn't let up. Stuffing my pillow over my head, I grumbled, "Go away."

"Rabbit! Goddammit, your ass better not be dead in there!"

Wasp was an annoyingly persistent motherfucker, just like his name implied. He could have gotten my room key from Link, but the muscle-bound idiot seemed determined to damage club property instead. And unfortunately, I was in the stage of whiskey-drowning my sorrows where every sound pierced my brain.

"I'm alive. Go away."

"I'm not going the fuck away. Answer this goddamn door before I bust it down."

His abuse of my door—and consequently my head—continued. Knowing I had no choice but to surrender, I dragged my ass from my bed, holding my throbbing temples in my hands, and unlocked the door. It swung open, and I wobbled out of the way, widening my stance to keep from tipping over.

"Jesus!" Wasp threw his hands up between us, fingers splayed to avoid seeing my nudity. "Put some pants on. Nobody wants to see your fucking business, man."

A glance at the suit pants lying on my couch conjured up memories that stabbed my chest like shards of glass. No way was I putting those back on. Ever. Fuck Wasp. He could cope or go away. Frankly, I'd prefer the latter. "Nah, I'm good. If the sight of me offends your delicate sensibilities, don't let the door hit you in the ass. It's not like I invited you."

His eyes narrowed. "You're fucking drunk? Are you kidding me right now?"

The room was spinning, so I staggered backward and plopped my ass down on the foot of my bed. "I'm too damn sober for this conversation, I assure you." Sadly, the bottle of whiskey I was working on was on the nightstand, which might as well have been on the other side of the planet. Besides, as I squinted at it, willing it to come to me, it didn't appear to hold more than a swallow or two.

Wasp stepped into the room and grimaced, fanning his face. "Holy shit, it's rank in here. Open your window and air it out."

"Yeah, I'm gonna go with Option B, the one where you buzz off so I can go back to sleep."

"It's Monday. Your ass should be at work. And why aren't you answering your phone?"

It was Monday, huh? I'd started in on my whiskey collection as soon as Elenore had made her demands and walked out the door and had lost all of Sunday to the booze. Impressive. Even for me.

I feigned a cough. "Can't work today. I'm sick."

He crossed his arms and huffed. "Sick in the fuckin' head, more like. What's really going on?" He studied me. "Are you on something?"

That rankled. He should know me better. "Fuck you, Wasp. I don't use."

"Well, something's going on, and it's high time you grow up and talk to Sage."

And now came the holier-than-thou behavior. I would have rolled my eyes had I not been worried about losing my balance. “Just as soon as you suck my dick.”

“Bring that thing anywhere near me, and I’ll snap it in two.” His expression sobered as he looked around my stark living space. “What the fuck are you doin’, Rabbit? Is this really how you want to live? Who you want to be?”

“Doesn’t matter what I want. This is who I am. And it’s time you and everyone else accepted that.” Why did he even care? I was his number one pain-in-the-ass. He should want to be rid of me. They all should.

The memory of Elenore walking out my door threatened to double me over like a kick to the nuts. *She* was what I wanted, but her price... it was more than I could pay. Therapy. Revealing all the messed-up shit inside my head. That would come with consequences I couldn’t handle.

Elenore and my brothers would learn what a cowardly son-of-a-bitch I truly was.

But by missing work, I’d advanced to an entirely new level of fuck-upperly. If Wasp reported my no-call, no-show, Link would be the next obnoxious asshole banging on my door. Ignoring the prez wasn’t an option. As it stood now, I had two choices: I could drink until they kicked my ass out or sober up and pretend to function. But sobering up would only revive the dream I’d been trying to drown. Because a life with Elenore was only a dream. But living without her was a goddamn nightmare.

Still, it wasn’t fair to saddle her with me. She’d given me one job—make it through one fucking dinner—and I hadn’t even been able to accomplish that. She deserved better.

Wasp cocked his head to the side, studying me like I was an engine emitting a noise he’d never heard before. “We will accept your choices, just as soon as you give Sage a chance. By the way, living like this,” he gestured to encompass my sparse, body-odor and alcohol-saturated room, “is not a choice, it’s a fucking cop-out. Helping vets is literally what Sage does. He can get you some relief, brother.”

“No thanks. I have all the relief I need.” I gestured at my dwindling whiskey collection.

Wasp’s brow drew into a determined line as he marched toward my booze like a man possessed, and I realized my mistake. Before I could wobble off the bed to stop him, he scooped up four of my five remaining bottles. Using an elbow to gesture at the bourbon he’d left behind, he said, “You get one more bottle to get your shit together. You hear me?”

