



# REDEMPTION

DERANGED DRIFTERS MC BOOK 14

LOGAN GRAY

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Logan Gray

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Logan Gray

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# Chapter 1

*Griffin's Beach*

*Colt*

Colton “Colt” Nichols races to his mother’s house. There’s a chance, no matter how small, that his wife and kids will be there. There aren’t many places Lex can stay, especially with two kids, and he’ll be damned if he doesn’t drag them back to the house. To stay. Where they fucking belong.

Parking in the driveway, he races up the steps and pounds on the door so hard it sounds as though he splintered the wood frame. He feels like he just ran a damned mile, and he tugs his blonde hair back into a hair tie.

His mother answers, closes her eyes, and steps back with a sigh to hold the door wider and let him inside. “I was wondering how long it would take you to show up here. Lex said at least three days, and I told her she was wrong. Guess I was,” Karmen Nichols says.

He stares at his mother. Until six years ago, he referred to her as his estranged mother. Actually, after he caught her cheating on his father with another member of the club, he lost his mind and had a few other colorful names for her. Then her actions killed his younger brother, Noah, because Rush Gable tried to kill his father. Got his brother by mistake. She ruined their entire family, and now he prays she can give him the clarity he needs to figure out what the hell happened with his family. The irony would make him laugh if he wasn’t so fucking pissed.

“Is she here?”

“No, Lex isn’t here. I tried to convince her to stay, to give you time to come to your senses and talk to you, but she refused.”

“But you know where she is?”

She shakes her blonde hair with gray at the roots. Something she never would have been caught dead with before. “No, sweetheart.”

His sister walks downstairs and leans on the banister. “What’s going on?”

“Go up to your room, Klaire,” Karmen says.

“What’s wrong?” The girl he remembers as a timid eight-year-old stands before him as a pretty teenager. If she’s anything like him or their mother, she’ll be defiant in a way Karmen isn’t quite prepared to handle. Serves her right.

Colt sighs, and Karmen visibly restrains her annoyance. “Please, just go up the damn stairs.”

“No, I want to know what’s going on.” Her arms cross over her chest, and an eyebrow raises in obvious defiance.

He’s had enough of this, and he needs to find out where his wife ran off to. “Listen to Mom!” he growls, his nostrils flaring as he stares hard with narrowed eyes. “Get your ass up those stairs right now and stop back talking!”

“I was just worried about what has your panties in a bunch. God!” she says and stomps up the stairs. “No wonder Lex left you. You’re such an ass!”

His mother ushers him into the kitchen, and he sits at the island. “Where is she, Mom?”

“I don’t know.”

“How can you not know?”

“She showed up here at the house the night she left, and we talked. The kids weren’t with her, and I tried to convince her to stay here. To tell me more, but she couldn’t. I said you’d be by in the morning to get them when you realized they were gone, and she said it would be at least three days before you noticed. That someone could break in and kill them, and no one would know for days or weeks until you decided to come home. The heartbreak in her voice made me want to call and scream at you.”

He sighs. “I didn’t know about any of this, otherwise-”

“Don’t feed me a line of bullshit, Colton. Alexis Dalton would walk over hot coals for you. For her to give up on the two of you – no, to give up on your family – you screwed up. Big time. I heard about what that little tramp from Black Valley had been saying, and she told me what was sent. I don’t blame her for thinking you’re with someone else.”

“Don’t act like this wasn’t planned. She didn’t come up with this idea to have you charter our kids to me on a whim. It’s something she’s thought about for a while. She just took the coward’s way out by leaving when I was gone.”

Karmen shakes her hair, blonde strands falling from the ponytail tied up at the top of her head. “If she waited until you were home, the kids might have graduated high school. How can you not see what you’re doing? You can’t be mad she’s giving you an option to see your kids. Hell, you had every option before this and didn’t take it. She’s hoping this will snap you out of whatever the fuck you have going on in that head of yours to be there for Noah and Calla.”

“She should’ve talked to me first!” He slams his hand on the granite countertop. “She just up and left without a conversation.”

“When was she supposed to have that conversation? Huh? Even your father’s mentioned how often you’re gone when we’ve talked. You’re not present in your own clubhouse, which means you’re sure as hell not present with your family. She said she tried calling you that night before talking to Psycho. Hell, I tried calling you. You ignored me, too.”

“I was fucking busy!”

“Fucking busy, or busy fucking?”

He glares at her. “Diane is a fucking liar.”

That bitch never should have sent anything to Lex. She took a naked picture without his consent, and he sure as hell didn’t knock her up. If she’s pregnant, that kid isn’t his.

Smirking, she crosses her arms. “Say I believe you. Still doesn’t take away the fact it’s a bullshit excuse because being busy nursing a bottle of vodka while your wife tries



desperately to reach you after she gets a picture of you stark naked from the twat who's been taunting her for months saying she's taking you from her. And vodka's an even worse excuse to ignore your children, Colt."

"She's got to be with her dad."

She stares at him, and he can tell she believes he's a moron. "Really? You think she's going to go to her *father* for help after everything he and Zane put her through as a kid? Besides, don't you think you'd have heard from him?"

Taking a deep breath, he tries to remain calm. His wife and kids are somewhere he can't find them, and he shifts between panic and hatred and back again. "They've rebuilt their relationship."

"She called him about you being in Black Valley so much, and he basically told her to fuck off."

"She has to get over the past. I'm tired of hearing it over and over again whenever she feels a certain type of way."

"You guys all pushed her away, and now you're mad she finally let you? Do you hear yourself right now?"

"Where the hell would she have gone then? I know she won't be at Zane's. And if she'd gone to Ky and Felicity, they would have called me. Must be Lily."

She shrugs. "I honestly don't know. I wish I did. But she knew you'd ask me, so she wouldn't tell me. But I have to ask you something. Did you do something you shouldn't have with that bunny, Colt?"

Leaning back, his eyes fly up to her face. Is she serious? "What the fuck did you just ask me?"

"No judgment, believe me. But Lex said there was a sonogram in the pictures the bitch sent. She believed it could be yours, but she didn't know because, well, you didn't answer your goddamned phone. But it looks really bad, sweetheart."

"I didn't fuck her! She just hangs all over me at the fucking clubhouse. And sure, part of me liked the flirting, but

I'd never. Not again. Shit with Lex and I got so twisted, and it was nice to get some type of attention."

"What do you mean?"

He's an asshole. There's no way around it. "Since Calla was born, the world has revolved around the kids. And I know I sound selfish, but as soon as we'd get close, the baby would start crying. She'd have to go take care of her, or Noah needed her. I came last. Then, when I was in Black Valley, the distance made it harder."

"But you voluntarily stayed out there that much! You realize the distance piece was your choice, right?"

He wishes people could just understand that he had to be. Casey deserved it, and he owed the man everything. "I needed something to do. Something that wasn't helping clean up puke or fixing something around the house. I needed a break, and I guess it went a little too far."

"But you never crossed any lines? I know you said you didn't fuck her, but you can do a lot of betrayal with someone without having sex."

"No, she gave me attention, and I'd entertain it for a total of about thirty seconds before she'd annoy the shit out of me. I'd ignore her, but she was always there. I swear, I never even thought about doing anything with her."

"Really?"

Clenching his fists, he snarls. "Okay, fine! I thought about it, but I didn't do anything about it!"

Leaning forward, she rests her elbows on the counter in front of her. "You realize how this looks, though, right?"

Yep. It looks like he's been stepping out on his wife. "I need to talk to her. I need to tell her it's not what it looks like. She's blowing this all out of proportion, and she's going to feel fucking stupid when she realizes it."

"No, don't you dare do that. This is not her fault. You put yourself in this position, Colt. I love you, and I'll never judge you for a mistake, but *you* did this. There is absolutely

nothing that girl needs to feel stupid about. Except maybe putting up with it for as long as she did.”

“Excuse me?”

“She has every right to feel the way she does. She tried to reach out to you to talk to you about what happened before she left. And what did you do? You ignored her call. She gave you an opportunity most women wouldn’t to try and save your family. And you failed her. Do you see that at all?”

She gave him a phone call. That’s not exactly moving mountains. And at the end of the day, they’re married. He’s the father of those children, and she should have waited for him to get home. Even if it took a while, she shouldn’t have taken the coward’s way out. *She* did this.

“She walked, Mom. She gave up when things got tough instead of fighting.”

“God, you and your father are one and the same, you know that? When will you realize your pride isn’t worth losing your family? You did this once before, and where did that get you?”

He sighs and looks at the counter. This isn’t about pride. This is about Lex being selfish and not understanding his priorities. That he owes Casey and the club.

“She made this decision. Not me.”

“You pushed her to it!” Karmen cries. “Pushing her away and forcing her to be alone with those babies day in and day out takes away from the marriage. She doesn’t feel like a woman anymore. She’s Mom, and that’s it. You’re supposed to be there to remind her she’s a wife. A woman. Someone desired.”

His hand slams on the counter. “I didn’t fuck her enough? That’s what you’re saying? God, Mom, you realize how fucked up that is, right?”

“Colt-”

“Is that why you walked out on Dad? Because he wasn’t fucking you like he should?”

Her hand hits the counter as she leans over in his face. “Partially, yeah! He stopped being part of this marriage long before I did. I tried to get his attention. I did everything I could think of, but the club took all his attention and focus, and I needed some, too. I wanted to be more than just a mother. I wanted to feel like a fucking woman!”

Shaking his head, he stands. “Lex and you are not the same!”

“No, we’re not. I went to desperate measures trying to get your father’s attention. She has more self-respect. On top of that, she has too much respect for you to do what I did. I found someone who gave me the things I was seeking, and I tried to hurt your father. Make him feel the pain he caused me. She could’ve done the same. Hell, she could have had a full-fledged affair, and you wouldn’t know because you never came home! She didn’t do that to you, and you should be thankful.”

“What is it you think I should do, then? Huh? What’s your magical advice to make this better?”

Walking over to him, she taps his face gently. “I honestly don’t know if you can do anything to fix this. I think that girl has been pushed to the brink, and if it weren’t for those babies, she’d be all the way to Arizona by now. Your kids are the only saving grace of having any type of contact with your wife, Colt.”

“Mom-”

“You fucked up. Plain and simple. Until you can push aside your pride and understand that, there’s nothing anyone can say or do to help you. Even then, there’s a good chance you’ll never get Lex to believe you. Actions speak louder than words. You didn’t believe she’d really leave when she told you she couldn’t keep living this way. You didn’t believe her. But you believe her now, don’t you?”

## Chapter 2

*Griffin's Beach*

*Colt*

Colt sits on his bike down the street from Karmen's, waiting. He'd made plans to have the kids this weekend, and he cracks his neck when he sees Lex's black Mustang pull into the driveway. It's been two weeks since he found his wife and kids gone, and the time hasn't eased his anger. If anything, it's only intensified it.

He watches Alexis Nichols step out of the classic car he spent way too much money on after she sold it when she ran away years before, and she reaches into the backseat to let their kids out. Yes, the irony of the situation isn't lost on him.

Once she enters the house with the kids, he walks his bike the rest of the way to park on the street. The last thing he wants is his motorcycle tipping her off that he's here. If she wants to be sneaky and disappear when he's gone, he'll be just as sneaky and show up when she doesn't expect him to. He walks over to lean against her car and wait.

She steps out onto the porch and freezes when her puffy eyes land on him. "I don't know why I'm surprised," she says and stops at the bottom of the steps.

"We need to talk, Lex."

"Everything I had to say was in the letter for you."

"No, this isn't how this is gonna go," he says and pushes himself off the car to walk towards her. He takes in her unruly hair pulled into a mop on the top of her head and clothes that look to be two sizes too big on her. Where the hell did she buy them, and why hasn't she returned them yet? "This is not how this ends."

Her eyes avoid his, and he feels conflicted at the tears she furiously blinks away. He wants to both comfort and strangle her at the same time.

“I can’t do this right now, Colt.”

The tears bring him back to three weeks ago when she begged him to stay, and it fills him with anger when he knows he should feel guilt. Maybe he’s the broken one.

*No shit, Sherlock.* Noah’s voice sounds in his head. Goddamn his dead brother.

“I don’t give a shit what you think you can or can’t do. This isn’t how this marriage works.”

“This marriage stopped working months ago!” she shouts and pushes him backwards. “This conversation won’t fix a damn thing. The time for a conversation to fix anything was anytime within the last year, up until the night the lovely care package from your girlfriend arrived.”

They both turn towards the street when the sounds of two motorcycles echoes in the air. TK Nichols and Nash “VP” Dalton pull up outside the house. Great, just what they need. Both of their fathers watching this play out.

They look confused as they walk up the driveway, and TK looks at his son. “Why did I get a text from Klaire that VP and I should get our asses here right away?”

“Because she thinks the three of you can gang up on me and convince me something I know in my heart to be true isn’t,” Lex says.

His eyes look up at his sister’s room and see the curtains flutter. Meddling brat. But this might actually work in his favor. Maybe they can help talk reason into her thick skull.

“And what’s that?” VP asks, taking a step towards his daughter, his hazel eyes filled with suspicion.

Her arms cross over her chest, and she steps back and away from his touch. Looking at the ground, the toe of her converse shoe kicks the sidewalk, and her words feel like a kick in the nuts. “That my marriage is over.”

“What?” TK asks and looks at his son. “What the hell’s going on?”

“It’s been over for quite some time, but it’s finally broken beyond repair. A decision had to be made, and I made it.”

Colt shakes his head. “Lex, this is why we need to talk. What you think happened, or what you think has been happening, isn’t true! That is not my baby!”

VP holds his hand up. “Wait, hold it. What baby?”

“I need to go,” she says and wipes at her eyes. “I told you, Colt, I can’t do this. Not right now. I’ve been holding myself together because I’ve had two kids who depend on me, but I’m about thirty minutes from breaking.”

“Where are you staying?”

“I’m not telling you.”

VP blocks her path. “Then tell us.”

Her chin lifts in defiance, but her bottom lip quivers. “I’m not telling any of you.”

Colt grabs her wrist as she walks by, and she whips around, tearing her arm from his grasp with such vigor it startles him. “I need to know where you are to make sure you’re safe. To make sure my kids are safe.”

A dry laugh comes from her, and she shakes her head. “Well, the kids are with you this weekend, so my location has nothing to do with that.”

“I need to know you’re safe, too. We’ve got shit going on with the club.”

“And I’m not part of the club anymore.”

His father gapes at her. “Excuse me?”

“I’m done with the club. It’s done nothing but let me down, and targeting me would be pointless. No one’s cared for about a year, so they’d be stupid to think you’d care now.”

“Lex, wait,” VP says. “We care-”

“As for you,” she says and looks at Colt, “don’t give me that bullshit about me being safe. I could’ve been out with

those kids until two in the morning with the creepy guy down the street for months, and you wouldn't have known. Not when you all but moved to Black Valley with a girl who's been telling me for months she's going to take my man. She doesn't have to take him. I've given up, and she can have you."

"I never fucked her!"

Taking a deep breath, she still refuses to look him in the eyes. "The fact you think that's what broke us makes it so much worse. It's not the only reason. It's the final reason. We've been broken for so long now that I can't remember the last time we were happy. When we were really together as a family."

Her words catch him off-guard. "I'm not unhappy."

"That's because up until yesterday, you got the best of both worlds. But I'm not sure if it's a comfort or makes it worse that I was the only one miserable. I haven't been happy in so long, I don't even know when I can say the last time truly was. But you don't care. My husband doesn't even look at me when he comes home. Assuming he comes home at all."

"Lex-"

"There's no communication. You don't answer my calls unless I text you first that Noah wants to talk to you. It's the only way to get you to answer, which I think speaks volumes of where our relationship stands."

"Lex, just take a breath," TK says and stares at Colt. "My son's clearly made mistakes, but you two are made for each other. And I promise you, whatever this woman said isn't true."

"This isn't about her," she says. "This is about me. This is about us! We haven't been us for almost a year, and he doesn't care. He just... he stopped caring."

"That's not true," Colt snaps and reaches for her, but she backs away from his touch.

Her hands wipe at her eyes as she turns and looks away from them. "It is. I've tried, Colt. I've done everything I can think of. I've been understanding and flexible. Up until the



point I caught you in a lie. You've been choosing to spend so much time away from us, but even then, I still tried. And you... you didn't."

"What the fuck did you do?" TK asks, his eyes wide.

"I didn't do anything," he says and runs his hands through his hair. "Lex, please, you left your phone at the house. I need a way to get in touch with you. To know you have a way to reach me if something happens. With you or the kids."

"I have a way to get in touch with you if I need to. Karmen is our mutual point of contact if something happens with the kids. You stopped worrying about me a long time ago, so don't bother yourself by starting now."

VP steps forward and takes her by the shoulders, stopping her from shoving out of his grasp. "Where are you staying?"

"I'm not telling you that. You may be my dad, but your loyalty has always been to the club. And my soon-to-be ex-husband is the club. I need time. And I need space."

"Baby, I'm loyal to you-"

"Fuck you!" she cries, pulling herself from his grasp. "I called you. I tried to get your help when my family started falling apart. Do you remember what you told me? Because I do. You said, 'Lex, you know how the club life is. They need him out there.' You didn't even want to know why I called you. And this is exactly why I don't ask for help."

TK's eyes widen as VP drops his hands to his sides and steps back with his mouth open. Colt tries to find words, but nothing comes to him. She talked to Psycho. She talked to her dad. She tried talking to him.

"I've never once come before the club with any of you. I get it. I really do. But I swore I'd never end up with a man who treated me the way you did when I was growing up. And that's exactly what happened. I won't do it. And I refuse to give my daughter the same childhood I had."

VP looks like she just slapped him. As much as they've moved forward in their relationship, the pain from the past always finds a way to rear its ugly head again. No matter how much Lex says she's past the pain of the past, Colt knows it's not that easy. The feelings from her childhood creep in and hurt her all over again.

"Lex, you realize you're threatening to push the club away because you're mad at me, right? Do you hear how ridiculous this is?"

TK gives him a look that tells him the words may not have been the wisest choice. "Colt..."

"You're the club. They're the club. I need space from you. Real, defined space. I have to deal with everything that's happened and figure out how to move forward with my life with the best interest of my kids in mind. For once, the club isn't coming first. Not for me. It's the most important thing to you, so you do you. I'll do me."

"You need the club, babe. Don't act like you don't," he says with a chuckle. She's lost her fucking mind.

"I don't need the club," she says with a laugh. "I needed you. And you weren't there. You've had me running through everything that's happened the past year on a loop and questioning everything. The shit with Diane is just the icing on the cake."

He growls and lets out a deep breath to calm himself. This is fucking stupid. "Okay, I didn't tell the whole truth about why I was out in Black Valley so much because I didn't think you'd understand. I wasn't messing around with Diane, and I didn't stop caring about you or our family. Don't blow things out of proportion."

VP cracks his knuckles. "Watch your tone, Colton."

"I don't believe you," she says, her voice even yet still quiet.

Her eyes still refuse to meet his, and he feels an uneasy feeling settle in his gut. This isn't good. "Lex-"

“You don’t see me when you look at me anymore. I’ve become invisible, and it’s not a place I want to be. That’s not fair to me, Colt. For the first time, I understand exactly how Lily felt all those years ago. Except instead of it being my father and my cousin, it’s my father, my brother, and my husband.”

“And having you gone with no way to reach you or my kids is fair to me?”

Her hands shake as she crosses her arms under her chest and hugs her waist. “You don’t get to play the victim when you created this. You haven’t cared about us enough to call in days. I still have access to the phone bill to see there wasn’t a single attempt for almost thirty-six hours. You didn’t answer my calls, and even when I texted you that night, you ignored me. I could have been bleeding, dying on the ground, and you wouldn’t have known for three whole days.”

“Stop being dramatic, Alexis. You think this means you have the right to take my kids away without a way to get in touch with them?”

“You have them all weekend. You don’t need to contact me because they’ll be with you. The only reason you want communication now is because it’s not on your terms. I’m done being a doormat.”

“You’re not a doormat. Jesus, just come home with me so we can talk without everyone around. Let Karmen keep the kids, and we can have a conversation. You can yell and scream and hit me if you want. We’ll figure this out.”

“I don’t want to scream and yell and fight. All I’ve done for months is fight, and I’m done. It’s so damn exhausting, and I’m so tired. I’m tired, Colt, and I can’t do this anymore.”

His eyes lock with his father’s. Lex not wanting to fight speaks volumes she’ll never say. His girl is nothing but fight. “Lex, come on. Stop being like this. We’ve hit a rough patch, but it’s nothing we can’t come back from.”

“Yes, it is.”

Pride kicks in, and he crosses his arms over his chest. “I’m not going to beg you to come back.”

“Like I begged you? Trust me, I didn’t expect you would.”

Grinding his teeth, anger washes over him. “Stop this! Come home, and we’ll talk. We’ll be fine. I love you.”

Her lips tremble as she looks at the ground. “I don’t believe you. And that hurts worst of all.”

“You don’t believe I love you?” His arms drop to rest at his side, and he takes a step back. He couldn’t have heard that right.

“No, I don’t,” she whispers. “I have to go. I’ll be here to pick the kids up on Sunday around five. If you need to go to Black Valley, just let Karmen know. I’ll be checking in with her. Calla has had a cough for a few days, but she hasn’t been running a fever. There’s cough medicine in the cabinet if you need it.”

He watches her damn near run to her car and get in. She doesn’t even glance in their direction as she backs out and takes off. There’s no doubt about it: He’s fucked.

“Colt, what the fuck did you do?” TK asks.

“Nothing that can’t be fixed,” he says, but even he doesn’t know if he believes the words. “We’ll figure it out. We always do.”

Just as he turns to walk towards the house, VP grabs his arm and whips him back around. “She didn’t fight you, Colt. The only time that woman ever stops fighting is when she gives up. And she doesn’t give up easily. Especially when it comes to you.”

“We’ll figure it out, okay? Relax. I’d appreciate it if you keep this to yourselves for now. I don’t want to make a big deal out of something that’s going to be a non-issue in a few days.”

“You better figure it out,” his father says. “If she disappears, you’ll regret it for the rest of your life.”

Sighing, he walks inside to get his kids loaded up into his mother's car. This will be a long weekend.

## Chapter 3

*Griffin's Beach*

*Colt*

Colt sits in the clubhouse later that night, his mind a million miles away. Jennings called Church, and Karmen agreed to stay at the house with the kids until it ends.

“Look who decided to show back up,” his best friend, Ky Short, says with a laugh. “Thought you’d up and moved to Black Valley with how much time you’ve been spending there.”

The man’s the only person besides his father who knows him better than he knows himself. Well, and Lex.

“Shit’s been going down,” Colt says as the rest of the men filter into the room.

“You okay? You seem weird.”

Okay? He’s anything but okay. Hasn’t been okay since the night Casey died, but now it’s different. Calla wouldn’t stop screaming and fighting him when Karmen dropped them off with him at the house. He tried a bottle, tried to feed her mushy baby food, and then tried to entertain her with her toys. Nothing worked. Noah had to come in and take care of her. Maybe Lex was right about their daughter not knowing him. But he had to be gone. Why can’t anyone understand that?

Her cough started after her tantrum, which ended with her throwing up all over herself from crying so hard. He had to fight her to get her cleaned up, and then Noah had to give her the medicine because she refused to take it from him. At least his daughter understands stranger danger, he supposes.

“I’m fine. It’s just been a long day.”

“Are you sure? Because VP looks about ready to murder you.”

He nods towards VP, and Colt sighs. Jesus Christ. It’s been four hours. He clearly expects miracles. Part of him hates

the fact Lex left, but the other part is pissed at how she's overreacting. She doesn't understand anything that's going on. The obligation he feels. If she realized, maybe things would be different.

*How the fuck is she supposed to know when you never talk to her?* Noah's voice echoes in his mind, and he wishes the ghost of his brother living in his head would materialize so he could punch him in what he's sure would be his smug fucking face.

"Holy shit, Colt Nichols does still belong to this charter," Jennings Molloy, the President, says and gasps. "Thought maybe we transferred you, and I'd just forgotten about the paperwork."

"Ha ha, very funny. Anyone else want to make comments?"

A few of the men laugh and shoot jabs at him, but for the most part, it dies down quickly. They walk into the Chapel, and he focuses on Jennings and the reason he called Church.

"We've been having problems with the Puffy Taco," he says.

Colt went to the grand opening, but otherwise, he forgot all about the strip club they purchased. Taylor "Shep" Shepherd's girlfriend, Heidi, runs it. And she knows about the business after being the most sought after stripper who won over Shep's heart.

"What's going on?" he asks. He hasn't heard much about the Puffy Taco other than the few snippets that reached Black Valley. And all center around what the dancers do on and off stage.

"Christian's been causing problems," Shep says, his dark hair a little too long and falling in his face. "First, he blocked permits and our liquor license, and then he and a few of his boys got them and a few of our guys arrested. He's trespassed at the club, but that hasn't stopped him from sending men to harass the dancers."

Christian something-or-other owns the Clam Bake over in Riverview. He used to be friends with Shep until Heidi and he started dating. Then she stopped dancing and bringing in the money he'd come to expect. His attitude caused some of his best dancers to leave and join the Puffy Taco, adding fuel to the fire already burning bright. Never stopped to think he was part of the problem. Typical.

"We gotta figure out what to do to keep that motherfucker from messing with our girls again," Tyson Reeves says. He and his best friend, Shep, have recently been reunited.

"Maybe we need to be the security for a while," Jacob "Patriot" Norris offers. "There aren't too many people who are bold enough to fuck with us, especially when we're in a group. And Christian's guys lost to us."

Colt watches the man who replaced Tripp as the fuckboy of the club. Well, Patriot and his buddy, Mack. Now, Patriot dates a daughter of the club and lives happily ever after. Asshole.

Jennings nods. "That's a good idea. Any objections?"

"I think it's a good plan," VP agrees.

The men all shake their heads, and people start volunteering to take shifts with the girls. All eyes turn to him, and he knows he needs to think of something fast. "I'll get back to you. I'm not sure what the plan for Black Valley is, and I think Lex was talking about visiting her mom in Arizona. She'd probably take Calla, but Noah would stay with me."

TK narrows his eyes and shares a glance with VP across the table, but both keep their mouths shut. Even he's surprised at the ease with which the lie slid off his tongue, but he keeps a straight face.

"Just let us know," Shep says. "We'll always take an extra man."

A few other pieces of business hit the table, but it doesn't take long. They filter into the main room, and rather



than sit down to have a drink like he wants desperately to, he starts to head towards the door. Vodka and trying to wrangle Calla wouldn't be a great combination.

“Hey, Colt?” Felicity, Ky's wife, calls out. Her long, dark hair wraps in a large bun on the top of her head as she tilts her head to look at him. “Where's Lex?”

“She's, uh, she's at home,” he says.

Shep's shoulders sag. “Damn, I wish she was here. She'd probably have a good idea to help fuck with Christian.”

“What's going on?” Felicity asks.

Ky wraps his arm around his wife. “The owner of the Clam Bake just started causing waves with the Puffy Taco. Nothing we can't handle, but it's extra shit we don't need with everything going on in Black Valley right now.”

“Yeah, this would kind of be Lex's bread and butter, right?” Melanie asks as Jace Conway pulls her into his lap. Her large, fake breasts barely fit in the tight tank top, providing even more cleavage than normal. Or maybe Colt's just been so far removed to remember.

The woman also stares at him with expectation, and he shifts uncomfortably. Does she know? Has Lex talked to her? He wants to pull her aside and ask, but if she doesn't know, he can't trust she'll keep her mouth shut. Not for him.

“I forgot to tell her I was coming home, and Karmen has plans tonight. We couldn't get a sitter in time.”

Ky narrows his eyes at him, and he needs to get out of there before he can't talk his way out of the questions they're throwing him. He knows he's building suspicion, and that only leads to more questions he can't answer. Not yet.

“Gracie would love to watch the kids. Yours are the best behaved kids in the club,” Felicity says. “Actually, why don't I call Lex and have her bring the kids to our house? She can come join us for a drink. It feels like forever since I've seen her.”

She really hasn't been at the clubhouse. Panic sets in. She won't answer if she calls his wife because she no longer has a phone. That he knows of. "Her phone has been on the fritz since she replaced the one that broke. Besides, we could use some family time together tonight. I'm gonna head home now."

"I haven't seen Lex in a hot minute," Heidi says and looks up at her man. "Have you?"

He shakes his head as he plays with the ring on her finger. Did Shep finally pop the question to the woman he's been head over heels with since he saw her dance on that pole? Wait, did Lex tell him that? It sounds familiar.

"Did you two get engaged?" he asks before he can stop himself.

The older man looks at him with confusion. "Lex didn't tell you?"

Shit. "She did. I'm sorry. Things have been so hectic, I couldn't tell you what I had for lunch today. Or even if I ate lunch today."

"Yeah, we got engaged a few months ago," Heidi says.

"I don't actually remember the last time I saw Lex, now that I think about it. God, that's weird," Felicity says.

Lily Hankinson turns on the barstool in her signature pencil skirt. The other daughter of the club married to a brother looks at him, and he knows she knows exactly where Lex is.

"The last time she was here was when she broke Kandi's nose," she says and takes a sip of her drink.

"Oh, yeah, that was great," Heidi says. "Blood everywhere. That was, what? Four months ago?"

Who the fuck is Kandi? He looks around, trying to spot anyone who looks like she may have disdain for the curly blonde, but he comes up empty.

"More like six."

“Jesus, has it really been that long?” Felicity asks. “Is she okay?”

Lily turns and looks at Colt. “Yeah, Colt. Is Lex okay?”

She definitely knows, and he shoves his hands into his pockets. “Yeah, she’s good. She’s just been busy with me in Black Valley so much. And you know, two kids. Lily, can I talk to you for a second?”

The woman shrugs and stands, walking into the Chapel in her three-inch heels. “What can I help you with, Colt?”

“Where is she?” he asks as soon as he shuts the door.

“Who?” Her head tilts to the side, and she gives him big doe eyes.

Damned daughters of the club. “You know who. Where’s my wife staying?”

“I thought you said she was at home with the kids.”

“Cut the shit, Lily. Where’s Lex staying?”

“I don’t know.”

“Bullshit.”

Shrugging, she walks towards the door, but he grabs her arm and turns her to face him. “Tell me.”

“Get your hands off me, or I’ll open that door and call my husband in here to beat your ass. And once I tell Melanie what you’ve done to make your wife leave you in the dust, she’ll send Jace in to help. Considering how many of those men out there love the woman you’ve neglected and treated like garbage, I wouldn’t be surprised if you find yourself unable to walk for a long ass time.”

“I deserve to know where she is.”

“No, you don’t. She deserved to have the husband she married, not the man who made her feel two fucking inches tall. If Phoenix treated me the way you treat her, there wouldn’t be a year of figuring shit out. I would be gone the first time I had to question whether he was honest with me.”

“Lily, she’s taken my kids.”

Narrowing her eyes, she rips her arm from his hand. “Well, considering you have the kids this weekend, that’s another lie. Man, they just roll off the tongue, don’t they? And second, you haven’t known where she or your kids have been for months. You don’t get to play the concerned father now. I’m not saying shit to anyone because she asked me not to. To let it play out and let you tell them about the separation, but I swear to God, I’ll ask for forgiveness if you try this shit with me again.”

Running his hands over his face, he leans on the table. “I didn’t fuck that bunny.”

“I’m not the one you need to convince.”

“She won’t talk to me, so I don’t exactly have many fucking options!”

“Not my problem, Colt. I’m the attorney for the club, but at the end of the day, if it comes down to you or her, I’m with her. All the way. She’s my ride or die. The one person other than Phoenix I’d call if I murdered someone.”

He watches her walk out of the room, and the anger courses through him. Of course. He should have known better and feels stupid for even asking.

“Colt,” Jennings says from the doorway. “Talk to Lex about the Puffy Taco. See if she has any ideas.”

“I don’t know if she has much time to be involved with the club right now. Calla is sick, and I haven’t been home much-”

“We need her. Figure something out.”

Goddamn it.

## Chapter 4

*Griffin's Beach*

*Colt*

Exhausted, Colt steps into the clubhouse Monday evening after spending the entire weekend with the kids. Saying it was harder than he thought it would be is an understatement. Figuring out what they like and don't like, and the words 'that's not how Mama does it' came out of his son's mouth so many times he could have started a drinking game and been blacked out by Saturday night.

Calla just started to warm up to him by the time Karmen came to pick them up. The house is a disaster, and his chest hurt more and more every time Noah asked where Mama was. Like usual, he lied. Clearly, Lex hadn't told him about the separation enough for him to understand. Since she made this decision, she can explain it.

He got a taste of what she must've gone through with Noah asking for his other parent. Only, he never asked if she still loved him and his sister. It didn't hit him until this weekend just how much he really missed out on, and the reasons for being gone all the time don't hold as much merit now.

After Karmen left, he stood in the doorway and watched his kids leave. His heart broke as he watched the car drive away into the distance until he couldn't see it anymore, but he refuses to accept this as his new normal. His wife will come home. He'll make sure of it.

"Didn't take the trip out to Black Valley?" Ky asks and sits next to him at the bar. "Finally decided it was time to spend the entire weekend alone with your wife, huh? Let me guess... brought the kids to Karmen's and got reacquainted with Lex? All. Weekend. Long."

Even his best friend saw he pulled away from his wife. How the hell did he not recognize it?

*Because you're a stubborn asshole.*

Colt grits his teeth. The voice belongs to Casey this time, not Noah. It doesn't stop him from wanting to punch the air.

"No, I spent the weekend with the kids," he says, deciding not to lie. Not tell the whole truth, but not lying.

"That's good, too," he says with a smile. "That little girl must have you wrapped around her little finger. Gracie still does me."

She does, but she has no idea because she doesn't know him. "Yeah."

"You okay?"

"I'm fine," he says. "Just a long weekend. Calla is sick, and I need a drink."

The prospect behind the bar, Jeff, gives him a smile. Definitely a newbie. "What's your poison?"

"Vodka."

"And?"

"Just vodka."

"Ice?"

He shakes his head, closing his eyes. "It just makes my teeth cold when the ice hits them."

The glass sets down in front of him, and a large hand slams down on top of it as he grabs it to take a drink. "What the fuck happened?"

"What are you doing?" he asks. "I'm trying to drink that."

"You only drink this shit when things are fucked up. This also usually helps you fuck things up even more, and you'd stopped. I heard you were drinking in Black Valley, but I would have to, too, in order to get through out there. So, what happened?"

Knowing he won't let him drink it, he sighs and looks towards the Chapel. "Not here."

They walk towards the room before the others notice the scene Ky caused, and VP glares at him as they pass. Jesus Christ.

"Well, I'd say your father-in-law has to know based on the fact he still looks like he wants to make Klaire an only child," Ky says and closes the door. "What's going on?"

"Lex left me."

His face deadpans. "That's not funny."

Colt sits in the chair usually reserved for Diesel, facing Jennings's seat at the head of the table. Leaning back, he rests his hands behind his head. "Tell me about it. I spent the weekend with the kids because that's my time with them. I can have them whenever I want, but she felt she had to force the time."

"Where is she?"

"I don't fucking know. She won't tell me. Left her phone and both trackers from the car on the kitchen table the night she left. The only communication I have with her is through Karmen. Of all fucking people, she chose Karmen!"

Ky sits in the seat to his left and faces him. "What happened? Lex wouldn't wake up one day and decide to leave you. The girl would legitimately die for you. And I know without a doubt she'd kill for you. Already has."

"She's blown things so out of proportion, man. Yes, I'll own my part with not being around that much lately, but shit's been going on. I thought she, of all the women, would understand that, but apparently not. And now she's using it against me for other shit."

Narrowing his eyes, he shakes his head. "I don't know what the fuck you're talking about, Colt. What other shit?"

"You know that bunny, Diane?"

"Their VP's step-daughter, right? Or someone's step-daughter?"

“Yeah. Apparently, she’s been sending texts to Lex and calling her and shit.”

Leaning his chin forward, he stares expectedly. “And?”

“Telling her all this shit about how she’s fucking me and plans to take me away from her and the kids.”

“You didn’t,” he says, leveling him with a knowing look.

“No!” he shouts and stands, turning his back to his best friend. “No! But she sent a fucking letter to Lex talking about how she wanted to tell her woman to woman I’m hers now. That I’ve been wanting to leave for a while, but I wasn’t sure she was strong enough to handle it and shit. Which, let’s be real. That’s complete fucking bullshit for anyone who knows Lex.”

His best friend leans back and stares at him. “Colt, this isn’t adding up. Lex would fight.”

“She sent a bunch of pictures. Most of them were her sitting next to me or telling a joke in my ear or something. The bitch hangs all over me. Sure, I like the attention a bit because at home it’s all kids all the time. But I never touched her!”

“We’re still not quite at the point where two plus two equals four, bud.”

“One night, I got completely shitfaced. I don’t know that I even knew my own name. She helped me to Psycho’s room to sleep it off, and she stripped me down. Took a picture of me and said it was the first night we had sex. Along with that, there was a sonogram with her name on it.”

Pushing his chair back, it scrapes along the floor, and the sound makes Colt cringe. “But you said you-”

“I didn’t fuck her!” he shouts, whipping around to face Ky. “I never even got close to it. Haven’t even kissed the woman.”

“You don’t really have to kiss them to-”

“Fuck you! The closest I got was that night she took that picture. And trust me, I couldn’t have fucked her if I tried.



I was about three shots away from needing my goddamned stomach pumped. I wasn't getting anything up other than the contents in my stomach. Which was most of a bottle of vodka."

Ky's cheeks balloon as he slowly blows air and contemplates everything he just heard. "Okay, I get that it looks bad. But Lex wouldn't just leave because of that. She'd drop the kids off with Karmen, drive to Black Valley, and murder that bitch."

"That's where being in Black Valley gets thrown in my face. Apparently, we're broken. We're not on the same page, and she doesn't believe me. Told me she doesn't believe me when I told her I loved her. The fucking nerve of her!"

"Colt, there are still pieces missing. This isn't Lex. And this isn't you. If Lex left you a year ago, you'd be a lost puppy doing whatever you needed to get her back. Instead, you're more pissed than upset."

He paces and shakes out his arms. It does almost nothing to rid him of the anger, but he has to do something. Anything. "She just needs to cool down, and she'll come to her senses. That's why I'm not telling anyone yet. I want to save her the embarrassment of coming back and having to face everyone."

Ky stares at him with narrowed eyes. "Who the hell are you? And did you forget who your wife was? Giving her time alone is the absolute worst thing for you right now. Her mind will be made up, and you won't be able to talk her out of anything."

Colt's phone rings, and he pulls it out to see an unknown number. "Hello?"