Having never met an ultimatum I wouldn’t challenge, I asked, “Or what?”

I expected him to get angry and promise to kick my ass to the curb, but his expression softened. “Won’t matter because it won’t come to that. I believe in you, brother. You’re stronger than you think, and you’ll pull your shit together.”

Then the patronizing asshole walked out of my room with my motherfucking booze.

Annoyed, I pulled on a pair of jeans, thinking. I should chase his ass down and demand he return my property, but that required a level of functionality I didn’t possess at the present time. Instead, I snatched up the single bottle he’d left me. Naturally, it was a \$300 special reserve bourbon, the most expensive bottle I owned. I’d intended to save it for a special occasion, but using it to ignite the dumpster fire that was my life would have to do.

Wasp was right about the stink of my room. Fresh air was in order. I took my bottle and ambled down the hall to the emergency exit. Despite the notice that said otherwise, the door wasn’t alarmed. I knew that because I often retreated through it when I needed time alone to think. The door led to a rusted metal fire escape. I climbed up to the metal cage that served as a roof-level platform and sat, squeezing my legs through the foot-wide gap between the lower railing and floor to dangle my feet over the edge.

Opening my bottle, I took a swig. My empty stomach rebelled, clamoring for something more substantial than booze, but I ignored it. It was just one more entity trying to tell me how to live my life. Besides, I was feeding it the good shit

now, and this \$300 bourbon was smooth as fuck. I laughed, amused at the irony of dipping into the good stuff, not to enjoy the flavor but to avoid my impossible situation. Nothing like celebrating my nosedive into the gutter.

I'd made it about a quarter of the way through the bottle—my hangover fading into a much more pleasant buzz—when the back door of the fire station slammed open. Feet pounded on the paved walkway, and Morse rounded the corner of the building. Shielding his eyes with a hand, the judgmental bastard stared up at me and shook his head. I flipped him off.

“Drinking and heights? That’s the level of stupidity we’re subscribing to now?”

I toasted him with the bottle and took another swig. “Don’t knock it ’till you try it.”

“How about you stop being a dumbass and climb your ass down from there before you fall?”

“How about you suck my dick?”

I needed to come up with a wider variety of comebacks. But after Elenore’s little stunt, blowjobs were front and center on my mind. If Lacey were around, I could probably convince her to give me one. But oddly enough, the idea of anyone but Elenore’s mouth on my dick no longer appealed to me. Hell, if that wasn’t love, I didn’t know the meaning of the word.

I was fucking whipped.

By someone who demanded more than I could give.

*Fuck my life.*

I’d always known I wouldn’t be good enough for her, but I didn’t expect my inadequacies to cause this much pain. The marrow in my bones fucking missed her.

“If your dick needs attention, you should have gone home with Elenore,” Morse said, his words only rubbing salt into the wound.

“Yeah? Well, if you’re so smart, why don’t you go fix your own goddamn relationship issues? Bet you still haven’t worked up the balls to tell the widow you’re into her. What the

fuck makes you think you're qualified to give me advice?" Not my finest moment, but nothing chaps my hide like know-it-alls behaving as if their shit doesn't stink.

"You know what? Fuck you." He flipped me off and went back inside.

I knew I was being an asshole, but this rah-rah you-can-do-it bullshit felt a lot like toxic positivity. Clearly, I couldn't do shit. All I wanted was for everyone to leave me the fuck alone and let me ferment in my swanky-ass bourbon. Besides, my current condition was at least partly Morse's fault. The motherfucker had done his best to convince me I had a chance with Elenore. Had he kept his enormous mouth shut, I never would have gotten my hopes up, and this all could have been prevented.

What the fuck had I been thinking? I'd inserted myself into her life like I belonged there, like I was something more than a worthless mess.

The ground was only four stories down, and the daredevil in me mulled over Morse's warning, wondering if I could survive the fall. As cowardly as I was, I'd never feared heights. Probably because I used to hide in a tree whenever Mom lost her shit.

*Every time. Every goddamn time, Tad. You fuck up everything you touch.*

Dulled by the alcohol, the memory of her favorite admonishment didn't cut as deep as it usually did. I eyed the bottle in my hand, wondering how much I'd have to drink to forever repress the disappointment I'd become.

Beneath me, the third-floor emergency door swung open, and someone slid out onto the iron landing, holding onto both side rails and moving at a snail's pace. The door slammed closed, and the newcomer stopped to look up at me. Sage. I swore, surprised to hear the curses echoed back at me. The club shrink had tried to talk to me frequently, but today, he looked like a man who'd drawn the short straw. Had I cared what he thought of me, I might have been offended.

“Mornin’, Sage.” I toasted him and glanced at the cloud-covered sky, grateful it wasn’t sunny. “Assuming it is still morning.” I didn’t know or care about the time.

“It’s almost noon. Feel like coming inside so we can chat?”

“Not a chance in hell.”

His hopeful expression fell into a frown. He’d tried, earning his good deed patch for the day, and now I fully expected him to go back inside and leave me alone, but he surprised me by climbing up. His pace was painstakingly slow, and he clung to the metal railing for dear life. I would have sworn he was scaling a deadly cliff face rather than climbing a ladder.

“What’s wrong?” I took another swig. Then, realizing the extent of his discomfort, I chuckled at his expense. “Does the shrink have an unresolved fear of heights he wants to share with the class?”

“No. I’m not afraid of heights, dumbass. I’m afraid of falling to my fucking death. And I doubt that this rusted piece of shit is OSHA-approved.”

“You know, you don’t have to come up here. You can always go away.” In fact, I really wished he would. If I’d wanted a drinking partner, I could have gone to the bar. “Kinda tryin’ to be alone.”

He reached my landing. Sliding across the platform, he spun and planted his back flat against the building. Releasing his breath, he nodded as if reassuring himself he was safe. “It’s too late. I’m here now.” Gesturing for me to hand over my bottle, he asked, “How about a drink?”

I considered the bourbon. “It’s my last bottle. Wasp stole the others, the goddamn thief.”

“I just want a drink, Rabbit. Come on. Give me that much, at least.”

He had climbed a ladder to annoy me, after all. I reluctantly handed it over. The bastard snatched it from my hands and took a long-ass pull before setting it on a ledge well out of my reach.

“What the fuck, man?”

“You can have it back after we talk.”

I frowned. “People like you are why I have trust issues.”

He nodded. “Good. That’s an excellent place to start our session. Where would you say these trust issues originated?”

I’d walked right into that one. Frustrated, I shook my head. The building spun, so I came to an abrupt halt. “I’m not sayin’ shit to you, man.”

“Okay, but can I ask why?”

What a moronic question. “Because I don’t need to be psychoanalyzed.”

He scoffed. “You don’t think so, huh? That your professional opinion?”

“Seriously, go fuck yourself.” I didn’t care for the way he was eyeing me.

“What if I promise to just listen?”

It felt like a trap, but I was intrigued. Then again, that could have been the alcohol. “Why? So, you can tell Link exactly how fucked up I am?”

He slid down the wall, crossing his legs to sit on the platform behind and to the right of me. “No, Rabbit. That’s not how this works. Anything you say to me is confidential. Well, as long as you don’t pose an immediate threat to your own physical safety or the safety of others. That shit, I do report to Link.”

“And that happens?” I asked, legitimately interested. If some of my brothers were plotting sketchy shit, I wanted to know.

He gave me a cryptic smile. “And I *only* report it to Link. Think I’d tell your crazy ass anything?”

“The fuckin’ audacity.” I turned to gape at him. “Did you just call me crazy?”



He shrugged. “You’re drunk on the top of a fire escape. Am I wrong?”

Despite my irritation at his intrusion, I chuckled and tried to toast him, remembering he’d taken my bottle. Perhaps he had a point.

“Come on, Rabbit. Talk to me. Tell me what’s got your tail in a twist.”

I knew I shouldn’t say shit, but I was having a hell of a time remembering why. In fact, now that I was thinking about them, the words wanted to spill out. And I was tired. So fucking tired of keeping it all in. Fuck it. I let the words fly. “I took my shot and missed. We’re talkin’ air fuckin’ ball. No golden buzzer for this Rabbit.”

He stared at me for a solid minute before finally responding. “Am I supposed to know what that all means? Because I’m lost. Care to elaborate?”

“I fucked up. Again.” I chuckled, but there was no humor behind it. “But hey, I’m nothing if not consistent. That has to count for something, right? You know the definition of insanity, Mr. Shrink? Doing the same thing over and over and expecting a different result. No matter what I do, no matter what I try, the outcome is always the same. Everything I touch turns to shit.”

I expected his psychobabble mode to engage, but Sage surprised me. He didn’t argue. Didn’t try to tell me my theory was wrong. He simply asked, “What happened?”

Turning away, I leaned against the metal railing, staring at the ground but seeing Elenore’s face when I’d told her I’d be her dinner date. She’d had “concerns” but trusted me, and I’d only let her down.