"Colt?"

"Lex?"

"Everything is fine, but Calla is in the urgent care clinic. She spiked a fever I couldn't get to come down, and she stopped eating. Was she fussy at all this weekend?"

At all? Try the entire fucking weekend. “Yeah, but I figured it was because you weren’t around,” he says and puts his phone on speaker when Ky moves close enough to dance cheek to cheek. “But I checked for a fever, and she didn’t have one.”

“When was the last time you gave her medicine?”

“I gave her a dose of the cough syrup on Friday night, but nothing after that.”

“Okay, that helps. Thanks.”

“I’m on my way.”

She sighs. “No, stay where you are. I’ll call you if they say it’s something more serious and have you stop by.”

Running his hand over his face, he closes his eyes. “She’s my daughter, Lex.”

“I know she is. But I need her to stay calm. Noah said she wasn’t your biggest fan most of the weekend. I’ll call you and let you know what happens. I’m hoping they’ll just give me a prescription and send us on our way. You won’t need to waste a trip.”

“It’s not a wasted trip,” he growls.

She hangs up, and Ky stares at him with wide eyes. His face says everything he needs to know.

“She fucking told me to stay away from my daughter’s side at the goddamned clinic.”

“I don’t know what to say, man, but that’s not the woman I know. It sounds like the version of her who caught you getting blown by Eva. This ain’t good.”

He sighs and shakes his head. “This is so fucking stupid. She just needs to calm down.”

“That *was* calm.”

“She wouldn’t even look at me when I showed up at Karmen’s at drop off. I had to lie my ass off on Friday when everyone was talking about her because I’m trying to protect

her. She's giving up on the club, too. Or so she says, but I don't think she can hold on to that for too long."

"Fuck," he groans. "And you've told me everything? Because these things don't all add up."

Looking away, he pauses for a moment. "We stopped having sex."

"And you weren't cheating?"

"For fuck's sake!" he shouts and throws his hands in the air. "No!"

"Dude, don't jump down my throat. The two of you would go at it like damned rabbits. If you aren't getting it from your wife, it's a logical fucking question."

Shaking his head, he punches the wall. "I'm going to the fucking clinic. She's not keeping me away from my kids."

"Colt, I don't think that's a good-"

He runs out before Ky can finish the statement, but he hears his best friend's heavy boots clomping after him to his own bike.

## Chapter 5

*Griffin's Beach*

*Lex*

Alexis Nichols holds her daughter, Calla, close to her chest and is plagued with guilt. If she hadn't left her daughter alone with Colt all weekend, maybe she would've been able to see how sick she was sooner. Now she's hooked up to an IV to replenish fluids and give her antibiotics.

"Is she okay, Mama?" Noah asks, his green eyes wide and filled with worry.

"She'll be fine, buddy," she says and winks at him.

"I tried to help Daddy with her. She didn't like him for a long time."

Tears sting her eyes, but she blinks them away. How did everything get this messed up so quickly? No, not quickly. It's been a year. But this has gone so far off course that the path to get back has overgrown to the point she can't even see it anymore.

She can't fault Colt for thinking her fussiness stemmed from how unfamiliar he is to her. That was probably part of it. Maybe the added stress contributed to her illness. And she feels guilty for all of it.

The doctor came in and hooked up an IV to her baby, she nestles into her mother's arms as Noah reads them a story. Calla stays focused on her big brother, and Lex feels grateful for her little man. He stepped up and took care of his little sister this weekend. Just like he's helping her now. And she's so happy he's the big brother she always wished she had growing up.

Dr. West walks into the room. "I'm prescribing a dose of antibiotics to help flush this out. Just make sure to watch her fluid intake, and she'll be fine. The biggest issue right now is how dehydrated she is. Her fever's gone down, and she took the IV like a champ."

He's not unfamiliar with Lex or the rest of the club. He's helped stitch them up so often, she's pretty sure they paid for the braces of all three kids. Maybe even helped build up the college funds. She's just happy to have a friendly face. "Thank you."

"No problem, Mrs. Nichols. I'll send the prescription to the pharmacy, and you'll be good to go in a bit here."

After he leaves, Noah takes over his job as storyteller again, and Lex leans back to take a deep breath. Part of her wishes Colt was here, but the other part of her feels relief to be without him. Once upon a time, he was one of the only people who brought her any type of solace.

*You have to get used to not having him here all the time. This is your life now.* Who's she kidding? He wasn't even here when he was at home.

She stayed at the hotel all weekend and spent most of the time crying alone in that big bed. No matter how many nights she spent without Colt, she'll never get used to sleeping alone. It's not something she ever expected to have to do again, and it's lonely. But at the end of the day, she was lonelier around him than without. It's time to move on.

Using the phone on the desk, she calls him to let him know what Dr. West said. It rings and rings before she hears his voicemail. Her heart sinks.

The part that kills her more than anything is the lack of surprise. If she's honest, the fact he answered the first time shocked her. But she did kind of expect his concern for his daughter to keep him waiting for her call and watching the phone like she used to wait for his.

He's probably on his way to Black Valley already. Maybe to see Diane. *That's not your concern anymore.*

The nurse comes in to remove the IV. The little girl stays asleep in her arms, and she feels the full weight of everything. She needs to find a new home to settle in and get the kids back into a routine. The only goal on her mind consists of finding a comfortable place for them.

Noah clings to her leg as they walk out of the room, Calla heavy in her arms, but she's too afraid to wake her by shifting. Instead, she just suffers through the ache in her muscles. Having Colt here to help her carry all of this, literally and figuratively, would be helpful in a perfect world, but she knows if he were here her anxiety and stress would have skyrocketed more than it already has. The newest addition to her ever-changing life comes in the form of anxiety she never possessed before, and she struggles to deal with it.

The sound of loud boots down the hallway catches her attention, and she instinctively freezes. She'd know the sounds of those boots anywhere, and all breath leaves her when her eyes land on her estranged husband.

"There you are!" Colt shouts.

Noah holds his finger to his lips. "Shh. The baby's sleeping," he says, his voice quiet.

"I just tried calling you," she says as Ky rounds the corner with him. Based on the look he gives her, Colt's told him what happened. His version, anyway.

"I was driving here," he says. "I didn't hear it."

Shifting Calla gently, she looks down at their youngest. "She's okay. We needed an IV to get fluids in her, and her fever's down. I just have to pick up her antibiotics, and she'll be fine."

Seeing Colt wasn't in her plan for the day, and she knows she looks terrible. Her greasy hair sits in a pile on the top of her head like it permanently does these days. It's been two days since she's had a decent shower, and she needs makeup. The bags under her eyes show just how little sleep she gets, and she can feel the puffiness from crying for two days straight. She looks freaking amazing. No wonder he wanted to stay away.

"But she's good?" Ky asks, his eyes darting between the two of them with his conclusions clearly written on his face.

"Yeah, she'll be fine."

“Need help loading her into the car?” Colt asks.

Giving him a small smile, she refuses to look directly into his eyes. If she does, she’ll surely break. “No, I’ve got it. Got used to it a while ago.”

As much as she didn’t want to sound bitter, she couldn’t stop herself. No matter what he says or offers now, he spent so much time away from them she got used to being a single parent. The words have an effect on Colt as he leans backwards.

“Sorry,” she says. “I’m running on no sleep, and it just came out.”

“I get it,” he says and places his hands in his pockets. “I was gone a lot. But I don’t like the fact you’re acting like you’re a single mother when you’re fucking married.”

Noah points at him. “No swearing at Mama!”

Her eyes widen and look down at her little man. “Noah-”

“No, Mama, that’s a bad word. No bad words to Mama.”

Ky holds back a laugh by disguising it terribly as a cough and turns away. Colt stares at him in shock. “What’d you just say?”

“You heard me. Be nice to Mama. She’s always nice to us. Even when we aren’t nice to her.”

“You’re telling your father what to do?” He kneels down in front of him and gives him a hard stare.

Crossing his arms over his chest, he stands tall in defiance. “I’m the man of the house, and it’s my job to protect Mama and baby Calla.”

“Noah Nash Nichols, you will respect me as your father.”

“Daddy, you will be nice to Mama.”

“Now you listen here-”

“Back off, Colt,” Lex says, her voice stronger than she’s felt in months. “Your issues are with me, not him. I’m tired, our daughter’s not exactly light these days, and I just want to go and get everyone fed and lie down to sleep.”

He stands and looks down at their son before looking at her. “Go back to the house. Let the kids sleep in their own beds.”

“No.”

“No? You’re so headstrong and stubborn that you’re willing to deprive our daughter of the comforts she’s used to when she just had an IV in her?”

The nerve of this man. “We’re not living in a cardboard box down by the river. Our children are not uncomfortable by any means. And yes, I’m going to stand by my word because you can’t keep yours. If I could trust you to stay away and not show up, I might consider it. But you won’t. And we need space.”

“Lex, what if I promise to make sure he stays at the clubhouse?” Ky offers.

He’s Colt’s best friend, but it still stings to know where his loyalties lie. “You’re going to chain him up to his bed in the apartment and take the key with you? There’s no way in hell you’re going to be able to keep him there.”

They eye Noah who has no issue with “hell.” Or at least his mother saying it.

“I won’t come by the house tonight, I promise.”

Laughing, she looks at the ceiling. “I wish you could understand that your word means nothing. Don’t you get it? You’ve made so many promises, and you’ve broken more than you’ve kept. If you’ve even kept any. I don’t believe a word you say for a second.”

“It’s for my kids. I’ll stay away to make sure they get a good night’s sleep. Regardless of what you think of me, I’m a good father. I’d die for these children.”



She lets out a deep breath to calm herself. This is not the time for this conversation. “I don’t question that you love them. And I know you’d take a bullet for either of them. It’s the rest of the things they need you can’t seem to commit to. That you just can’t do.”

“Just admit it. You think I’m a shitty father!”

“Stop it!” Noah shouts. “Leave Mama alone!”

“Noah, I swear to God, I’ll bend you over my knee right here.”

She steps in front of her son and shifting to hold Calla protectively against her chest. “No, the hell you won’t. Go, Colt. I didn’t want you for this exact reason. I need space. There needs to be a period of time where we don’t see each other or have contact with each other because I have a lot of shit to get squared away to figure out how exactly I move forward. You’re not willing to see things from any other perspective than the one your pride feels hurt by, so there’s nothing that will come out of any conversation. But so help me God, if you ever threaten our child again, I’ll take these kids away so fast.”

“You think you can take my kids away?” he growls. “That I won’t find you?”

Pointing up, she smirks, finally making eye contact with him. “Those cameras are all I need to get a restraining order and rights from a judge to disappear with these kids. Our marriage may be over, but I will fight you to the death for them if you make me. And I *will* win. Trust me, it’s in your best interest to get your shit in line.”

Turning back to Ky, he steps backwards. “You’re threatening the entire club?”

“If it protects my son, you bet your ass I’ll do whatever it takes. Any mother in this club would. You may have put the club before your family, but I haven’t. And I never will. They are my life, and it’s my job to protect them at all costs. I just never thought you’d be someone I need to protect them from.”

“Lex-”

“Colt, let’s just let them go. Calla needs medicine, and this isn’t getting you anywhere. You’re not in the right frame of mind to have this conversation,” Ky says.

He allows his best friend to pull him aside, but the angry glare doesn’t get missed by her. She leads Noah out of the clinic, her entire body aching. That isn’t the man she married, and this isn’t what she expected of them. But this is the new reality, and she needs to learn how to move forward for her babies. No matter how much it feels like she’s dying inside.

## Chapter 6

*Griffin's Beach*

*Karmen*

Karmen sits outside the Deranged Drifters clubhouse, her heart pounding. This used to be a sanctuary, but since her affair with Rush Gable, she's been persona non grata unless something terrible happens. She and TK rarely speak anymore unless it has to do with Klaire, and even then, they speak as little as possible.

Seeing his bike in the parking lot, she takes a few deep breaths to calm herself. He hates her, and she can't blame him. Her desperate attempts at attention followed by trying to hurt him cost them something they never expected. The loss of her youngest son, Noah. He's never forgiven her, and she doesn't want him to. She hasn't forgiven herself, either, and she never will.

But regardless of how he feels about her, they need to talk about this situation with Colt and Lex. Their marriage crumbled, but the two of them are destined for each other. The same way she and TK were before she screwed everything up. On top of that, their two grandchildren are the ones who will feel it most. They owe it to their grandbabies to do everything in their power to help.

She steps out of the car and walks to the clubhouse, taking one last breath to calm her nerves, and opens the front door. Nothing much has changed since she last stepped foot inside years ago, but it feels more like a lifetime ago.

"Karmen?" Jennings asks, the surprise evident in his voice. His hair still hangs just below his shoulders in dark brown strands, but the color at his temples has grayed while his hairline recedes slightly. They're all getting older it seems. One day they woke up and bam! Age caught up with them.

"Hey, Jennings. Is TK around?"

He looks back towards the apartments. “I think he’s back there, but I’m not sure if he’s alone. Is everything okay?”

“I just really need to talk to him.”

The thought of him with another woman, or women based on what she’s been told, still stings, but she knows she has no right to feel anything resembling anger. She’s the reason they’re in the situation they are. Regardless of her intentions, what she did with Rush was intentional and malicious, and she knew better.

Even though Rush knew what he was doing when he got involved with her, she took the brunt of the consequences. He just really wanted to give TK a giant “fuck you” because of the hatred he had. She never understood why, and he never offered a reason. As far as she knew, the two had once been friends.

Her stupid actions took the most precious thing from her. Her son. She still remembers getting the call about Noah. Rushing to the hospital, she prayed it wasn’t as bad as it sounded. That he’d need surgery or a lengthy recovery time, but she knew he’d make it. When she showed up to find him hooked up to machines, she fell apart. She was alone, and her youngest son laid in a hospital bed relying on machines to live all because she wanted to hurt her husband.

The tests came back and proved her worst fear. He’d never wake up. Without the machines, he wouldn’t live. He broke his neck so severely, the damage was unfixable, and he had severe bleeding in his brain they couldn’t get under control. There was no coming back from this injury, and she’s never felt this type of pain in her life.

Karmen knew she didn’t deserve it, but TK was there for her when they pulled the plug on their boy. He was vulnerable for the first time in years. They’d both lost their son that night, and the two put their differences aside as he went home with her and Klaire.

No one knows they spent the night together. Both consumed with grief, they found comfort the only way they could provide each other. It was the first time in so long, and

she almost let herself believe they could come back from everything bad that happened. That they could find their way back to each other in face of grief.

By the next morning, TK was gone, and he never came back. She wasn't surprised, but it hurt. This was the man she'd been in love with since she was sixteen, and she will never stop loving him. He stopped loving her, though, and she can't blame him. She stopped loving herself, too.

"Karmen?" TK asks, his footsteps heavy as he hurries over to her. Concern fills his voice, and for a single moment, she pretends it's out of concern for her. Just one moment.

"Klaire's okay," she assures him. "But we need to talk."

His bushy brows furrow as he leads her into the Chapel. They rarely speak, and she knows showing up at the clubhouse would put him on edge. The last time she was in this room, though, was with Rush when Colt and Lex caught them, and she suppresses the urge to vomit. The only saving grace is the scent of TK's familiar cologne filling the small space near her.

"What's wrong?"

"We need to talk about Colt and Lex."

Dumbfounded. It's the only way to describe the look he gives her as he sits down. "What about them?"

She sits down in the seat next to him on his right. "We need to do something. Well, you need to do something."

"What the hell am I supposed to do?"

"Talk some sense into your son!" she cries. "He's not himself. Something's going on with him, and he's taking it out on Lex and his kids."

Shaking his head, he leans back in the chair. "He's a grown ass man. He's in his mid-thirties. What the fuck am I supposed to do? Threaten to bend him over my knee and smack him with a belt? I don't think he's gonna be too worried."

“He’s doing to Lex what you did to me,” she says, her voice low. “The only difference is that Lex had the sense to leave instead of doing something stupid to get his attention like I did with you.”

“This is my fault now?”

“Jesus, no. I’m just saying, you are two peas in a pod. You act alike. You think alike. Hell, he’s basically the younger version of you. You know how he thinks, and you’ll know what to say to snap him out of this shitstorm he’s creating.”

He laughs at her and places his hands on his head. “Oh, that’s good, Karmen.”

“What?”

“How do you know this isn’t also Lex’s fault? That she isn’t just upset because he needed to do things for the club, and she felt neglected. I mean, that’s what happened to you, didn’t it? You felt like you weren’t getting the attention you deserved, so you stepped out on me. Cost us our son.”

“Don’t you dare go there, TK,” she warns. “Don’t you dare.”

Leaning forward, his fist pounds on the top of the table. “Tell me I’m wrong.”

“I blame myself every fucking day, okay? Is that what you want to hear? That I miss our son so much I feel like I shouldn’t be on this earth anymore, but I drag my ass out of bed and make the best of what I have. Are you happy? Huh? Are you happy now?”

His face pales. “What did you just say?”

“I just said a lot of fucking things,” she says with a deflated sigh and leans back in the chair. “What part are you confused on?”

“You don’t think you should be on this earth anymore? You want to kill yourself?”

She lets out a shaky breath. “If I could trade places with Noah, I would. In a heartbeat. It’s my fault, and I know it. Rather than being strong like Lex is, I tried to get your

attention and played with fire. I knew what I was doing, but I didn't care. I wanted to hurt you. At that point, you didn't seem to see me anymore, and any reaction felt like winning. Even if it was hatred."

Rubbing his hand over his face, he leans back. "You didn't answer my question, Karmen."

"I know it would be easier for you if I was gone, but no, I don't need you to put me on suicide watch. Our daughter needs me. Besides, she's becoming a sassy handful you wouldn't be able to handle on your own. God, she's so much like me as a teenager, I don't blame my mother for threatening to kick my ass out."

He licks his lips. "I've gotten a taste of her attitude, and I have a feeling I'm gonna be scaring off a lot of boys."

"Yeah, probably," she says with a laugh. "But something's going on with Colt. I saw it in his face when he came over after he found them gone. Whatever it is pushed him to this point with his family. He wasn't devastated like he should have been. Pissed. He was pissed."

He shakes his head. "I don't agree with you. Lex isn't strong for walking away. Sure, she's not out screwing another member of the club, but she should have fought. Stayed and fought until they got back on track."

"You can't fight for a marriage on your own. Believe me, I tried. And you know Lex better than I do. You really believe that woman just decided one day things were too hard and to walk away? She loves our son with more passion than anyone I've ever seen. She loves him like I love-loved-you," she says, catching herself.

"That's how you felt? That you were fighting for our marriage alone?"

Tears fill her eyes. "This isn't about us. We haven't been us for too long, but he's following in your footsteps. He pushed Lex away, and she couldn't take it anymore. Missed her birthday. Then their anniversary. He didn't show up for Noah's birthday party, and then he didn't even remember

Calla's. God, when I see her, I feel her pain. I've felt that same pain, but I think hers is worse."

"Jesus, he really missed all that? And why is her pain worse? Because of the shit that happened with VP and Zane when she was a kid?"

"Because she made the tough decision. I was too weak to make it. If I had, everything would be so different. I took the easy way out. Staying married and being with someone else isn't hard, especially when your husband never comes home. But deciding to leave because you deserve to be treated the way you were when you were first married takes guts. Because what the hell is a former old lady of the club gonna do? Trust me, I deal with that every fucking day."

"What do you think bothers him?"