“I’ve been seeing this woman who’s way out of my league. She needed me to be there for her, her plus one at a fancy dinner. I didn’t just drop the ball; I kicked a field goal. Fuckin’ panicked and bailed. And you know what she did? She came after me.” My laughter sounded hollow and abrasive. “Told

me she loves me, then promised to reward me with a blowjob if I get help.”

Sage was silent, so I glanced over my shoulder. He looked so shocked I almost laughed, but he wrestled his expression into impassivity and nodded. “Everyone needs help sometimes, Rabbit. There’s no shame in that.”

“Oh yeah?” I snapped. “Then what the fuck’s wrong with you? What do you need help with?”

I didn’t expect him to answer, so it surprised me yet again when he said, “I have commitment issues.”

I snorted. That was nothing. “You and half the population.”

“No. I don’t think you understand. I’d rather jump from this fire escape than tie myself to one person. And considering my fear of falling, that’s sayin’ a hell of a lot. For me, the most terrifying thing you said was about this woman telling you she loved you. If a broad said that to me, I’d probably move out of the state.”

Talk about dramatic. “What about the club?”

“Link would understand.”

I doubted it. “And are you seeing a shrink about your problem?”

“No. Therapy is for people who want help, and I don’t. The best way to get over a commitment phobia is to commit, and I sure as shit don’t want to do that.”

I’d likely have a hard time wrapping my brain around his confession sober, but right now, it made no sense. If it wouldn’t screw up her life, I’d tie myself to Elenore’s in a heartbeat. What the fuck was there to be afraid of?

“You’d prefer suicide or moving over dealing with your shit. Got it. How the fuck are you a shrink?”

“Look, I’m trying to be real with you because I think you’ve had enough bullshit. You want me to blow smoke up your ass, bend over.”

I huffed out a laugh. “I’ll pass.”

He grabbed my whiskey and took another drink. I held my hand out for it, but again, the bastard kept it out of my reach.

“That shit’s expensive. If you’re not gonna share, stay the fuck out of it.”

He leveled a look at me. “Consider it the cost of your first therapy session.”

“Unscrupulous bastard. I knew you were tryin’ to trick me. Well, it ain’t gonna work. I’m not getting therapy. Especially from a quack who can’t even commit.”

Sage raised both hands in mock horror. “Oooh, the patient attempts to push me away with hateful words. Good one. Nobody’s ever tried that on me before. How ever will I cope?”

I flipped the sarcastic motherfucker off.

He ignored the bird and leaned forward. “Allow me to clue you in on a little secret, Rabbit. Nobody has their shit together. Some of us are just more adept at faking it.”

Even alcohol-addled as I was, I could see the parallel he was trying to draw between us—between me and all my brothers—but I wasn’t falling for that shit. “The others might have issues, but they’re nowhere as fucked up as me. If they were, this fire escape would be much more crowded.”

“Wow. You seriously believe you’re more dysfunctional than mass murderers, child molesters, and politicians, don’t you? That’s some fuckin’ ego.”

“Everyone makes it sound like you walk on water, but you’re a son-of-a-bitch.”

“No. I’m exactly what you need me to be. You don’t respond well to kindness—likely because you haven’t experienced it much—so fuck that. You want real, let’s keep it real.”

“A real dickhead, you mean.”

He chuckled. “Everyone’s got a little asshole in them. You just have to know when to let it loose.”

I was being manipulated—he'd clearly admitted as much—so why was I starting to like the bastard? Something about him made me want to get everything off my chest, goddammit, and that was unacceptable. Even though I couldn't recall why. Elenore had promised me a blowjob if I got help, so why wouldn't I at least try? Talking couldn't be so bad, could it? Needing a moment to clear my head, I focused back on the ground.

“Why did you go into the service?” I asked.

“The GI Bill.” The randomness of my question hadn't even thrown him off.

“Really?”

“Sorry. Were you expecting something a little more altruistic?”

“Well, yeah. Didn't you want to protect our citizens or help children in third-world countries or some shit?”

“Not particularly. I wanted an education that wouldn't put me in debt for the rest of my life.” His tone was serious. Genuine. “What about you?”

“Didn't have anywhere else to go.” I hadn't meant to tell him, but there it was.

“Were you in the foster system?”

I shook my head. “Nothing like that. My mom is....” How the fuck was I supposed to finish that sentence? With no good alternative, I gave up. “I'm not gonna sit here and bitch about my childhood. No, it wasn't all sunshine and rainbows, but I had it better than some. We had food, and there was always a roof over my head. My father's a useless piece of shit, and Mom did the best she could.”