That's not her job to find out anymore. "I don't know, but when I talked to him, he seemed haunted. Like the weight of the world rests on his shoulders. And he's angry, TK. Really angry. Not just because Lex left, but at the world. If she'd have left him a year ago, he'd be miserable and fighting to get her back, but his pride gets in the way now. He's making so many wrong choices."

"I can see the haunted part, actually. And he does seem angry, but are you sure it's not just because he's pissed his wife up and left for what he thinks is a bullshit reason?"

"He didn't tell you what that twat in Black Valley's been doing, did he?"

Leaning forward on his seat, he rests his elbows on his knees. "He said she's been flirting and trying to fuck him, but he turned her down."

Oh, men like to see what they want to see, don't they? "She started calling Lex. Telling her she was going to take her man. Then she sent her a video of herself sitting on the arm of Colt's seat while he played poker and ignoring Lex's call. Which he did most of the time, by the way. But then she sent the loveliest of care packages."



TK closes his eyes and rubs them with his fists. “Good God, what did she send?”

“A letter telling her how much Colt hates Lex. That he’s in love with her and fucking her every night. How he hates the domesticated life he has with Lex, and that’s why he never answers her calls or comes home. Told her to get prepared to set up a drop off schedule for the kids.”

“That’s not good, but that’s not that bad.”

“There was a picture of Colt completely naked in bed with a note saying it was from the first night they slept together. The bitch knows about his tattoo and what it means. Told Lex that Colt complained about how long it took her to get pregnant with Calla, and that he started to wonder if she was broken. But the real kicker was the sonogram with Diane’s name on it.”

His eyes pop open. “He said he never fucked her.”

“When your man spends more time away from home than with you, especially when they’re as sexually active as we know they were, it’s not hard to question what’s true. Mix that with her knowing his wife’s deepest insecurity on top of the fact he stopped paying any attention to her, it sounds more like the truth than not.”

“I’ll talk to Psycho. He’ll know what’s going on out there. Jennings needs to know what’s going on, and I’ll tell him Colt’s done going out to Black Valley. At least until we get this shit settled.”

Her hand reaches out to touch his, but she pulls it back before making contact. He hasn’t touched her since the night Autumn’s stalker tried to abduct Klaire. “Thanks, TK.”

“I still think Lex should have fought harder.”

“If you look at her, and I mean really look at her, you’ll see she fought as hard as she could for as long as possible. That girl is defeated. And at some point, you have to cut the cord that hurts you, even though it also hurts. I can see this whole situation kills her.”

He shakes his head. “I don’t know.”

“She had to decide which pain was worth it, and she did what I couldn’t. She looked at her daughter and realized she was setting the example of how to allow a man to treat her. And trust me, if a man treats Calla the way Colt’s been treating his wife, he’d murder that motherfucker.”

“Do you feel the same way about me? That I’d kill a man who treats Klaire the way you feel I treated you?”

Swallowing, she looks at the table. “It’s a moot point considering how everything played out. But I’ll tell you I sheltered her from it all. I never let her see the pain I felt when we were together, and I never let her see Rush with me until after you and I split. As far as I know, she never knew he was there.”

“That doesn’t exactly make me feel better.”

“She doesn’t have any examples of how a man should treat her other than the fact she’s a princess. That’s all that matters,” she says. “Thank you for looking into this and possibly talking to Colt. I don’t want what happened with us for them.”

# Chapter 7

*Griffin's Beach*

*Colt*

Colt leans on the bar top with his elbows and faces the front door the following Sunday, much like Lex always used to. It became her signature stance, and he finds it entertaining to do to her what she's done to so many others.

The rest of the club isn't privy to their separation, and he's planning on putting an end to all this bullshit tonight. Tonight, they're going to talk, and they're going to figure out how to move forward. Together. He's done playing games.

His plan has worked perfectly so far. He figured out a way to get Lex to the clubhouse and for her to talk to him. They'll figure out their problems, and she won't be able to run. This has gone on long enough, and she's made her point. It's time to move forward and stop acting like teenagers.

Ky sits down next to him. "Why do you look so smug?"

"I came up with a plan to get Lex to talk to me. And to get her into the clubhouse like everyone's been asking for," he says, his smirk wide.

"You really think all that at one time, in public, is a good idea? I thought you wanted to keep the situation under wraps while you two figured out what you're doing."

"We just need to get into a room and talk things out. That's all."

Signaling for a beer, Ky shakes his head. "You realize whatever plan you came up with is gonna backfire, right? Your plans never actually work."

"Go away with that negativity."

"What's up with you lately, man? You seem different."

He looks at the much larger man with narrowed eyes. “Different how?”

“Like an asshole, honestly. The way you talked to Lex and Noah at the clinic... man, that’s not you. What’s going on?”

“Nothing.” He won’t understand. No one understands.  
*Maybe if you gave them a chance...*

He growls at his brother’s voice as Felicity walks up and wraps her arms around Ky. “Hey, Colt. Woah, what’s with the growl?”

“Nothing.”

“Uh, sure, okay. Is Lex coming tonight?”

“Yep, she sure is.” He can’t keep the smirk from his face, and it earns him suspicious looks in return. “I’d give her another five minutes, max.”

“Why does it seem like something bad’s about to happen?”

“Because it is,” Ky says and turns around, pulling his wife to settle between his legs and wrapping his arms around her waist. “It’s going to be really, really bad.”

The front door bursts open, and Lex storms over to him. Something about her looks different, but he can’t place it. She wears sweatpants and a zip up hooded sweatshirt. While she’s still the most beautiful woman he’s ever laid eyes on, something isn’t right.

“Where are my kids, Colt?” Lex demands.

“Don’t you mean *our* kids?”

Felicity looks to Ky with wide eyes. “What’s going on?”

She looks around as the room falls silent. The music stops, as has all conversation around them while everyone stares. “Where are they? We have an arrangement, and Karmen said she didn’t know where the kids are. You weren’t home when she stopped by, and I’m about thirty seconds away

from losing my fucking mind,” she says, turning back towards him.

“They’re with someone we both trust. We need some time alone to talk about everything, and the kids are an excuse. There’s nothing to stop us now.”

“No,” she says, waving a hand in the air. “No, I’m not doing this.”

“You didn’t give me a choice when you made your decision, so I did what I had to do. We’re going to talk, Alexis.”

The room gasps as he uses her full first name, and Felicity steps forward, causing Lex to step back. “What’s happening? Lex, are you okay?”

Melanie stands and walks over to them with concern written on her face. “Lex, baby, what’s wrong?”

“This isn’t how this works,” she whispers to him. “Where are my kids, Colt?”

“They’re at our house for a sleepover,” her half-brother, Zane, says. “Lex, what’s going on?”

“Thank you, Zane. Can you let Lane know I’m on my way to pick them up?”

She turns to leave, but Colt grabs her wrist and turns her back around to face him. Like the night outside Karmen’s house, she yanks it back as though he burns her with his touch. The entire room gasps again. For the first time, he sees the broken woman his mother told him his wife is.

It finally hits him. The reason she looks off is because she’s lost about twenty pounds, and her skin is so pale he can see her veins. Large bags rest under her puffy eyes, and she fights back tears as she avoids looking at him.

“Just let me go, Colt. I don’t want to do this here.”

Again, she makes the decisions, and he gets angry again. “What’s the point of keeping it a secret, then? If you’re not going to talk to me about what’s going on, why don’t we just tell everyone exactly what you did,” he calls.

“Colt,” Ky warns. “Abort. Abort!”

Standing, he faces the room. “The reason my wife needed to find out where our children are is because she left me. We have a fucking custody agreement, and she refuses to talk to me. Won’t let me know where she’s staying with my kids, and we’re communicating through my mother. Of all the fucking people to choose, she chose Karmen.”

“I can find her for you,” Brock Bradshaw says. “If you need.”

Lex looks at the man they’ve both known since grade school, and Colt reads the betrayal wash over her face. It stirs up a strange emotion within him, but he quickly finds it replaced with disdain. The nerve! “She took the tracker off. Both of them. I have no idea where my kids and wife stay, and I get them on the weekends. And she’s pissed because I decided they could have a sleepover with their cousin.”

“You’re a fucking dick, you know that, Colt?” Lily snaps.

Melanie moves towards Lex, but she steps back. “Lex? Talk to us.”

The room stares in silence, no one quite sure what to say. “Stay the fuck out of my marriage. I mean it!”

“Who the fuck do you think you’re talking to?” Phoenix Hankinson asks, standing to get in Colt’s face.

“You realize how fucking stupid that sounds, right? Because had you actually been a part of your marriage, this conversation wouldn’t even be happening,” Lily says.

“This is a shit thing to do, Colt. Was your goal to embarrass her in front of everyone? Because the only one looking stupid here is you,” Melanie says.

“You don’t know what the hell you’re talking about, either, so shut the fuck up.”

Jace Conway stands to his full six foot six height and wraps an arm around his girl and stares at him with angry, wide eyes. “Watch it, Colt.”

“Watch it? Both of your women are bitching at me for trying to figure out a way to con my own wife into talking to me after she took my kids and moved the fuck out to wherever the hell she wanted to. With no way to communicate with them. Because she refuses to fucking talk to me!”

“You’re the reason she’s been avoiding the clubhouse,” Heidi says. “Oh, God, it makes so much sense now. Lex, are you good? Do you need anything?”

“No!” he shouts. How can they all miss the point? “No! The one everyone keeps asking about and saying we need has let us down. Avoided us. Decided she doesn’t need the club anymore because she’s better than all of us.”

Jace catches Melanie as she leaps in the air towards Colt, and he jumps back in surprise. She may be small, but damn if she isn’t a loose cannon. “Fuck you, Colton Nichols!” she shouts and fights with her boyfriend to get free. “Go to fucking hell you soul sucking pathetic excuse of a man. You’re nothing but a fucking piece of shit!”

“Mel, stop,” Jace says and struggles with the woman less than half his size. “Jesus, you’re strong when you’re mad. It’s like trying to give a cat a bath.”

“Lex never does anything without a good reason, and you know it. If she left, taking his kids and not telling him or the rest of us where she is, he did something to cause it. Husbands and fathers of the year don’t lose their families. Shitty motherfuckers who treat their families like shit do. And that’s what he is. A shitty motherfucker I want to claw the fucking face off of.”

Lex crosses her arms under her chest and looks at the ground. For some reason, her unwillingness to bite back both pisses him off and makes him nervous. She always fights. Maybe Karmen was right.

“Say something,” Felicity says, looking at the blonde. “Is this true?”

“This is the humiliation I was trying to avoid,” she says, her voice quiet.

Her eyes refuse to look up at his face, and he wills her to even just give him a glance. To give any indication she's not completely gone. "Lex-"

"Everything that's happened was forced by your hand. By your decisions. I wanted to do this when things were more settled, and I knew I had a better handle on everything. But like usual, it's all about you and what you want. Are you happy now?"

"This is why you've pulled away from the club?" Jennings asks. "Why you haven't been around?"

Sniffling, she wipes at her eyes with the sleeve of her sweatshirt. "Yes."

"What the fuck did you do?" Shep shouts.

"Nothing," Colt says. "I swear-"

"I'm done with this conversation, and I'm not doing this here in front of everyone. I understand why Karmen and TK are still married. It's to protect the club. I'm willing to do that because it's in our kids' best interest."

Shep stands up. "Forget the club. What the fuck happened, Lex? What'd he do to make you turn away from all of us?"

Colt looks at her, the anger rising. "Yeah, what the fuck happened? Oh, wait, I remember. You think I fucked and knocked up a club bunny from Black Valley."

"That's crazy, Lex," Autumn Sims says. "Colt loves you."

"Are you sure about this?" Tripp Molloy asks, his eyes glancing to his father. At least he has a few people on his side.

Brock raises his eyebrows. "We can get this cleared up quickly."

"Do you see why I needed to pull away from the club? You all back him! He *is* the club, but you don't know the entire story. You don't know everything that's been going on for the past year. The club bunny issue is just the icing on the shitstorm cake he's baked."



Shep moves towards her and pulls her tightly against him, ignoring her protests until she gives in and looks at him. “Talk to me, babe. Tell me what’s going on.”

Colt hates how relieved she appears with someone other than him, but he feels a punch to the gut when he hears the tremble in her voice.

“It’s so much more than Diane taunting me. It’s everything else that he’s done to put him in the position for me to doubt him. And then there’s the fucking sonogram and naked picture of him she sent me. She knew things he never should’ve told anyone. And yet, I gave him a chance to stop me, and he ignored me. And my texts. He just did nothing.”

“I never fucked her!” he shouts. “Goddammit, Lex, I was in Black Valley for club business. You of all people should understand this!”

His anger quickly disappears as her legs give out, and if it weren’t for Shep holding her, she’d have collapsed right there on the ground.

“Lex?” Shep asks, his voice alarmed.

“I can’t do this,” she whispers. “The club is the excuse for everything. The club brought us together, but now it’s broken us. I can’t do this, and I can’t do this here. Not now. Please, I need to go. Let me go.”

Melanie and Felicity rush to her. Colt moves to check on her, but Heidi and Shep create a two person barrier to stop him.

“Baby, go get your kids from Lane’s house,” Melanie says. “Cuddle those babies.”

“I can’t,” she says as she tries to collect herself. “I can’t let them see me like this. They’ve seen too much, and Noah will ask more questions I can’t answer. He can stay with his cousin tonight.”

Felicity turns around and stares hard at Ky. “You knew, didn’t you? You knew about all this?”

“Babe, their marriage doesn’t affect ours.”

“Are you fucking kidding? The club has gotten in the way of every one of the relationships in this room. But it’s usually Lex who pulls us all back together. She’s broken. Can’t you see that? And it’s Colt’s fault. By not beating the shit out of him for being this big of an asshole, you’re siding with him. You know what? It’s probably best if you stay here tonight.”

“He’s fucking lucky she still has enough love for the club to stay married to protect them,” Melanie says. “She could really fuck everyone over.”

Colt feels the trigger of her words and shakes his head. “I’m not living with a marriage like my parents. It’s all or nothing, Lex. Together or not. No in-between.”

Sniffing, she nods and still avoids contact.

Lily slams her drink on the bar. “I’ll get everything drawn up and serve his ass. I told you the other night, Colt. I side with her. Oh, and fuck you.”

Turning, she leaves and walks out the front door with her small posse behind her. He runs after her in a mixture of anger and shock. She’s divorcing him? How did they get so far away from what he planned for tonight? “So that’s it? You’re just giving up and walking away?”

She turns and faces him in the parking lot. “When what we had turned me into someone I hate, someone I never thought I’d be in a million years, what am I fighting for? What’s the point? I fought enough alone, and I honestly don’t know if I want what I’d be fighting for anymore, Colt. You win.”

## Chapter 8

*Griffin's Beach*

*Colt*

Colt stares at Lex in utter shock. “What are you talking about?”

“You don’t have to talk to him,” Melanie says.

She is really starting to piss him off. “Melanie, stop it,” he says, his voice much calmer than he feels. “What do you mean by that, Lex?”

Felicity avoids looking at him and focuses on his wife. “Are you okay? Do you want us to stay?”

Lex shakes her head, a few blonde curls falling from her bun and resting on the sides of her face, sticking to her wet cheeks. “I’ll be okay. I don’t know what else could possibly go wrong tonight. The train went off the track the moment I stepped foot in there like I knew it would.”

The two women walk back towards the clubhouse but don’t go inside, and he looks at his wife. For the first time, she looks into his eyes, and he sees the pain in a sea of dim blue that used to sparkle. “Lex, talk to me.”

It hits him why the look scares him. It’s the same look she had after she was kidnapped by her ex, Vincent. She gave up on him, and she wanted him to let her go. That she wished he’d physically beaten her because the emotional beating she was taking was too much. In this moment, he knows he screwed up. He screwed up, and she may be too broken to be fixed.

“What’s there to say?”

“I never slept with Diane. I swear it. On our children, I swear, I never touched her. And I had no idea she was taunting you, otherwise I would’ve made sure she fucking stopped.”

Looking at the ground, she shakes her head. “You should’ve known. I tried to tell you. After the first call, I called

you. And you know what you did? You sent me to voicemail. You cut the lines of communication by going to Black Valley and giving me no way to reach you.”

“That’s not entirely true.”

“The only way you’d answer when Noah wanted to say goodnight or tell you about something that happened to him that day was if I texted you first to let you know it was him. If it wasn’t for the kids, you wouldn’t answer. Even on Calla’s birthday, you ignored my call. All of them. But you answered when I called from Psycho’s phone. I stopped getting the time of day a long fucking time ago.”

Reality slaps him in the face. “That’s not what I meant to do. I just needed a break. There’s some shit I’m going through and dealing with, and it was hard to talk to you.”

“Because I’m Mom first and wife second.”

“What?”

“That’s what you told Diane. It took so long to get pregnant with Calla that you can’t have your wife the way you want her. So you get what you need from her instead.”

Narrowing his eyes, he shakes his head. “She said that to you?”

“Said you told her you thought I was broken. That you don’t like being home with us because we’re so demanding. That’s when she told me about your tattoo. I’m guessing all of this came out the night she took that picture of you naked, but it could have been any other night you were there instead of here. She also said she was with you when you’d ignore my calls. Sent a video of you doing it with her on the arm of your chair.”

“Okay, I might’ve said some stuff I shouldn’t have when I was drunk-”

“Anything between us should never have been said. Our marriage, our kids, nothing. But you did, and you gave her the tools she needed to chip away at me. Sharp tools.”

He feels guilty. There's no argument for what he did, and he can't blame anyone but himself. "You're right. I'm sorry. But Lex, this can't be the entire reason. How did I turn you into someone you hate? What do you mean by that?"

Taking a deep breath, she looks away. "Something changed with us. You don't want me anymore, and I started picking myself apart. Every little thing I found wrong with me added to the reasons why you didn't seem to desire me anymore."

"Lex-"

"Is it the baby weight I couldn't seem to get rid of? Do you find the stretch marks on my stomach disgusting? Were my thighs and hips too big to find attractive anymore? Are you just tired of me? Should I get surgery to nip and tuck and lift? Maybe get bigger boobs. Would you want me then?"

His stomach churns. How the hell did she get there? "I still want you."

She laughs dryly. "No, you don't. My husband would try and mount me when covered with blood and mud and being so tired he could barely stand. Now, you shower the moment you get home, never want me to join you, you don't join me, and you barely touch me. The few times you have, it's been for you. Then you roll over and go to sleep. Our connection disappeared."

"Baby, I love you. And I want you. Nothing has changed that."

Her finger spins in a circle next to her temple. "When Diane started reaching out, I questioned everything. Things with us changed. Then, when you started showering right away, the moment you stepped in the door, I started thinking maybe it was to wash the scent of someone else away. Are you not interested in sex with me anymore because you're getting it in Black Valley? Is that why you lied and volunteered to be out there all the time? Are you starting a new life? For months, these questions ran over and over in my head. Still do."

Holy shit. Of everything she could have said, this was the last thing he expected. “No. None of that is true.”

“If you aren’t sleeping with her, how’d she get you naked to take a picture, Colt? How’d she know about the meaning behind your tattoo?”

“Because she apparently helped me into bed after I drank so much I was almost to the point of needing a fucking hospital stay. Trust me, I couldn’t have fucked her even if I wanted to. And I don’t want to.”

Turning, she shrugs. “It’s not just about her. It’s about the pathetic person I’ve become.”

“That’s not true.”