Sage nodded. “I hear what you're saying, but children need more than that to thrive.”

Thriving hadn't been an option, but we'd survived. “I didn't exactly make Mom's life easy, always fuckin' up something. But my last stunt... I have no regrets about that one.”

Sage didn't respond.

I turned away. It was easier to open up when I wasn't looking at him. "My mom was seeing this guy, and I didn't appreciate the way he was lookin' at my little sister. I told him to keep his goddamn eyes to himself, and when he didn't, I beat the shit out of him. The cops were called, and it turned out the asshole had a warrant for his arrest. Petty theft or some shit like that. Anyway, the cop who booked me had a cousin who was a recruiter."

"Convenient."

I chuckled. "Yeah. I think they believed they were helping me. It was a week before my eighteenth birthday, and I was fresh out of high school, trying to figure out what to do with my life. I had the grades to get into college but definitely not the money. My neighbor—a mechanic who worked out of his garage—had taught me his craft. I'd been earning money helping him with jobs here and there, but it wasn't a steady paycheck. And I sure as shit didn't have a savings account."

Again, Sage said nothing.

"Mom kicked my ass out. I would have been homeless."

I heard the creak of metal as Sage moved. He didn't come near the ledge but scooted close enough to pat me on the back.

"That's not an uncommon story," he said. "Lots of people don't have any other options when they become adults. I've met several foster kids who signed up when they aged out of the system and didn't have anywhere else to go. I'm not telling you this to minimize your experience, by the way," he added. "Sometimes it helps to be reminded that you're not the only one with limited options."

I'd never considered the fate of foster kids. In a way, Elenore had aged out of her uncle's foster care, but she was fucking brilliant. Probably racked up the scholarships because the University of Washington cost a mint. I'd looked into colleges when I'd first enlisted, intending to do something with my life after I got out. But the episodes that had gotten me discharged had taken away that option.

“I was fucked up before I enlisted, but my time in the Army didn’t do me any favors.”

He didn’t say a word, and again his silence prompted me to explain.

“Growin’ up, I saw some crazy shit, but nothing could have prepared me for the shit I saw in the service.” Memories I’d suppressed long ago came flooding back. Gunfire. Smoke. Orders to retreat. Red fucking sand. I shook my head, pushing them away. “Came home with a commendation medal. Because I survived.” I scoffed. “The actual heroes were the ones who hadn’t made it back. The lives that had painted the sand red. Not a fucking coward who ran and hid.”

It was out there. Now, someone knew. My chest tightened, and I waited for his rejection to kick me in the teeth.

“Rabbit.” Sage chuckled. “I get the road name now.”

*What the fuck?*

I turned and narrowed my eyes at him. “You’re fuckin’ laughing at me right now?”

“Somebody’s got to. You take yourself too damn seriously.”

How the hell was I supposed to take that? “Aren’t you supposed to be helping me?”

He arched an eyebrow. “I’m only supposed to listen, remember? Want me to help you now?”

“Man, fuck you. Now you’re just takin’ advantage of me because I’m drunk. Goddamn mind-raping asshole.”

Sage shrugged, seemingly unfazed. “I do what I must. You know, your story isn’t nearly as unique as you think it is.”

“Good to know I’m not special.”

He ignored me. “In fact, it’s so common that professionals have developed relaxation techniques and prescriptions to help you function through it.”

“You wanna dope me up and rot my brain with woo-woo shit?”

He held up his hands in defense. “Back up the judgment bus there, brother. Studies have proven that meditation and other woo-woo shit does the opposite of rotting your brain. And what the fuck do you have against medication? Less than two percent of the population is on antipsychotics. A minuscule number in the grand scheme of things, but trust me, we do not want to know what happens if someone takes away those drugs. Pandemonium, I tell you.”

Sage kept right on talking, but it was no longer his voice I heard. More shards of glass sliced up my chest as Elenore rattled off statistics. She was in my head. But unlike the others who occasionally took up residence, I wanted her there. Even though her presence fucking shredded me.

“You sound like Poe.”

Sage stopped mid-tirade and stared at me.

“She’s smarter than you, though,” I said.

He snorted. “Not likely. Or she sure as hell wouldn’t be with you.”

I laughed, even though it hurt. “Man, you’re an asshole.”

“If I were nice, you wouldn’t have given me the time of day. Now, enough bullshit. If this woman is as brilliant as you say, we both know you’re never gonna do better. You need to lock that shit down. Tell me why you’re not using every tool available to you. Life’s hard enough without intentionally breaking the shit that makes it bearable.”

Growling, I banged on the rail in frustration.