“I did everything I could think of. I’d go above and beyond trying to reignite the spark that disappeared. I made your favorite meals, did my best not to get after you for being late or not coming home at all, dressing up to try and entice you. You didn’t care. No matter what, I couldn’t get you to spend time at home. Colt, I cried, on my knees, and begged you to stay for a weekend. One weekend. And you refused.” Her hands slap her chest. “That’s not me! That’s never been who I am!”

The pain in her voice sends panic through him. He has to fix this. This wasn’t what he thought his actions would cause, but he really did ignore everything she put into the relationship. She’s right. She fought hard, and she fought alone.

“Baby, we can fix this. I promise, we’ll find a way to move past it. This was never my intention, and I’m not having a kid with that bunny.”

“You still don’t get it,” she says and turns to look at him, tears filling her eyes as they fall down her cheeks. “It’s not just the fact you may be sleeping with someone else. The reason I’m devastated is the fact you did this. You put yourself in a position for me to doubt you. Doubt us. I don’t know what to believe, but I know I don’t trust you. You’ve lied and created this situation where all I do is question everything

about us. But worse than that, you've made me question myself."

"Baby--"

"I've lost sight of who I am. I don't even recognize the woman staring back at me in the mirror anymore. The only reason you're so upset with my decision is because I gave up just like you did. The difference is you just never fought, Colt. I did, and I'm so tired. I'm so fucking tired, and there's nothing left to fight for."

Swallowing, he reaches for her, but she steps out of his grasp. "I love you."

"I wish I could believe you."

Colt watches his wife walk to her car, and he can't decide if he should follow her or not. All the anger and frustration he had lingers below the surface, but now he's also scared. Really scared. He can see he pushed her to the edge, and she just jumped.

Turning towards the clubhouse, Melanie and Felicity shake their heads and walk inside, letting the door slam in his face. He guesses he deserves it. Her words replay in his head, and he can't help but wonder where she would've ever gotten the idea that she needs plastic surgery.

*Because you royally fucked up. Fucking Noah.*

*He really did, didn't he? Jesus, I died for this.* Great, he has two dead people in his head. Maybe he needs a fucking straightjacket.

"Shut the fuck up," he growls and walks into the clubhouse.

VP storms over to him. "Where the fuck is she?"

"She left."

"Be honest with me. Is there even a chance Ian's step-grandchild is yours?"

"No!" he shouts. "I never fucked her!"

Ky sighs. “Are you sure? Because when I talked to Psycho, he said you’ve been downing vodka like water. Is there even a possibility something happened you don’t quite remember?”

Shep walks up to him. “You don’t do smart things sober, but you do even dumber shit drunk. How can you be sure you didn’t cheat on Lex?”

The anger radiates off him, and Colt understands. Shep was one of the many strays his wife took in, and they have a weird friendship because of it. “Because the only time I was drunk enough where I don’t remember the night would have produced a child by now. I remember every other night.”

Up until this point, his anger never wavered from Lex. But seeing her the way she looked tonight, his anger turned around and points right back at him, too. He contributed to everything, but she’s not giving him a fair chance.

Sure, she was right. He cut communication a bit when he went to Black Valley, but it’s not for the reasons she thinks. It really pisses him off how everyone believes he’d mess around on her.

“Colt, there are a lot of people in this room ready to murder you right now. And I’d be lying if I said the woman who knows probably the most about us will no longer have legal rights to avoid testifying against us if ever called upon didn’t worry me. It might be best to leave and let us all cool down,” Jennings says.

“I honestly thought that if I could get her to just talk to me, we’d work it out,” he says.

Melanie shakes her head. “From the sounds of it, she tried to talk to you and work it out long before this. And you turned her down every time.”

“How could you do that to her?” Felicity asks, wiping her eyes. “She said she begged you to stay for a fucking weekend. On her knees. Crying. And you just left? Do you have any idea how that had to have made her feel?”



Ky reaches out, and she slaps his hand away.  
“Felicity-”

“No, you picked a side. The wrong side. After everything she’s done for you, for all of us, you still thought Colt wasn’t bullheaded and giving you his stupid version of what actually happened?”

“You humiliated her with what you did tonight,” Zane says. “Your intentions weren’t good. If they were, you would’ve taken her out of the main room and talked to her in private. Let her keep some of her dignity.”

Shep shakes his head. “You just pushed someone we’ve all come to depend on for things both in and outside of the club running for the hills. If her own brother who treated her like shit for half her life tells you that you fucked up, you really fucked up.”

Zane scoffs. “Gee, thanks.”

“He’s not wrong,” VP says to his son before looking back at Colt. “I don’t know what’s going on with you, but you need to figure your shit out. That girl has never been so devastated in her life, and now I’ve seen it twice. Both times because of you. And I hate you for it, I really fucking hate you.”

“We all do,” Shep says.

“But I hate me, too. She asked me for help, and I didn’t do anything.”

Lily gasps. “Wait, so everyone she should’ve been able to count on let her down? Her husband, Psycho, and her father? Wow. Great job, guys. Stellar work.”

“I think this goes without saying,” Jennings says, “but you’re done in Black Valley. I’ll let Chicago know he won’t get you back out there anytime soon.”

Nodding, Colt turns and walks out to his bike. As much as he doesn’t want to go back to his empty house, he knows he can’t stay in the clubhouse for a good while. If Felicity stays mad long enough, he could invite Ky to stay as

his roommate. He'd probably murder Colt in his sleep, but right now, it doesn't seem like such a bad idea.

## Chapter 9

*Black Valley*

TK

TK finds himself lost in thought sitting in the Black Valley clubhouse with the rest of the men. Everyone gathered to talk about how things have been going since they killed the President of the Savage Slashers. He doesn't pay much attention to the conversation, but since they all seemed satisfied with the way things seem to be going now that O'Malley's dead, it must be fine.

Dallas "Chicago" Smith walks over and sits next to TK. The President of the Black Valley charter looks to his friend of more years than either wants to admit. "Everything okay, man?"

"I'm fine. Just thinking."

"About the Slashers?"

The rival has an issue with the Black Valley charter, and it started long before the Drifters patched them over two years ago. Until recently, they'd been on a losing streak that cost them men.

He shakes his head. "No, actually. I know I should be, but I just can't focus on the club right now."

"Wanna talk about it?"

"My son lost his wife."

Chicago leans back and laughs. "Unless you have some hidden son somewhere, it sounds like you're talking about Lex, and I don't believe that. Not for a second. That woman is the club."

"I have to ask you, Chicago... Was Colt doing anything she shouldn't have when he was out here?"

"As in...?"

"Was he messing around with Diane?"

Point blank. He wants an answer from someone he can trust. Someone who will tell him the truth because he has no stake in the game. If it proved true, he'd have only a daughter left.

“She hung all over him, and she tried to take advantage when he hit the bottle hard so hard he drank enough to kill a shark. As far as I know, he didn't, but I wasn't watching him. I was keeping tabs on Kimberly. She started dating a douche I had to scare.”

TK knows little good comes from talking about Chicago's ex-wife. Instead, he nods towards the scantily clad group of women and asks, “Which one's Diane?”

The man turns and smirks with an eyebrow raised. “Gotta say, if Colt did step out on his wife with her, he definitely has a type.”

He spots a woman with hair almost identical to Lex's, only brunette. “Curly dark hair?”

He chuckles, and TK stands to walk over to the women playing pool with a few unfamiliar members. Diane bends over the table with her pool cue, ready to aim, and shakes her ass in booty jean shorts for the benefit of anyone watching.

He leans against the table next to her and takes note of her flat stomach. “You look good for a woman who's close to popping out a kid.”

She stands straight, and her eyes look at him with shock. “What?”

“Do you know who I am?”

Shaking her head, she glances around while the rest of the group slowly steps away. He may not know them, but they obviously know him. And this woman right here helped create so much havoc. She's cute with a smattering of freckles on her nose, and she's got a decent body. But she's far too young, even for Colt.

“If you really were pregnant, I'd be that kid's grandpa.”

Her jaw drops, and he sees a few silver fillings on her back molars. “Colt’s dad.”

“Could you imagine what this conversation would be like if I was Lex’s dad? Or Shep?”

Her hands shake as she sets the cue on the table. “What do you want?”

“I just wanted to meet the woman who thought she could take my daughter-in-law’s place. You helped create quite a mess, you know that?”

“I can explain-”

“No, you can’t. And I don’t want you to. I just want you to know something. If your goal was to get Lex to leave Colt so he’d be here full time and come to you, you failed. Colt won’t be coming back to Black Valley anytime soon. If ever again.”

She pales. “He’s not?”

“I gotta say, you got lucky. Lex left him, but he’ll never be yours. But if she ever comes out here, you better hide because you won’t be around too long after she sets eyes on you. On top of that, you screwed up. My son’s really fucking pissed, and there’s no way in hell he’d ever consider fucking you now.”

“I know you won’t believe it, but I like him.”

He laughs. “No, you thought you could get an old lady title. All you bunnies do. But I can tell you right now, you better never step foot in Griffin’s Beach. You’re public enemy number one, and every old lady in my clubhouse wants blood. Yours. And no man in Griffin’s Beach will touch you with a ten-foot pole.”

“They’re that upset?”

Standing, he hovers over her, his face above hers. “Colt isn’t the only one she’s left, and that has a lot of people really pissed off. It’s currently aimed all at Colt, but the moment they spot you, it’ll shift. So, I’d stay here, little girl.”

He walks back to Chicago and sits down. The woman stands where he left her, her chest heaving as she takes deep breaths. He scared her, and she fucking deserves it.

“What’d you say to her?”

“That she’s going to be in a world of hurt if she ever steps foot in Griffin’s Beach. And that she’ll likely never see Colt again. Her plan failed.”

“What’s going on, TK?”

He lets out a slow breath and takes a drink from his beer. “I wish I knew. All I know is Colt created a mess for himself, and it’s cost him everything. But if he wasn’t out here for Diane, what the fuck had him so hellbent on being here all the time? At least with her, there’s a reason. A shitty one, but still.”

“You’re looking for a reason?”

“Yeah, I am. I think it’s also for me.”

“What do you mean?”

Leaning back, he looks around the room. He’s spent far too much time thinking since Karmen sought him out. “Do you ever wonder if it’s the club? The reason why we have so many failed relationships?”

Chicago laughs. “I know it’s the club.”

“But then you look at the successful ones, and what’s the difference? Same club. Same patches. Same threats.”

“Man, if I knew, I probably wouldn’t be divorced.”

TK watches Psycho who caresses Lacey’s cheek and moves her long, red hair over her shoulder with his other hand to kiss her neck. She beams when she’s with her husband, and even with all the shit going on with the club, they’ve never had a real issue. Not because of the club, anyway.

“I do,” he says.

“You do? Well, enlighten me, oh wise one.”

He nods towards the fellow Sergeant at Arms. “Guys like us who put the club first. All the time. No matter what. And then there are men like him who would walk away for his woman. He’d die for this club, but his wife takes top priority.”

“I never thought of it like that.”

“We let the club consume us. Take over our thoughts and way of life, and we neglect everyone else in the picture. For me, I took for granted she’d still be there after I got the never-ending list of club shit done.”

“TK?”

“I’m the reason Karmen fucked around. Yeah, it was fucked up it was with another member I once upon a time considered a friend, but it was my fault. She did it for attention. And then it was to hurt me because I’d hurt her. I stopped participating in the marriage.”

His eyes narrow. “You can’t blame yourself for the actions of your ex.”

“You didn’t see Lex, Chicago. She’s a ghost of herself. They have two kids, and the reason Colt did all this to her was because of his obligations to the club. If they were anything like mine, they seemed so much more important in his head. Made him put the club so far in front of his family that she had to make a choice. So did Karmen, but she made a different one. Went down a destructive path.”

“She could have talked to you,” he offers. “Same with Lex.”

“How many times did Kimberly try to talk to you before she finally had enough?”

His tongue runs over his lips before biting his lower lip. Everyone knew Kimberly finally had enough of everything and walked, leaving him a divorcee living in the clubhouse while she stayed in the house he paid for. “Too many.”

“Karmen did the same now that I look back. I just chalked it up to her not understanding or willing to understand the life. Probably like you did, too. They tried to tell us they

weren't getting what they needed to stay happy, and we ignored it."

"Do you think Colt could have saved his marriage if he'd just talked to Lex?"

Nodding, TK takes a sip of his beer. "Yep, but I can't put all the blame on my kid. Lex should have fought harder. When I saw her, she had no fight. She gave up on him, and also us. Turned her back on everything when I think she still has a chance."

"Is it really too far gone to be salvaged?"

"I think it is. I really do. The moment she stopped fighting, he lost all hope. There's no coming back from it. The weird part is, Colt doesn't see it. He's so pissed off, it hasn't hit him. But when it does, look out. He'll become insufferable."

"Damn, TK, if I'd known there were problems like this, I wouldn't have let him stay out here so much. It was selfish, but it really felt like we had another regular at the table."

He shrugs. "It's not your fault. It's all his. But now I'm pissed because I have to re-evaluate my fucking life."

"Karmen?"

"I've blamed her for Noah's death every day since it happened. He wouldn't have been on that bike if she hadn't been fucking around with Rush. But if I'd paid attention to her and listened when she told me what she needed, she never would have. I'm the reason for what happened."

"You do have a leg to stand on there, man."

Shaking his head, he sighs. "No, I don't. Not when I see all the things she did to get my attention before messing around. She tried to get me to focus on the family, but just like Colt, I said the club needed me more."

"It's not your fault."

"Isn't it?"



Everything always comes back to the club. Today, he doesn't know if it's a blessing or a curse.

# Chapter 10

*Griffin's Beach*

*Psycho*

Psycho sits in the lot of the Griffin's Beach clubhouse and stares. It feels longer than two years ago since he called this place home. The place and the people who inevitably saved him. He owes a lot to these people.

No one expects him, but he needs to get in touch with Lex. He's been calling for close to a month now, but she hasn't answered. And yesterday, the automatic recording says her number has been disconnected.

After taking out O'Malley, the club finally has room to breathe. The real question is if the break is to take time to regroup or if they take the truce seriously. He just hopes Chicago doesn't sit on a false sense of security, but that's a worry for another day. Now, he needs to find Lex.

He walks inside and sees Melanie sitting at the bar with a drink in her hand. Jace, who normally clings to her whenever they're in the same room, sits on the couch against the wall next to the Chapel, his eyes never leaving her.

Walking over, he sits on the arm of the empty side of the couch next to him. "What's going on? You two have a fight or something?"

"My girl's punishing me. She's not putting out, but I know she's suffering as much as I am. Maybe more," he says and takes a drink of whiskey. "She'll come around."

Melanie turns at his comment and gasps when she sees Psycho. "Jace, this isn't the person to have this conversation with," she hisses before joining them.

Psycho laughs. "Do you remember where my old room was? Right across the hall from yours. Trust me, I've heard it all. Come to think of it, I've heard you not having sex less times than I've heard you going at it like gorillas in a zoo. I didn't know there was any shame."

Jace falls silent as he stares at her, his lips clenched shut.

“What’s with the face?”

She sighs. “We’re fighting because he stopped me from murdering Colt.”

The hair on the back of his neck stands on end. Is that why Lex’s number suddenly stopped working? “Why do you want to murder Colt?”

“Because he’s an asshole motherfucker who deserves to be beaten to a bloody pulp.”

His eyes turn to Jace, shocked at the venom dripping from her words. “What’s she talking about?”

“He’s in the doghouse because he sided with Colt. Just like Ky did. And Ky’s stuck sleeping here while his wife stays at the house with the kids.”

“Took Colt’s side about what?” His skin prickles, and he doesn’t like it. Something’s obviously wrong, especially if these two aren’t fucking each other’s brains out and Ky and Felicity are fighting.

“You should probably talk to him, man,” he says.

“I’m talking to you,” he growls. “I’ve been trying to get in touch with Lex for a fucking month, and as of yesterday, her phone’s out of service. What the fuck’s going on?”

Colt sits with Ky at one of the tables with a water in front of him. Considering how he’d been drowning his sorrows in vodka, this is a new development. Yes, something bad happened, and he needs to know what.

“Tell me,” he growls and looks at Melanie.

She jumps closer to Jace out of self-preservation, her anger gone for the moment. “Lex left Colt. Took the kids and moved out.”

“Left her phone at the house and worked out an arrangement for kid exchanges with Karmen,” Jace says. “She’s dropped the club, too.”

His eyes move to find Shep sitting at the bar with a beer in his hand, his eyes glaring at Colt. Heidi attempts to distract him, but it doesn't appear to work. Standing, he walks over to the man. "What the fuck happened? Where's Lex?"

"Don't know where she is," Shep says, his leg bouncing. "If I did, I'd be there right now talking to her instead of sitting here thinking of all the ways I want to murder that asshole."

"She's done with the club?"

"Thanks to him."

He turns and sees Colt watching him. Large bags hang under his eyes, and he recognizes the look of sleep deprivation. His greasy hair could use a long, hot shower, too. Oddly enough, he doesn't seem to have any reaction to Psycho. "What the fuck happened?"

"Diane in Black Valley," he says. "Don't know much else."

"That bitch better hope I never see her again," Heidi says. "I'll show her what fucking with an old lady gets her. I doubt that sonogram's real, but if it is, Colt better pray the kid ain't his."

"Wait, this doesn't make sense. Lex doesn't give up, especially when it comes to him."

Shep clenches his fist. "You should've seen her, man. I wanted to break Colt's fucking face. She's broken. More broken than she was when she caught him with Eva. Looked like a damned ghost she was so pale. She's been avoiding the clubhouse for a long ass time and said she needs distance. How did we miss it all? How did we not see her?"

"From the club? This is her club."

He sighs. "No, she says it's his club. She hasn't told anyone where she's staying because she doesn't trust anyone anymore. Not even the girls. Says her husband is the club, and we have the same code. God, Psycho, it broke my damn heart watching her. She wouldn't even look at him."

“I think Lily knows, but we all know she’s unbreakable. She’s also the only other woman who has any idea what Lex feels.”

Pulling out his phone, he calls his wife. “Lace, is Diane fucking pregnant?”

“Hello to you, too, Carson,” Lacey jokes. “I’m glad to see you made it there safely. But, no. I mean, I guess, not that I know of. She’s shooting back shots, but that doesn’t mean she’s not newly pregnant. She doesn’t really strike me as the responsible type.”

“Thanks,” he says. “Love you.” Hanging up, he looks at Colt. “Diane’s not pregnant.”

“He put himself in a spot to look like he’s running around on his wife. Ignored his kids, too,” Shep says. “Just because she’s not pregnant doesn’t mean he didn’t fuck her.”

“What the fuck happened to this club? We expand and shit goes to hell.”

Heidi holds out her hand. “Not all things.”

The light catches on the gaudy diamond ring. “No shit?”

“No shit.”

“Congrats, man!” He fist bumps Shep and bends down to kiss her cheek. “You’ll make a beautiful bride.”

“Will you be the best man? Heidi’s claimed Lex as maid of honor, and as the bride with the pussy I love, she holds the power.”

“Not Ty?”

Heidi giggles, and he sighs. “Don’t get me started on him.”

“I’d be honored.”

A loud knock comes at the front door, and everyone pauses. Someone from the police department must be outside because even the pizza delivery guys walk right in. They know they’re safe as long as they don’t put up a fight for the hot,

melly cheese in the boxes. On a good night, they make out amazing with tips.

When no one moves, Psycho stands and opens the door to find Grayson Tate standing there in his uniform. “Got a warrant?”

“Not why I’m here. Colt here?”

Stepping aside as Grayson walks inside, he sighs. “Come on in, I guess.”

Colt’s eyes widen, and he hurries to his feet. “Lex?”

He holds up a hand as the other holds a large envelope. “She’s fine. Don’t worry about that. I offered to be the one to bring this to you considering my relationship with the club.”

“Not here,” he says and leads the man outside and out of earshot.

“What’s the deal there?” Psycho asks.

Everyone shrugs and remains silent. They wait on pins and needles for Colt to come back inside, and no one seems to want to tell Psycho what the hell it’s all about.

He finally walks back inside with an envelope. Grabbing a pool cue from the wall, he winds back and swings, hitting the glass shelf of liquor. The new prospect ducks for safety from falling glass and alcohol. “Fuck!”

“Holy shit.” Psycho stares in paralyzed shock.

Ky watches his best friend walk to his apartment, the room silent except for the liquid pouring onto the ground. Colt tosses the stick on the ground and slams his door. “He’s not okay.”

“Where is she, Ky?”

He shakes his head. “I honestly don’t know. Not even Karmen knows. I really thought this would all blow over in a couple weeks, but it doesn’t seem to be happening anytime soon. If ever.”

“She really thinks she’s done with the club?” he mutters. “I never thought I’d see the day.”

“Neither did we. But believe me, there’s a large divide happening with the women of the club right now, and Jace and I are in the doghouse.”

“I heard. Why’s Felicity pissed at you?”

“Because I knew Colt’s version of the story, and I didn’t tell her. But based on what he told me, this would blow over soon, and I wouldn’t need to worry about telling her shit. Kept saying she was gonna be back before anyone else found out, and he wanted to save her the humiliation.”

Sitting in the now vacant spot, Psycho leans back. “Guess he was wrong.”

“He didn’t realize the amount of damage he caused. I felt so bad seeing Lex. If they could just talk, I bet they’d be able to make things work, but I think she’s done trying.”

The idea that the woman who’s helped save him many times in the past stopped trying makes him angry. She knows better than anyone that fighting is the way to go. The way to fix everything. Cutting off lines of communication won’t get anyone anywhere.

“He got really dark out there for a while. We saw a lot of battle and death, and he started hitting the bottle hard afterwards. Never wanted to talk about it, though. Just drank away his feelings.”

“Drinking usually gets him into more trouble than it helps.”

Psycho chuckles. “Ain’t that the truth for us all?”

“Yeah, probably.”

“So... what was Grayson talking about?”

“What do you mean?”

“He said something about his relationship with the club. Are we even more solid with the boys in blue?”

Sighing, he shakes his head. “No, he means my fucking sister.”

“Still? You and Diesel didn’t put a stop to that shit the last time I was here?”

“Are you blind? They were at Calla’s birthday party together.”

“I was a little preoccupied. Still, you allow it?”

Ky laughs. “I’ll give you one guess who convinced us to do it.”

“The woman who’s given up on all of us?”

“Yep.”

He looks around the room at everyone grouped together. It’s obvious sides have been drawn in the room. He hates the fact he doesn’t know where to find Lex. He knew something was wrong. Felt it months ago, but she wouldn’t tell him. Now it’s beyond repair, and she was too stubborn to just tell him and let him help. Part of this is on her.



# Chapter 11

*Griffin's Beach*

*Grayson*

Grayson strums the steering wheel of his squad car as he drives the streets of Griffin's Beach. He's lived here his entire life, and he can't imagine living anywhere else. Everything he ever needs in life resides in this small town, and he realizes that for the first time in a long time, he's happy. So happy, it almost scares him like something terrible will inevitably happen.

He passes by one of the real estate offices and spots Lex's black Mustang outside. It's the only one in town, so there's no mistaking it. Pulling into the parking lot, he waits for her to walk outside.

It takes thirty minutes, but she finally walks out in a white sundress hanging off her as though it's a size or two too large. Her hair, freshly styled, blows in the wind, and he takes note of how striking her collarbone protrudes right above the neckline.

Flipping on the lights and siren, he watches her jump and looks at him. Smirking, he turns them off and climbs out of his car.

"Jesus Christ, I almost had a heart attack," Lex says, her hand on her chest.

Her ring finger bares no ring, and pity takes over. For the longest time, he believed he was in love with Alexis Dalton. She told him he wasn't in love with *her* but rather the *idea* of her. And she was right. Like usual. But deep down, he'd always known she and Colt were meant to be. At least, until Colt screwed up.

"Sorry," he says with a laugh. "What're you doing here? Buying a house?"

She sighs and leans against her car. "I wish."

His eyes narrow. “Lex, what’s going on?”

“In what sense?”

Touching his ring finger, he nods to her. “You’re really done with Colt?”

Her thumb reaches out to move the absent rings out of habit and looks at the ground. “You served him the divorce papers.”

“Yeah, but let’s be honest. No one thought it’d stick. What happened, Lex?”

“Life,” she says with a laugh and shrugs.

“Bullshit. I know you, and I know this isn’t just how life turned out for you. What happened?”

Her hand rubs her arm as she crosses them under her chest. “He didn’t want me anymore. That’s really what it boils down to.”

“No, I’m sorry. I don’t believe that. I can’t. There are no two people on the planet I know love each other as much as you two do.”

“Including you and Ashley?”

Smirking, he walks over and leans against her car in a similar stance. “Touché. But I know you still love him. I can see it on your face.”

“It wasn’t my love being questioned.”

“What did he do?”

Her eyes glance up at him. “What?”

“I know you. And I know him. What did he do?”

“Besides possibly having a kid with a club bunny in Black Valley, it’s more about what he didn’t do.”

Grayson can’t help himself. His jaw drops. Colt Nichols cheated? On Lex? No, there’s no way. Well, there was that time with the chick he’d knocked up, but that was different. Or so he says. Yes, the world will officially end now.

“You’re going to start letting flies in, Tate.”

His mouth snaps shut. “Sorry, I think I might have had an aneurysm or something. I just... wow.”

“What do you think about all this?”

Her blue eyes look into his, and his heart breaks for her. “I think he had to screw up big time to push you this far. And if you believe he stepped out, there’s a damn good reason for it. I also think he’s a fucking moron and will regret this for the rest of his life. You know, when the pride keeping him from realizing just what he’s done moves aside.”

“You don’t think I’m wrong? Or crazy? That it’s all in my head?”

“If there’s one thing I know, it’s that you only walk away or give up when you finally get tired of hitting your head against a brick wall. In case you were wondering, Colt Nichols seems very wall-like. Stubborn, difficult, but solid.”

Her eyes fill with tears, but she smiles. “Thank you.”

“For what?”

“Most people tell me I’m crazy to believe that he might’ve had a thing with that tart. That he loves me, and I’m giving up too easily. No one knows just how hard I fought every single day. It hurt, Grayson. It really hurt. And I could only let it hurt for so long before I had to make a change.”

Wrapping his arm around her shoulders, he pulls her to him. “I know. If you believe something like that, who am I to question you? You are the most rational person of anyone in that club. That I know, period, actually. And you’re borderline clairvoyant. I meant what I said, though. He’ll regret this one day when he wakes up and realizes his pride wasn’t worth letting you get away.”

“I just want the pain to stop,” she says into his shirt, her fists balling his uniform shirt in them as she clings to him tightly. “I don’t know which hurts worse. Staying and constantly being made to feel invisible and unimportant or being without him when all I want is him.”

His lips kiss the top of her head. “It’ll get easier. I don’t know when, but I know it will. There will come a point where you’ll see him, and it won’t feel so bad. There will only be seven knives stabbing you in the heart instead of ten. Then five, and four, and soon, it’ll be a butter knife chipping away at it.”

She laughs and pulls away, wiping her eyes. “I got a job.”

“Where?”

“Here,” she says and points to the building. “I wish I was buying or selling a house, but I’m looking for work. Something to help support my kids.”

“Colt won’t give you anything?”

The thought that Colt would withhold money from Lex to take care of the kids doesn’t sound like him. Even if his pride stands in the way of his marriage, he’d never let his kids go without.

“He probably would, but I need to break free. The less I depend on him, the better my chance of moving on. You know, in like thirty years, but still.”

“What are you going to be doing?”

“Uh, that’s a good question. Mostly administrative things, but I might have to go to conferences with them to help coordinate things. Keep track of their networking and field inquiries. I’m not entirely sure what all of that entails, but I’m sure I can figure it out.”

He nods. She’s smart enough to learn quickly. “I’m sure you can, too.”

“How’s our girl?”

He smiles, feeling guilty considering the current state of her relationship. “She’s good.”

“Don’t do that.”

“What?”

“Look like you can’t be happy because I’m not. No matter what happens with Colt and me, I’m happy for you two. If you remember, I kind of fought for you to be together, so...”

Letting out a deep breath, he looks at the ground. “I’ve been thinking.”

She waits a beat before saying, “Buying a monster truck?”

“What?”

“I don’t know. But you stopped, so I thought I’d finish the thought. A monster truck would be cool, though. Noah would be your best friend.”

He laughs. There’s a little bit of the woman he remembers still in there. “I’ve been thinking about proposing.”

Blinking, her jaw drops. “I’m sorry, what?”

“I’ve got a ring picked out and everything, but I haven’t put the deposit down. I wanted to get your opinion first.”

“Have you talked to Diesel and Ky about this already?”

He laughs again. She has jokes today. “Yeah, not even close.”

“You know you have to, right?”

“What? Why?”

Tilting her head, she cocks out her hip and crosses her arms over her chest. “Seriously?”

“Seriously. Are you saying I need to get their permission first?”

“You needed their permission to date her!” she exclaims, her hands in the air. “You don’t think you need to get their sign off before you ask her to be your wife?”

“No, I don’t. They’re close, but our relationship has proven to be a non-issue when it comes to the club. Why should marrying her be different?”

The look she gives him makes him feel like the ornery child in elementary school the teacher finds exasperating. “Dude.”

“Dudette.” Yes, he’s five and mocking her. But she can’t be serious. Not after how hard Ashley fights the club life.

“Ashley wasn’t going to date you until they gave the green light. She’s not going to accept a ring and marry you if they don’t give their blessing. As much as you may not believe it’s necessary, she does.”

He stares at her. She’s serious. “Do you think they’ll say no?”

“If you ask her without talking to them first, yeah, I do. It’s a sign of disrespect considering your position at the moment. As much as she loves you, she has a loyalty that you’ll never understand. Hell, I don’t always understand it, and I live it.”

“Shit,” he sighs. “You’re right.”

“I usually am. Even when I want nothing more than to be wrong.”

“So... how do I convince them to let us get married?”

Her hand taps his chest. “Good luck, buddy. I really do wish you well.”

“That’s it?” he calls as she opens her car door. “Good luck, buddy?”

Smirking, she shrugs. “I got you two together. I can’t do it all for you.”

“Thanks for nothing,” he calls, and she waves to him as she pulls away.

This will be harder than he expected. How does a cop convince two men of an outlaw biker club to let him marry their daughter and sister?

# Chapter 12

*Griffin's Beach*

*Colt*

Colt pulls into Karmen's driveway to find the black Mustang sitting there. He planned to meet his mom and his kids at his house, but Shep asked if he'd be willing to take a shift at the Puffy Taco tonight. He wanted to say no since it's his weekend with the kids, but since the man hasn't done anything more than shoot daggers at him since the night he tricked Lex and humiliated her in the clubhouse, he felt he should probably agree to it.

He knows he should come back when she's gone, but his heart jumps a little knowing he might get a glimpse of her. God, he misses her. And the desire to set eyes on her gets the best of him. Not being near her feels like he's slowly dying inside. The more time he spends alone, the crazier he feels.

He walks inside and stares as Lex holds Calla, sobbing. What the hell happened?

"It's okay, sweetheart," Karmen says, rubbing her back. "It'll be alright."

"It's been a long week, and I'm going to miss her," Lex says, handing their daughter to his mother. She wipes her eyes and lets out a deep breath. "It's the longest I've ever been away from her."

Turning, her eyes meet his for a brief second before she bends down to hug their son. "Mama, it's okay," Noah says, hugging her tightly. "We'll be good."

"I know, baby. I'll see you soon. I love you, little man. Take care of your sister for me."

"Love you, too, Mama."

Nodding to Colt, she avoids his eyes. "Sorry, I didn't mean to stay here this long. Have a good weekend."

The first words she speaks to him in months starts with ‘sorry’? He stands stunned for a brief moment before running after her. “Lex, wait up.”

She lets out a sigh, and he sees her defenses go up. “I don’t have the energy to fight you right now. I’m about one mean comment away from snapping. Please, just let me go.”

Her eyes fill with tears, and she furiously blinks them away. All he wants to do is reach out and hold her, but he says, “What happened?” instead.

“Nothing.”

“Lex, it’s not nothing. You said it was a long week. What happened?”

Swallowing, she looks at the ground and crosses her arms under her chest. Damn, she’s thin. Too thin. “It was her first full week at daycare, and it was harder than I expected. For me, not her.”

“Daycare? Why?”

“Because I started a job. It was part time for the first week, and I went full-time on Monday. I knew it would be hard, but I wasn’t prepared for the reality of it.”

A job? “Then quit.” Problem solved.

“What?” she asks with a laugh, but he notices the smile doesn’t quite reach her eyes.

“You don’t need a job. Your job is being a mother. Quit.”

“I wish it was that easy.” Her hands shake as she reaches up to wipe her eyes. “God, I’d gotten so used to spending every waking moment with her. I know it’s a codependency that probably isn’t healthy for her, but that’s my little girl. Noah’s been independent for a while now, and she’s my baby.”

This still doesn’t make sense. “Lex, why get a job in the first place? I don’t understand.”

“Because I have bills to pay.”



The statement sounds so simple, but for some reason, the words don't make sense in his mind. "Bills for what?"

"I got a place. And I spent the money I had left in savings from before we got married on furniture for the kids so they have beds and everything they need to feel at home. It didn't leave much money left over, and I'd really like to stop sleeping on the couch at some point."

His heart drops. She's really moving on, and he's been out here living in la la land. "You don't have to work. I'll give you whatever money you need to take care of the kids. And you."

Leaning on the car, her eyes finally lock with his. "I can't take your money."

"Sure you can. I'm offering."

"Lily suggested putting alimony in the papers, but I just couldn't do it. I don't want to be vindictive, and I wasn't in the marriage to get anything out of it."

The fucking divorce papers. "Are you sure you still want to go forward with the divorce? We can change our minds. Talk and figure out how we move forward again. How to fix what went wrong and broke."

She sighs and looks at the ground. "I'm sure."

Fuck. "Lex-"

"I'll be fine. Do you have your phone on you?"

"What?"

"Your phone. Do you have it on you?"

Colt reaches into his jeans and pulls it out. "Need to call someone?"

Taking it from him, she half smiles. "No. When did you get a smartphone?"

"A couple of months ago. I'm still trying to figure out how to use it. But it works well when I have to rock Calla to sleep because I can only count the various sections of the ceiling in her room so many times before I go crazy."

She chuckles and taps on the screen before handing it back to him. “Here.”

“What’d you do? Did you change my ringtone to something that sounds like a woman getting off in a porno so I have to explain it to Noah? Because I hate to break it to you, but Ky already did that.”

Another chuckle comes from her, and he feels a warmth spread across his chest. It’s been so long since he’s seen her smile, let alone laugh. Until right now, he hadn’t realized just how long it’s been or how much he missed it.

“No, I got a new phone. I replaced my old number with my new one. I think we’re at a place where you contact me directly for the kids.”

“I’ve earned your trust?” he jokes.

Sniffing, she wraps her arms around her waist, and he hates how small she looks. “It’s not that I didn’t trust you with the kids. I didn’t trust you wouldn’t try to find me. Or that you wouldn’t harass me into giving in and coming home. It took me this entire time to get to the point I am now, and I think I’m strong enough to not fall apart at the sight of you.”

“I never wanted this, Lex.”

“I know. Me neither.”

“And I didn’t want to hurt you. Whether you can believe me or not, I love you.”

Wiping her nose, she shakes her head. “Please, don’t. This is the first time I’ve been able to be around you that hasn’t felt like fifty people stabbing me with steak knives in the heart.”

“Are you eating?”

“What?”

“Eating. Are you eating?”

Looking up at him, she furrows her brows. “The kids are well fed, Colt. I’d steal before I’d let them go hungry.”

“I didn’t ask about them. I asked about you. Our kids being taken care of isn’t anything I’d ever doubt, no matter what situation you’re in.”

She laughs and sighs in relief. “My appetite hasn’t been present, but I do eat. I have to in order to keep up with the kids. But on the plus side, I finally lost the baby weight I struggled with. So, that’s a silver lining, I guess.”

“You never needed to worry about that. I know I didn’t make it well-known, but I’ve never had any issue with the body that gave me our two kids.”

Her eyes shift to look at the ground, and he can feel her discomfort. “Thank you.”

Getting into her car, she leaves, much less rapidly than the last time they met at his mother’s house, and he watches her leave. His heart breaks knowing she’s leaving him again, but the anger quickly replaces the sorrow. She did this. Damn her.

He walks inside to find Karmen trying to console Calla. “She won’t settle down,” she says and bounces her.

Taking his daughter from her, he cuddles her. “You miss your mommy, don’t you?”

Calla grabs his hand and settles down. Her cries turn to small hiccups, and she slowly falls asleep. No wonder Lex had an issue letting her go. She’s the perfect little image of her. How had he spent so much time away from his family? Away from this little one snoring in his arms?

Noah walks in and says, “She finally stopped crying. We couldn’t get her to stop.”

“Buddy, you should always try and help calm your sister. When she’s sad, we shouldn’t leave her alone,” he says and hands her back to Karmen.

“Really?”

“It’s your job as man of the house to take care of the women. You should always be there when they cry.”

Tilting his head, he studies him. “You didn’t.”

He lets out a deep breath. Noah still hasn't forgiven him for how he spoke to Lex at the clinic, and he's outwardly defiant most of their time together. "I know I was gone a lot when Calla was a little baby."

"Not just Calla."

Colt's eyes look up at his mother who shrugs. "Don't look at me."

"What are you talking about, Noah?"

"Mama. You weren't there when she cried."

"I know things are a little different right now, but they'll settle down. Mommy and Daddy are both sad, especially when you aren't with us."

He shakes his head. "No, before."

"Before when?"

"When we all lived in our house. Together."

"What are you talking about, buddy? When did Mommy cry?"

Noah looks at the ground. "When she would sleep on the couch. She still does, sometimes. Cry, I mean. She sleeps in a bed now."

He closes his eyes. She'd said she didn't sleep in their bed very often because it got to be too lonely, but he never realized just how badly she felt. "Did she cry a lot?"

"Most nights. One night, I hurt her feelings. When I went to say sorry, she said I didn't hurt her feelings, but I know I did. I was mad at you, not her. When I asked her why she cries, she told me something made her sad. But I know I made her sad."

"What did you say that made her sad?"

"I asked her why you didn't love us anymore. Why you stopped coming home like Alexa and Levi's daddy. She said you still loved Calla and me, but I told her I didn't believe her. But she cried a lot before that, too, but that time was my fault."

His stomach twists as he looks at his son. The truth he can't ignore. "I never stopped loving you, Noah. Or Calla. I was just really busy."

"Mama told us. She said you loved me and baby Calla. But she never said you love her. Did you stop loving Mama? Is that why you never came home?"