He was right.

I fucking wanted Elenore. But more than that, I wanted to be the kind of man she deserved. If therapy could help me get there, why the fuck wouldn’t I try it? What sort of man would I be if I didn’t?

Sighing, I surrendered. “Fine, fucker, sign me up.”



## Rabbit

“Do you ever stop moving?” Morse snapped, sounding like a crotchety old geezer desperately needing a nap.

We waited in a van outside the high-rise office building that housed Chamberlain Industries. Correction: *I* was waiting, perched in the driver’s seat and scanning the street, steadily going out of my mind from the inaction. Morse and Hound were furiously pecking away at keyboards in the back of the van, hacking into the building’s security system and doing... whatever the fuck hackers did. Tap was somewhere inside, executing his assignment. I was the lookout, watching for anyone who looked twice at our nondescript delivery van idling on the street.

Glancing at my phone, I confirmed we were four minutes and thirty-two seconds past the allotted ten minutes, according to the loading zone sign posted just outside my passenger window. If Tap wasn’t out soon, we’d have to go around the block because there was no way in hell we weren’t all going to jail if they looked in the back. I couldn’t get locked up now, not when I was this close to seeing Elenore. It had been six days and roughly fourteen hours since she’d made her ultimatum and walked out my door, and I would damn sure be there to greet her when she got home from the gym tonight.

I would meet her at work and accompany her to the gym, but she made me a promise. The instant I saw her, I wanted



her to pay up. And again, I had no desire to get locked up today.

So, yeah, kill me for not holding still. I was freaking the fuck out.

“Okay, delivery boy, you’re clear,” Morse said into his headset. “Two in the first room on the left. Good. Take the next right. You’re comin’ up on the staircase. It’s empty.”

I took a deep breath, relieved that Tap had delivered the package and was on his way out. I’d been so busy I hadn’t had a chance to get back at the bastard for that stunt he’d pulled with my bedroom lights. Now, I never could. He was doing me a fucking solid and risking his neck in there. From here on out, anyone who wanted to fuck with Tap would have to go through me.

Because I wasn’t a coward.

Sage had diagnosed me with PTSD and explained why stress made my brain switch off. It had nothing to do with my lack of courage. After all, he reminded me, I’d gone after my mom’s much larger boyfriend to protect my sister. He’d also given me a prescription to help with anxiety, and so far, it seemed to do the trick.

And go fucking figure. Talking to Sage wasn’t half bad.

In hindsight, I probably should have tried it sooner, but that’s water under the bridge. The side door opened, and Tap climbed in, dressed like the delivery boy he’d pretended to be.

“I can’t thank you enough, brother,” I said as he slid the door shut.

He gave me a nod. “We’ll always have your back, brother.”

My throat squeezing tight, I returned his nod. They’d proven as much. Hell, Morse hadn’t even told Link. He said he would brief the prez upon our return, but sometimes it was easier to beg forgiveness than ask for permission. Besides, if anything happened, he wanted Link and the club to be oblivious to our plan.

I'd kill for Morse, too.

"Let's get out of here," Morse said.

He didn't have to tell me twice. I put the van into drive and merged into traffic, heading for the grocery store parking lot we'd selected for the second part of the plan.

"Target is entering his office... now," Hound said. He was the newest addition to the tech team, a Navy veteran who'd fucked up his back in the service. I made a mental note to introduce him to Elenore. Maybe he could help her with her CBD trials. Her program might help him with his chronic pain.

"Target is seated at his desk," Morse said. "Make the call."

Perfect timing. I pulled into the lot and put the van into park before climbing into the back. Tap handed me a burner cell that was already dialing. It was set on speaker, allowing us all to hear it ring. The monitor in front of Hound showed a dark-haired asshole in a suit. His expression confused, he frantically searched his desk drawers, looking for the source of the ring. Finally, he found the phone and put it to his ear.

"Hello?"

Though the bastard couldn't see me, I got my game face on. It didn't take much to turn my anger up to ten. This man believed his money empowered him to treat others like inferior beings. And the motherfucker had put his hand on Elenore's thigh.

"Mr. Chamberlain." Anger punctuated my words, and I felt the surprise of my brothers. "You've been a bad, bad boy."

On the screen, his brow furrowed. "Who the fuck is this? What do you want?"

"Doesn't matter who I am. What you should be worried about is what I know."

"Oh yeah? What do you think you know?"

"I know you're a man who takes liberties with women who don't want your attention."

He scoffed. “Do you hear how ridiculous that sounds? I’m rich and attractive. Every woman wants my attention.”