Jesus Christ, this kid just twists the fucking knife in his chest. "I will never stop loving your mama."

"Me, neither. I know to go and take care of her now. She's easier to take care of than Calla who just screams her head off. It hurts my ears, but I'll try, Daddy."

Karmen looks at him with a look of pity, and he just closes his eyes, taking a deep breath. It's like peeling back an onion, except each layer reveals something worse than before, and he's nothing but raw and in pain.

Pulling out his phone, he finds Shep's number and calls it.

"Yeah?"

"Hey, I can't make it tonight. I have the kids, and they need me tonight."

Shep pauses a moment until he finally says, "Okay."

"Can I ask you a favor?"

"Depends."

"I'm going to send you Lex's number. Have Brock run a trace on it. She got a new place, and she's had a rough week. I think she could use a visit from you tonight or tomorrow."

"You don't know where she lives?"

Sniffling, he sighs. "No, I don't. Not until she's ready to tell me. She had a hard time saying goodbye to Calla, and I think she needs you."

"You want me to go and check on your wife?"

"I want you to go and check on your friend. It was obvious she doesn't feel like she has any within the club

anymore, and I really want her to know she does. Starting with you.”

“I still fucking hate you.”

“I know. Thanks, Shep.”

Hanging up, he sighs. “Do you want me to put her in the car seat?”

Karmen looks with shock. “You turned down something for the club?”

“I saw how upset Lex was to lose time with the kids. And I have a lot of time to make up for. The club will be fine without me for a night.”

“There just might be hope for you yet, Colt,” Karmen says. “Sure, go ahead and get her into the car seat.”

He takes his daughter and walks outside. There may be hope for him, but he doesn't think there's hope for his marriage. He might just be screwed.

# Chapter 13

## *Griffin's Beach*

*Lex*

Lex sits at the kitchen table of her rental place with a bottle of wine in front of her. The home may not be large, but it has enough space for her and the kids. They each have their own room, and she feels accomplished. Accomplished but sad.

This wasn't how she imagined her life ending up. Being a single mother still madly in love with her ex while working and paying bills on her own never entered her mind. Neither had walking away from the man she married and loved with all her heart. But life's a bitch sometimes.

With the kids at Colt's for the weekend, she can drink her dinner. She can drown her sorrows in the alcohol just like he did in Black Valley with no one to take care of besides herself in the morning. The thought depresses her more than it comforts her, but she still takes another drink from the glass.

Her phone vibrates, and when she sees Colt's name on the screen, she panics. Answering, she tries to keep herself calm. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," Colt says. "The kids wanted to say goodnight to their mama. Hold on, I'll figure this out."

Her screen sounds, and a video call request appears. She answers to see both kids on the screen with their father, and she laughs as he squints.

"Mama!" Calla shouts as she slaps her father's arm and tries to reach for the phone.

"Hey, Mama! We wanted to say goodnight!" Noah says with a wide smile.

Tears spring to her eyes. Never in a million years did she think she'd ever need to say goodnight to her kid on video. Or not being there to tuck them into bed every night.

“You can see us, right? I did this right?” Colt asks.

Smirking, she nods. “Yes, you did it right. Goodnight, Noah. Are you being good for Daddy?”

He nods. “We are!”

“Good. You both sleep tight, and I’ll see you soon.”

“Mama!” Calla shouts. “Ma-ma-ma-ma-ma.”

“Good night, sweet girl. Mommy loves you both.”

“I don’t know if this helped or made things worse, but I wanted you to see them before they went to bed,” Colt says, shifting to set Calla in her crib.

Smiling, she holds back the tears. “It was nice. Thank you, Colt.”

“Have you eaten yet?”

Holding her glass up, she smirks. “Drinking my dinner tonight.”

“Been there. It doesn’t go well. Trust me. Eat something.”

“Good night.”

They hang up, and she breaks down into sobs. Resting her head on the kitchen table, she lets out a cry of pain. Not being with her kids hurts worse than she ever thought possible. With her childhood, she never imagined having kids. Now, she can’t stand being away from them.

Looking at the clock, she decides fifteen minutes of wallowing is more than enough time, and she stands to splash cold water on her face in the bathroom. Enough is enough. She’s a tough, badass woman, and it’s time she remembers it.

A knock from the front door startles her, and she splashes water onto her shirt. The only person she gave her address to was Karmen. And even if she gave it to Colt, he couldn’t be here. It annoys her how her heart hopes he stands there with the kids for her to wrap up in her arms.

“Hey, babe,” Shep says when she opens the door.



“What are you doing here?” She looks outside, expecting to see others. “How did you know where I live?”

He pulls her into a hug and holds her tightly as she clings to him. “Colt gave me your number to have Brock trace. Said you might need a friend tonight.”

Damn her estranged husband for being sweet when she wants to be angry still. If only he'd been this version of himself *before* she decided to walk away, they wouldn't be where they are right now.

“He video called me to say goodnight to the kids. I never expected any of this, Shep.”

Leading her to the steps, they sit, his arm still wrapped around her shoulders. “None of us expected any of this. Especially with the two of you.”

“I'm so fucking angry.”

“Why?”

“Because he does sweet things like this now. Video calling me, which, why the fuck did he do that? He switched back to a flip phone five years ago because he hated the new technology.”

Laughing, he rests his cheek on the top of her head as she sighs onto his shoulder. “Because he's trying to be a better man now, I guess.”

“Yeah, well, why couldn't he do that before? I literally begged him, Shep.”

“What'd he do when you asked him to stay?”

Tears form in her eyes as she remembers the last night they were together, and she wipes them away. “Basically told me he had obligations to the club, and I should understand it. All I was asking for was a weekend. Two days at the house with us because he'd been gone so much. Calla didn't know who he was.”

“He still left after that?”

Lifting her head, she lets out a deep breath and leans forward. “He did. Two hours later, I think it was. I fought as hard as I could, I swear. The night I left, I tried to talk to him. To give him a chance before I packed us up, and he didn’t answer. I texted after that and said we needed to talk, and when I called again, he ignored me.”

“Are you sure he ignored it? Could he have not heard it? Or been busy and not able to answer?”

The questions make her bristle. Shep’s *her* friend. He’s supposed to side with *her*. The club rears its ugly head yet again. “It only rang twice both times. When I called Psycho, he said he won a room in a game of poker and disappeared.”

“I didn’t mean to-”

“I know. It’s how it goes. You’re brothers.”

His hands take hers and force her to turn and look at him. “The only reason I asked was to make sure you knew, without a doubt, there wasn’t a rational explanation. Something that maybe you could forgive him enough to talk to him. And the reason isn’t for him. It’s for you. I can see how miserable you are.”

“I’m just so sick of the club.”

“Talk to me.”

How does she begin to explain? “It’s always come before me. I finally understand how Lily felt. And why she and Phoenix almost didn’t make it to the altar. It’s so easy to feel invisible. And when the person who’s supposed to see you ends up being the one to make you feel two inches tall, it hurts. It really fucking hurts.”

He grinds his teeth. “Why didn’t you talk to any of us? We would’ve had a conversation with him. It might’ve involved our fists, but it would’ve taken place. Straightened his shit out fast.”

“You have to understand how hard it is to trust anything with the club. Especially when VP told me to suck it up when I called him. And, if I’m honest, I think I’m still angry that they took you and Psycho away. Yeah, you came

back, but that's when everything just seemed to get so messed up. And I'm tired of settling and dealing with shit because that's what I'm supposed to do."

He laughs. "Yeah, I get that."

"It's not just the club for him, though. Something's going on with him. Something dark. He wouldn't talk to me, so I have no idea what it is, but I could see it. I think it drove him to the place he's at now."

"We still could've talked sense into him."

"And said what? If he didn't fix his shit, I'd leave? Because I hate to break it to you, but it didn't do shit when I said it. Besides, if Lacey reaming his ass for missing Calla's party didn't shift anything, nothing was going to."

Cracking his neck, he sighs and looks at the darkening sky. "This whole situation is so fucked up."

"You're preaching to the choir there."

"He seems to be snapping out of it now, though."

"Too little too late. Then again, he probably had to. Karmen said TK and Jennings talked to Chicago and stopped him from going out there. Which, in my opinion, is far too late. It just... God, I'm so pissed off."

His hand rubs along her back, and the sound of a passing car catches her attention. It's been so long since she's lived in the city compared to the isolated little oasis they called home, and certain things like cars driving by takes some adjustment. But she can't shake the feeling she's being watched. Randomly, every day, it feels like eyes watch her.

"Why? Don't you want him here for the kids?"

"I do. But I wanted him here for the kids before. He missed so much willingly, and he'll never get that time back. All the milestones he wasn't there for. But people asked all the time why he was gone so much. If it was causing issues with us. But no one did a damn thing. Except Lacey, but she's an old lady. We don't exactly count. By then, the damage was already done."

“You could’ve come to us, too, babe.”

Leaning down, she hugs her legs and rests her chin on her knees. “If you really believe that, you don’t understand at all.”

“Explain it to me.”

“You know old ladies don’t get to dictate what happens in the club. Yeah, we’re a little more progressive than we were before, but if Heidi went to Jennings to say you couldn’t go out of town anymore, he’d nicely tell her to go fuck herself.”

“Heidi isn’t you.”

Chuckling, she turns to rest her cheek on her knees. “I’m a strong advocate for those around me, but I’ve never been good at doing it for myself. It feels selfish. Probably a product of my childhood. But at the end of the day, I know I will never come before this club with anyone. Whether it’s right or wrong, I didn’t feel like I could come to the club. Not after VP and Psycho let me down. But more than that, Colt let me down. No, it was more than that. He destroyed me.”

“I don’t like hearing that.”

Heidi pulls into the driveway, and she steps out holding a garment bag. “Hey, baby.”

“Hey, hot stuff,” Lex says with a wink, making Shep chuckle.

Her sleek brown hair hangs down her back, and Lex can’t help the jealousy of her excitement and love. She wants it back so much it makes the ache in her chest pound even harder.

“What do you have there?” she asks, eyeing the bag suspiciously.

She holds it up and unzips the bag to reveal a deep blue bridesmaid dress. “What do you think? Is it maid of honor worthy?”

“You’re asking me to be your maid of honor?” she asks with a laugh. “Seriously?”

Nodding, she smiles. “You’ve been there for me since the beginning. Never judged me for my past, and you have always been there for Taylor. Hell, you gave me your last name.”

“Are you sure it’s a good idea considering the current state of my marriage? I might be bad luck for you.”

“Hey, it’s either this or standing on my side with jeans and leather as my best man,” Shep says. “I already asked Psycho, but I’ll kick his ass to the curb.”

“Not Ty?”

He rolls his eyes. “That guy... Ty has a fear of public speaking. Even though we don’t do speeches, and I’ve tried to tell him that, you know how he gets.”

“Well, as tempting as it sounds to swap Psycho and me to see him in that dress right there, I think I’ll pull it off better. Maybe. Besides, the only leather I have won’t ever get worn again.”

Slapping himself on the side of the head, he cringes. “Shit, I’m sorry. I wasn’t thinking when I said that.”

“It’s okay. The property kutties aren’t as big as they used to be, and I rarely ever wore mine. In public, anyway. It’s easy to forget,” she says and looks at Heidi. “As for you, I’d be honored to be your maid of honor. But I refuse to plan the wedding in a week. Been there, done that. Never again.”

# Chapter 14

*Griffin's Beach*

*Heidi*

Heidi wears a skin-tight, strapless, white dress that barely covers her ass. The cleavage she achieves with the tight bodice turns even her on, and she can't wait to go home to Taylor later and get his reaction. Chances are, this dress will be a one-time wear.

"Where are we going?" she asks Lex, who wears a little black dress and matches all the other guests. There was apparently a dress code she wasn't aware of, but she likes it. She pops.

They ride in a party bus, drinking and dancing on stripper poles. This couldn't be more perfect.

"Somewhere you're very familiar with, don't worry," Lex says as they pull into the Puffy Taco parking lot.

"You brought me to work?" as Ashley and Melanie chuckle beside her in the party bus they sit in.

"Didn't you know? You're going to dance for us," Melanie says, her own cleavage rivaling Heidi's.

"I never got to see you on the pole, but I heard you were fantastic," Ashley adds, downing her bottle of sparkling water. She may not be drinking alcohol, but she still seems like a good time.

"Oh, she was," Lex and Melanie say at the same time.

"Seriously, what are we doing here?" she asks.

They all step out of the bus, some more gracefully than others. Pretty much every old lady from the Griffin's Beach charter showed up, and she can't help but feel overwhelmed. She went from having no family to having one of the largest ones she could have ever asked for.

“I told Shep I needed a venue for your party, and he talked to the guys to have the club closed for the night,” Lex says. She unlocks the front door and lets everyone shuffle into the dark room before she hits the lights. “Hit it!”

Music and strobe lights fill the room as male strippers walk out to the stages to Heidi’s old song. Every one of them buff and gleaming as they put on a drool-worthy performance.

Turning, she gapes. Lex pulled all this off? By herself? Holy shit.

Avery gasps beside her, and Lex grabs her, reassuring her it’ll be fine. “It’s okay, babe. I got you.”

“How?” She meant for more words to come out, but this is all she can muster. One word. One amazed word.

“I have a lot of free time on the weekends now, and I’ve never really gotten to throw one before. Plus, you kind of have to go big for a former stripper. I mean, come on.”

Lily walks up and wraps her arms around the hostess. “I plan to get really drunk tonight, so don’t let me do anything too dirty with the strippers.”

“Just wait,” Lex says with a laugh. “There’s one you’ll want to slip away with later.”

She gasps. “I’m a married woman, thank you!”

Tess Molloy and Goldie walk up to congratulate Heidi, but she knows they want to grill Lex. See how she’s doing, and considering the way things went that night at the clubhouse, try and get information she doesn’t plan to give.

“Hey, kid,” Tess says and wraps an arm around Lex. “How you holding up?”

“I’m fine,” she says, her smile never reaching her eyes. It’s a theme Heidi’s noticed recently, and she hates it. “How are you? Ready to start slipping dollar bills into some g-strings?”

Avery rubs her arm. “You don’t have to put on a show for us.”

“She’s not putting on a show for you. She put this show on for me!” Heidi interrupts. “Because she’s the best maid of honor ever!”

The women cheer as buff men in black speedos and bow ties walk around with trays of various drinks. Each woman gets the drink of their choice, assigned by Lex, and Lily gapes.

“I so wish you were here for my bachelorette party!”

“It wouldn’t have been this wild. Or half this wild. Lord help us if Melanie and Jace ever decide to get married. I’m not sure if we can top this for her.”

Melanie stands at the stage with Autumn and Felicity, all waving money in the air as men gyrate and thrust their goods in their faces.

“Yeah, I have no idea how the hell you could top this,” she agrees.

“You’d have to set up a porno set,” Heidi says. “Luckily, that girl is never getting married.”

Tara stands next to them, staring in shocked awe. “I feel like I shouldn’t enjoy this.”

“Why not?”

“Because I have a boyfriend.”

“We all do!” Autumn shouts, and Felicity immediately slaps her. “I mean... shit.”

Lex nods her head. “Because I feel like I’m going to get this many times tonight, let’s just set the record straight. I’m fine. Everything is fine.”

“No, it’s not,” Tess says. “You’re not in the clubhouse with us anymore.”

“This is a party. We’re here to celebrate Heidi’s last days of freedom before she’s tied down for the rest of her life!” Lily says.

“Until she doesn’t want to be anymore.”



Lex bristles, but to her credit, she doesn't snap back. Instead, she hurries to the stage, shooing the men away. "Okay, ladies, I have a few surprises for some of you. I need the bachelorette up on the stage, along with Tara, Avery, Lily, and Melanie."

They all walk up, unsure what to expect, but she drags chairs for them to sit on and whips out blindfolds.

"What the hell are you doing to us?" Lily asks with a laugh.

Heidi nods to Melanie, who puts the blindfolds on without question. Music starts, and the women start laughing and screaming. She feels a man grinding on her, giving her a lap dance, and part of her hates how much she enjoys it. Hell, it's her last night of freedom, right? Why let guilt take over?

Avery screams, followed by Tara, and soon, the blindfold slips off Heidi. Grinding on her lap is none other than Taylor. She turns her head and sees Ty, Tripp, Phoenix, and Jace, all on their women dancing.

Lex stands over with Felicity away from the mothers of the club, no doubt keeping her distance. As much as she wants to enjoy Taylor dancing for her for a change, she can't help but stare at the amazing woman putting her feelings aside to do something this extravagant for her. To subject herself to the scrutiny of others just to give her something she'll always remember makes her want to murder Colt.

"Baby, I kind of expected a little something more from you," he whispers in her ear. "I know I'm no professional, but I thought you might like this."

"I do," she says, kissing him.

Lex's voice booms over the sound speaker. "No touching the dancers! You know the rules!"

Tilting her head back, she laughs. Lily runs her hands down Phoenix's chest, and she has to admit, Lily's man can dance. "Damn, Lil."

"And everyone wonders how I got knocked up with twins. Look at how hot my man is!"

Even Avery enjoys herself, laughing and loosening up with Tripp doing whatever it is he's doing on her. Lex knew the women who would really enjoy a lap dance from their man as well as the ones who needed a little reassurance. She wants everyone to have fun and feel comfortable.

After the song ends, they all cheer, even Tess, who shakes her head at her son. Taylor looks to Lex. "Do we have to leave? This looks like a hell of a lot of fun."

"That's up to the bachelorette. This is her party."

"You men can stay on one condition," Heidi says. "We all play a round of never have I never."

Everyone looks around and nods. Winking, Taylor says, "This should be fun."

Melanie jumps into the circle. "Never have I ever been married."

Looking around, half the women take a drink along with half the men. This could get dangerously fun fast.

One by one, everyone says something even more risqué than the last, the alcohol loosening up some normally tight lips. "Never have I ever had sex on a party bus," Avery says, surprising everyone.

Melanie, of course, takes a drink. Heidi giggles and does the same.

"We may have to change that, baby," Tripp growls, and she meets his gaze with no embarrassment or shame.

"Never have I ever filed for divorce from my husband and father of my children," Tess says, her eyes never leaving Lex.

"Mom!" Tripp shouts.

Taylor stiffens next to Heidi, obviously on edge.

Looking around the room, Lex lets out a sigh, holds her glass up, and downs the rest of her drink. "Happy?"

"Are you?"

“This isn’t the time or place, Tess-”

“You don’t even wear your ring anymore. You really just said fuck him and fuck the club, didn’t you?”

Lily tilts her head. “Didn’t you leave Jennings a few years ago? Talked about divorce and moved in with Goldie?”

“That was different.”

“Why? Because it was you and not Lex?”

“Because she didn’t actually leave him,” Goldie says. “Lex voluntarily left Colt. Do you have any idea what I’d give to have my husband back? You know, the one who died?”

Heidi never knew Trunk, but she’s heard of him. An Original Ten and best friend to Jennings who gave his life to protect and save his President.

“You don’t know what’s been going on with them, so you don’t get to comment or criticize,” Avery says, surprising everyone.

“Avery, it’s okay,” Lex says.

“No, it’s not okay. Everyone acts like this is just something you decided one day instead of realizing how much shit you must have gone through to be pushed this far. If I know that, they sure as hell should.”

Tess’s face falls as she looks at her daughter-in-law. “Avery-”

“No, you don’t get to stand up there and judge her. None of us do. And there are many of you have either thought about leaving your man or actually did it at one point. This life is hard, but you know what we all had? Lex to turn to. The one who helped us get through it all and kept us going. Leave her alone, Tess. And you, too, Goldie.”