The guy was a real piece of work. “What about Jasmine, Rochelle, Nicole, Elyse, and Elizabeth?”

Morse had the names up on his screen, but I didn’t need to look. I’d memorized them. Five women who’d filed charges against this motherfucker, only to have his sins swept under the rug. I would make damn sure Elenore wasn’t number six.

His free fist clenched, and he slammed it on his desk. The asshole was angry now. Good.

“Who the fuck is this? How did you...? If those bitches talked....”

“Bet your daddy paid a lot of money to lock their files down, but I have news for you, you perverse piece of shit. Nothing stays hidden forever.”

He ground his teeth. “What do you want?”

“What every decent human being wants. For you to stay the fuck away from women who don’t give you their consent.”

He stood and paced his office. “I’ve never forced myself on anyone. I didn’t have to. Those women knew the score the minute they saw me. But each one believed their magical cunt would lock me down. Those bitches all got paid. They need to keep their mouths shut. We had an agreement.”

The delusional bastard probably believed Elenore wanted him, too. Man, I really wanted to punch him in the face. “Let me make one thing perfectly clear, you pencil-dicked, entitled motherfucker. This is me *trying* to be a good fucking person. I don’t want to go to jail, but I will rip—”

Morse and Tap lunged in front of me, frantically shaking heads and slashing hands across their throats. Right. We’d agreed to no threats of physical violence. Shit. This was harder than I thought. I blew out my breath and tried again.

“We’re having a conversation rather than... exploring less savory solutions. Don’t fuckin’ push me.”

Tap shook his head and mouthed, “You sound like a wannabe mob boss.”

I flipped him off. Not the most constructive criticism from the peanut gallery today.

Into the phone, I said, “We’re watching you, Cameron. We have eyes and ears everywhere. Our media friends would love to get their hands on your story. Fuck around, and you *will* find out what it’s like when everyone discovers you’re nothing but a warped piece of shit.”

There. That was the speech Morse and Tap had approved. Before I could add anything else, Tap snatched the phone out of my hand.

“This is your one warning. We’ll be watching,” he said before ending the call.

Hound grinned up at me. “So, what are you gonna do next?”

---

When Elenore arrived home from the gym, I was in her apartment, grateful she’d given me a key before the dinner since I’d gotten dressed and ready at her place. I’d piled gifts on her sofa and arranged a colorful bouquet of Gerber daisies in a vase on the end table. I’d spent all afternoon buying her gifts. At first, I’d wanted to get her something unexpected and personal. For that gift, I’d settled on a badass handcrafted chess set. She once mentioned she played, and I hoped she’d teach me.

Then I’d gone the traditional route, buying her flowers, fine chocolate, and jewelry, in case she was into that shit. Remembering that Rose had lost her mind once when a guy gave her a stuffed animal, I also bought a two-foot-tall plush unicorn. I glanced at the sofa, second-guessing that decision and hoping it wasn’t too immature.

The door opened. “Rabbit?” Elenore asked as her footsteps sounded against the hardwood floor.

I'd parked where she'd see my bike since I wasn't trying to scare her shitless. I suddenly felt really damn naked and vulnerable, but it was too late for doubts. Butterflies danced in my stomach, and my heart raced. I didn't reach for my anxiety pills because this wasn't the type of tension I wanted to medicate away. I embraced the excitement, consciously forcing myself to stop worrying that she might have changed her mind. My woman wasn't fickle, and she meant what she said. I loved that about her. Then again, I loved everything about her.

She saw me before I could call out my location and stopped short. First amusement, and then heat flooded her eyes.

I was dressed in nothing but a black leather jockstrap harness that barely covered my limp cock. The sight of her sent all the blood rushing to my dick, and I had no idea what would happen to this thing when I got hard. I feared it might pop off and go flying across the room. Regardless, I didn't doubt the outfit one bit. It was the male equivalent of what she'd worn for me the night of the dinner, and from the moment I saw it, I knew I had to have it. Judging by the lust in her eyes, it was worth every penny.

"I don't know whether to laugh or ravage you," Elenore said, her voice breathy.

"You can do both. In fact, you can do whatever the fuck you want to me because we're doing this. I'm getting help."

Her gaze—which had been steadily devouring my body—jumped up to meet mine. Her eyes were the color of whiskey today, with only a thin jade line encircling the irises. The hope I saw in them punched me in the chest. I would continue to work with Sage and get my shit together because my woman needed me as much as I needed her.

"Seriously?" she asked.

"I'd do anything for you, Poe. Sage expects to see you tomorrow at eleven."

She nodded. "I'll be there."

We stared at each other for a solid minute, then she dropped to her knees and damn near swallowed my dick.

---

Saturday, after our session with Sage, we stuck around the club. Someone turned on the jukebox. A couple of club girls started dancing, and Elenore joined in. My woman had many talents, but dancing was not among her skills. However, her lack of ability didn't keep her from trying, a trait I both loved and respected. I'd never learned any modern dances, but even I could tell her moves were outdated. Was that... the mashed potato? Now, she was fishing, throwing her line out toward me. I pantomimed being hooked and let her reel me in. We had to look ridiculous, but I didn't give a fuck. I would act a fool any day of the week for the grin currently stretched across Elenore's face.

I reached her, and she wrapped her arms around me, leaning against my chest. *Pour Some Sugar on Me* by Def Leppard wasn't exactly a slow song, but she didn't seem to care. We swayed to our own beat, which pretty much summed us up.

"There's something I need to tell you," I said, sniffing the top of her head. I would never tire of her sweet scent. She smelled like home, safety, and acceptance, like everything I'd never believed I could have. We were still working out the details of our future together. I was determined to never allow secrets or lies to come between us, which was why I needed to confess.

"What's up?" she asked.

"I handled your Cameron problem."

Jerking us to a halt, she pushed off my chest to stare at me. "Exactly what did you do?"

"I didn't break my promise or endanger the chances of his family's investment."

"Okay." She gestured for me to continue.

“The less you know, the better.”

“That statement doesn’t instill confidence.”

“Oh, I’m confident. Confident you’ll never have to deal with that motherfucker again.”

“Roger—”

“Poe, you are amazing. You’re super fuckin’ intelligent and doing shit to help people and make the world a better place.” Today, she’d not only talked to Hound about his pain but also to a couple of other vets as well. She was the most incredible woman on the planet. I was damn lucky she was mine. I would never let her go, and I would protect her at all costs. “You shouldn’t have to deal with shitheads who believe their money entitles them to your time or body. I will never stand back and allow that. He needed to understand my position on the matter.”

“Promise you didn’t break his face?”

I grinned, grateful Morse had talked me into doing things his way. “Didn’t so much as touch him.”

“Is there a chance of him reporting you to the authorities?”

“Only if he wants to ruin his rep. I’ve got him by the shorthairs. Trust me.”

“I do. I trust you, Roger.” With her words reflected in her eyes, she smiled at me, and my chest damn near exploded.

“I told you I was going to murder him,” she said with a wry grin.

Which was precisely why I’d taken care of him. “I didn’t want to risk you going to jail. Especially not after that blowjob. You know I’m gonna want more of those.”

“Play your cards right, and I’ll give you one later in thanks for Harry.”

Despite my concern that she wouldn’t like the stuffed unicorn, she’d immediately named it and stationed it on her bed where it was standing guard.

“Oh, really? How many Harrys am I allowed to get you?”

Her eyes widened. “Just the one. I mean it, Roger. You can’t buy blowjobs with stuffed animals.”

“Okay. I’ll have to find other ways to convince you to put my cock in your mouth.”

“You won’t have to be all that convincing. I quite enjoy it. Besides, I’m sure you’ll spend plenty of time on your knees.”

I nodded enthusiastically. “Every time you let me.”

“Well, I wouldn’t be opposed to a little tongue action now.” She pushed off my chest to look me in the eye. “You know, I’ve never sixty-nined before.”

I was already leading her toward the stairs. “Then that’s something we should try.”

My pocket buzzed. As much as I wanted to ignore it, Rose was out on a date tonight with her fucking coworker, Ryan, and I needed to be available just in case. We had a dinner date with them next weekend, so the two most important people in my life could finally meet. Elenore asked to meet my mom, too, but thankfully, Sage didn’t believe I was ready for that. We were taking baby steps, and the shrink had been helping me for less than a week.

I tugged my phone from my pocket and studied the screen, hoping I wouldn’t have to dispose of a body tonight.

But it wasn’t Rose.

MORSE

SOS. Amelia’s life is in danger. My office. Now.



## **ALSO BY HARLEY STONE**

I hope you loved *Redeeming Rabbit*. Be sure to watch for Morse's story, which will be coming soon.

Please take a moment to write a review. They only require twenty words and help me tremendously. I appreciate your support!

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

International bestselling author Harley Stone is a lover of animals, books, dark chocolate, and red wine. She's always up for a good adventure (real or fictional), and when she's not building imaginary worlds, she's dipping her toes into reality in southwest Washington with her husband and their boys.



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