Lex looks at the ground, her arms wrapping around her waist. Tess shakes her head. “I just don’t understand it.”

“And you don’t have to,” Ashley says. “But you have to respect it. We all know she would do the same for all of us if we were in her place. No, you know what, she wouldn’t.”

She'd ask questions to understand why we left, and then she'd go to our men and tell them what fucking assholes they were to deserve it. That's what she'd do."

"Can we stop this, please?" she asks. "This party's for Heidi, and, well, now Shep, too. Let's just have a good time."

Signaling to the back, the male strippers come back out in various costumes, and the music starts up again. Tess walks over to Lex, and Heidi releases Taylor to walk over with Melanie. Lily and Ashley join her in a sign of solidarity. Good. Strength in numbers and all that with the matriarch of the entire club.

"I should go and check on the food. I'll be right back," Lex says and hurries to the back.

Heidi looks at Tess and Goldie. "If you can't keep your opinions to yourself, maybe you should leave. She did all this knowing the people she's trying to distance herself from would be here, but she did this for me. You ruined that incredibly selfless gesture."

Turning, she walks back through the doors reading EMPLOYEES ONLY to find Lex holding onto the sink, her shoulders shaking.

"Lex?"

"I'll be okay," she says. "Go back out and enjoy the strippers. They come highly recommended."

Her heart breaks. "You don't have to be strong for me."

"This is your party, Heidi. Go, enjoy it."

"But-"

"Please!" she shouts. "Please, I just need a couple of minutes."

Swallowing, she slowly backs up. "I'll get another drink for you."

"Thanks."

She walks back out, and Taylor looks at her. "Is she okay?"

Shaking her head, her hands ball into fists at her sides. “No, she’s not okay. Tess, Goldie, you’re out. Anyone else who has opinions about what Lex is going through, you can leave, too. I don’t care how you get home, but get the fuck out.”

The two women look at each other. “You’re kicking us out?”

“Yeah, I am. What you and everyone else have done to Lex is incredibly cruel. And if you stay, I won’t be able to enjoy my own party. The party she threw, so just go.”

Lily smirks as they toss their drinks on the table and head out the front door. “Heidi, I think I love you.”

“As much as you loved your man giving you a lap dance?”

“I don’t think I love anything as much as that.”

“Good. Go to the VIP room and make him give a private show. There’s also a lock on the door in case you want to try for your second set of twins.”

Phoenix lifts her up and carries her, laughing, back to the VIP room. Her man slinks up and kisses her temple. “Do I need to go and check on her?”

“Yeah, baby, you do. I’ll be here when you’re done.”

# Chapter 15

## *Griffin's Beach*

### *Lex*

Lex sits outside her house the morning after Heidi's bachelorette party. She expected there to be comments, but the way Tess and Goldie attacked her cut deep. Deeper than she thought possible.

Colt has the kids for another few hours, so she just has to find something to pass the time until then. It's been months since she moved into her own place, and while it's gotten easier to deal with, her pain without her husband hasn't lessened much. And it only gets worse when he has the kids.

A familiar blue sedan pulls into her driveway, and she considers locking herself inside. At the end of the day, she knows there's no hiding from this. Even if she wants to, so she takes a deep breath and braces herself for an attack.

"Hey," Tess says, her long, dark hair pulled back away from her face to showcase the sharp angles that make her so damn beautiful. God, she wants to hate her.

"Hey."

The woman walks up to her, stopping at the foot of the porch. "I came to apologize for last night."

"It's fine."

"You've gotten so used to saying that, haven't you?"

Shrugging, she purses her lips. "Saying what I really feel doesn't do any good, so yeah, kind of."

"Lex, what happened?"

Like she plans to tell her. "The same thing that happens to all couples."

"Which is?"

"The club."

“See, that’s what I don’t understand. You are the club. I fought like hell for you, and you were part of the reason I left Jennings. How he treated you wasn’t the way a man should treat any woman. How can the club get in the way when it’s a part of you?”

Licking her lips, she rests her chin on her hand. “Because it’s not my club. Not anymore. The club became more important than me, but worse, it became more important than our kids. I will never let them go through the same childhood I did.”

“Then talk to him, sweetheart.”

“You think I didn’t try?” she asks with a laugh. “That I didn’t do everything I could short of driving out to Black Valley and dragging him back home by his hair? I tried, Tess. I tried every day for a year. And you know what he did? *He* stopped trying. *He* gave up. It was only a matter of time until I was forced to realize that I was fighting for something that wasn’t mine anymore.”

Her eyes stare at her hard, and she knows she’s trying to read between the lines. “And you didn’t talk to anyone in the club about this? To get them to step in and try and help?”

“Yes, I did. My dad basically told me to fuck off, and Psycho didn’t want to do anything. But would you want someone to force Jennings to come home to you when it was clear he didn’t want to be there? To have someone else manipulate the situation so you have him home, but he’s still not yours anymore? Is that what you’d want?”

“No, but-”

“I fought until I was bloody and bruised. It’s not easy for me. And I don’t think it ever will be, but I wouldn’t have survived staying in the situation I was in. It was killing me. I don’t expect you to understand it, but it’s the truth. I was dying. The person I became was someone I couldn’t even look at in the mirror anymore.”

Moving towards her, Tess sits next to her on the stairs. “Do you really believe he cheated?”

“I was sent a butt naked picture of him along with a sonogram in the lovely care package from hell she sent me. At this point, it’s not really a matter of whether he did or he didn’t. He put himself in the position for me to doubt him. To doubt us. That’s the moment I knew we were broken, and I had to stop trying to put the broken glass together because I was bleeding out. And the worst part is that no one saw it, and if they did, they didn’t care.”

“I didn’t know.”

“You didn’t ask. You assumed.”

Nodding, she giggles. “Yeah, that’s true.”

“I still love everyone in the club. I always will. But I can’t be in that environment anymore. I can’t be reminded every day what I lost and don’t have anymore. The thing that came before me and my family and broke us. Can you understand that?”

“Yeah, hunny, I can.”

“I also can’t be the strong one anymore. The person with all the answers and fixes all the problems. That pedestal grew way too damn high, and I’m scared of heights. I have nowhere else to go but down, and I don’t want to fall on my face any more than I already have.”

Her hand rubs Lex’s arm. “We miss you.”

“I miss you, too. Well, right now, I don’t miss *all* of you. But the club was my life for so long. I just need a break and to step back because I can’t do it anymore. The pain becomes unbearable when I’m with everyone.”

“Like last night?”

“Especially last night. I’m on the outside looking in now, and it’s easier to pretend that’s not the case when I’m not around it. But it was for Heidi, so I put my big feelings aside. She deserved that party.”

“You deserve to be happy, Lex. I think part of the reason I took it so personally is because I wish you would’ve



talked to me. Let me know what was going on. You have a big problem.”

She laughs. “Just one?”

“Pretty much. You try to handle all the big things on your own. You don’t let people in, and it was only a matter of time before you broke. It took a lot longer than most of the women in the club, but it was inevitable with the way you were going. I know it hurts, but we’re still here for you.”

“Thanks, Tess. That means a lot.”

“Although, I should slap you silly for last night.”

Raising her eyebrows, she turns and looks at the older woman. “Excuse me? Me?”

“Yes, *you*. My daughter-in-law talked back to me for the first time since I’ve known her. She learned that strength from you, you know that?”

“Avery’s stronger than I’ll ever be. She just doesn’t realize her own strength.”

“Ain’t that the truth?”

“I appreciate you stopping by.”

Tess kisses her temple and stands. “I meant what I said. I’m still here if you need me. Your mother may be in Arizona, but you have plenty of surrogate mothers still here for you. Even Goldie. You should have heard her chew my ass on the way home. You know she sucks at apologies.”

“Don’t we all?”

Lex watches the older woman drive away, and her chest aches. She always loved Tess, and thinking she hated her hurt. But it hurts more knowing she’s without the family she depended on, even though she rarely leaned on them.

Another familiar white vehicle pulls into her driveway, and she smirks at the peace sign Goldie gives her. The feeling of being watched makes the hairs on the back of her neck stand up, and she looks around for any sight of someone who doesn’t belong.

“I come in peace,” Goldie says, her crazy, blonde perm seemingly growing taller with every passing year. “What’s wrong?”

“I don’t know,” Lex says and takes one last look around. “Something doesn’t feel right.”

“Like what?”

How does she explain it? There’s nothing that goes bump in the night. No threats of any kind. But someone watches her. She knows it. “I don’t know yet. What’s up?”

She sits down next to Lex. “About last night... the thing... and then... well... we left... and, yeah.”

Turning, she looks at her with her face scrunched up. “What?”

“Fuck, I’m never good at this. With Trunk, I just had to take my top off, and all was forgiven. That wouldn’t work on you by chance, would it?”

“Uh, no. I appreciate the offer, though. It’s been a long while since anyone offered to get undressed for me. I’m in one hell of a dry spell.”

“How long?”

How long has it been? “God, we’ve been separated for about six months or so, and it was at least four months before then. Ten months?”

Her jaw drops. “You’re lying.”

“I wish,” she says and leans against the railing. “I’d be lying if I said it wasn’t one of the things I miss the most. Being manhandled and thoroughly fucked always made everything better.”

“It was really that long?”

“Before that last time, it had been a couple of months at least. It’s hard to have sex with someone who never comes home.”

Her bottom lip trembles. “I’m sorry for what I said to you last night.”

“It’s okay-”

“No, it’s not. I get jealous of everyone who has men in their lives, and I get so green with envy that I don’t see the rest of it. It’s my own little pity party I wallow in. But that’s not fair to you. I basically told you that you should just suck it up and suffer in a bad marriage because I lost my husband. That’s just stupid.”

“You didn’t know, Goldie. No one did, really. I didn’t want you to. Part of it was protecting him. The last thing I wanted was bad opinions of him because I was complaining. But the other part was protecting myself. I didn’t want anyone to see the pathetic person I’d become.”

Her hand rubs Lex’s back. “You aren’t pathetic.”

She lets out a loud laugh. “Oh, I was as pathetic as they came. Deep down, I still wish he’d show up here, apologize, tell me how wrong he was, and we’d be okay. It would take some time, but we’d be okay. I hate that part of me so much.”

“Would it be okay?”

“If he could admit he was wrong and take accountability for his actions, I think we could. Assuming my kids don’t have a half-brother or sister out there somewhere. That may not be something I could get over.”

“Is it really a possibility?”

The feeling of eyes on her disappears, and she turns her head when a tree branch snaps around the house. Was someone here?

“Anything’s a possibility,” she says and turns back to Goldie. “He wasn’t fucking me, and he wanted to be out in Black Valley for some reason. He and I got so far away from each other, it’s the doubt that kills me the most.”

“Lex, I wish I could say or do something to make it all better.”

“Tell me you won’t hate me if I decide to move on with my life. Without Colt and without the club.”

Giving her a smile, she nods. “I wouldn’t hate you. I’d be a hypocrite because I’ve been kind of seeing someone outside the club for a couple of months now.”

“What?”

“No one knows, so you can’t say anything. Not even Tess.”

Her jaw drops open. No way.

“Don’t look at me like that. A woman has needs. It’s nothing serious. Just sex. My heart went with Trunk, and I’ll never have it back to give to someone else. And I’m okay with that. Do you hate me?”

“I think it’s about time. And as far as your heart goes, I think you have it still. It’s just still cracked and broken. Trunk wouldn’t want you to be lonely, Goldie. I believe that with all my heart. It may be shattered into a million pieces, but all those pieces tell me that.”

“Thanks, baby,” she says and hugs her. “Do what you have to do to be happy.”

If only it was that simple.

# Chapter 16

*Griffin's Beach*

*Colt*

Shep and Heidi's wedding day arrives, and Colt paces the clubhouse. His eyes look at every woman who walks into the place, looking for the familiar blonde he hasn't seen in weeks. Needs to see Lex.

They haven't seen each other since she gave him her number, and the only communication since then has been the occasional message about the kids. He wants to talk to her. He wants to tell her how he feels. How sorry he is. Even though he's still angry as hell, he misses her. She's made her point, and it's time to put this to rest. Over six months is long enough.

"Everyone, head on out to the back and take your seats," Tess calls out.

Ky wraps an arm around his shoulders and leads him out to take their seats. "You're looking kinda desperate, man."

"There's now way she'll miss Shep's wedding, right?"

"I don't think so, but then again, who knows at this point? Something's changed in her."

Colt looks at the ground as Noah's voice fills his head. *You. You changed her. Because you're an asshole.*

"I think it's a combination of everything. Becoming a mother, having two kids to keep up with, and now the other changes in life. It's a lot for anyone," Ky continues.

"Where's Felicity?" If she's here, Lex would probably be with her.

"In the wedding."

Shep stands up at the altar, his hands shaking in front of him. If anyone in the club had money to bet on who would be the one to never take the plunge into marriage, it would be

Shep. Who would have guessed a stripper would cast a spell and turn a one-night stand man into a husband?

Melanie walks down the aisle in a royal blue spaghetti strap dress, falling right below her knees with an A-line skirt, her arm wrapped with Jace's. Her bleach blonde hair falls in curled tendrils landing right above her shoulders, and she smiles at everyone. Until she reaches Colt. Her smile turns into a sneer, and she glares at him.

It's safe to say the women of the club still hate him.

Felicity walks out next with Ty in the same royal blue color gown but in a halter neckline with the hem falling at her feet. Her normally long, wavy dark hair wraps around a fancy clip showing off her slender shoulders.

"Ty's next to get married. You know he follows in Shep's footsteps with everything he does," Ky leans over and whispers.

Colt looks around. He doesn't see Lex slipping into the back of the crowd. His heart sinks. His wife skipped out on one of her best friend's weddings because of him. Sighing, he slumps down and faces forward. Ky slaps his shoulder, and he turns around, expecting to see Heidi. Instead, his mouth drops open as he sees the woman he's searched for all day.

Lex walks down the aisle with Psycho in a strapless royal blue dress that makes her eyes pop. It flairs out slightly at the hips and stops above her knees. Instead of the mess of curls he's used to seeing on her, her hair lays straight with clips pulling the front pieces away from her face.

"Holy shit," he whispers, his mouth suddenly dry. Besides her collarbone sticking out further than it should, she's drop dead gorgeous. It's like he forgot how hot his wife is.

*Didn't you?* Goddamn Casey this time. They're tag-teaming his mind fuck.

"Has she lost weight?" Ky whispers as everyone stands.

They turn to see Heidi walking down the aisle on VP's arm, her dress beautiful but leaving very little to the

imagination with more lace than solid fabric. Shep's eyes pop as his face breaks out into a wide smile, and everyone chuckles.

"Yeah, she's lost about, I don't know, twenty-five pounds or so," he whispers. "Too fucking much."

Gunner officiates the wedding, but very little registers with Colt. His eyes refuse to leave his wife, and he only follows Ky's lead to clap when he should, chuckle when he should, and stand when he should. Before he knows it, they're walking down the aisle and back into the clubhouse.

"Come on, Lex," he whispers. "Look at me. Come on, look at me."

She walks by with Psycho, but her eyes don't glance in his direction. In fact, she doesn't look at anyone in the crowd. As far as he knows, she doesn't realize he's even there, and he feels disappointed. How has all this shit gone so far left?

*Because you're a fucking moron.* Noah's voice makes his eye twitch, but he holds his comment back. They'll commit him if he admits to anyone he hears his dead brother.

"Did you know she was a bridesmaid?" he asks Ky as they wait for their turn to walk into the reception.

"I barely knew Felicity was a bridesmaid. She's still fucking pissed at me, but at least I'm allowed back in the house. And she misses my cock enough that she gives me angry sex, but we aren't what you'd call 'talking' right now."

Sighing, he looks at the ground. "Shit, I'm sorry, man."

"It's not your fault. Well, being in this position in the first place is your fault. You know what? Fuck you, man. This is *all* your fault."

Colt laughs and slaps him on the back as they make their way into the clubhouse. His eyes look around at every female, hoping to spot the one in the strapless blue dress with matching big, blue eyes.

"She's in the kitchen," Shep whispers as he walks past, and his voice comes out so quietly he almost misses it.

Of course, she'd be in there helping get things ready. Plus, it's a convenient excuse to hide. Giving the man a nod, he walks towards the kitchen and opens the door.

Lex stands at the sink, her back to him, and takes deep breaths as she braces herself on the sink. Her shoulder blades stick out as she does, and he can see every vertebra along her spine above the fabric of her dress. She's too damn small.

"You look beautiful," he says.

His voice fills the small, quiet space, and she jumps, whipping around to face him. One hand jumps to her chest while the other holds her stomach. "Jesus, you scared me," Lex breathes. "Thank you."

"You're still too fucking skinny, though. We're going to have to start force feeding you fried food to get meat back on those bones."

She smirks. "I'm trying to work on my appetite. It's slowly coming back."

"That dress suits you. I don't think there's a better color to make your eyes pop."

Her head bends down to look at the dress, and her hands run along the fabric of the skirt as though smoothing non-existent wrinkles. "You think? I couldn't decide if I liked it or not. It's not really me, but I'm also not the one who gets to make this decision."

He leans against the wall. "I do. And I think Heidi picked it for you. It looks the best on you out of all three bridesmaids."

Resting against the counter, she avoids his eyes. "Well, thanks."

"You're hiding."

"Maybe."

"It's not because of me, is it?"

She sighs and crosses her arms over her stomach. "No, not really. Well, not completely. It's weird being back here."



“Why?”

“Because I don’t really belong here anymore.”

“Babe, you will always belong here.”

Reaching up, she runs her hand over her shiny, straight hair. “I’m not an old lady anymore.”

“You’re a daughter of the Drifters. You’ll forever be welcome here. Just like Ashley and Lily and Klaire. Even Phoenix’s sister, London, if she ever decided to come back.”

“I guess that’s true, but I don’t really feel like I fit. Not anymore. It’s all so different now.”

“It doesn’t have to be.”

Sniffing, she looks at the floor, her eyes still avoiding him. “Yes, it kind of does.”

“Is anyone treating you differently?”

“Kind of. The women are friendly for the most part. Then again, Tess and Goldie got their anger out at Heidi’s bachelorette party, but we’re good now. I think. It just feels like we’re all walking on eggshells. I don’t want that. And the men, well, they don’t really seem to know how to act.”

“Because they don’t want to make the situation worse. They want you back.”

She laughs. “No, I don’t think so.”

“They do. They’ve been asking about you for months because you stopped coming to the clubhouse before this shit with us blew up. The last person they want giving up on the club is you.”

“Just because I know so much.”

“No.”

“For the record, I didn’t give up on the club. I just needed distance. For once, I needed for the club not to come first.”

He nods. “I get that.” Her hands shake, and he fights the urge to reach out and hold her. “What’s wrong?”

“I don’t know,” she says with a sigh and looks up to the ceiling. “I don’t know where this anxiety came from, but it feels like I can’t really breathe.”

*Because the last time she was in the clubhouse, you humiliated her.*

“Lex, I have to ask you... Are you sure we can’t fix this? There’s nothing we can do?”

“Have you signed the papers?” she asks, answering in her own way. “The divorce papers.”

He shakes his head, anger rising. “No.”

“It’s not really going to change anything, but if you’d rather work out an arrangement like your parents, I understand. I just need to know-”

“I don’t want this, Lex,” he says, his voice bordering on a growl. “I want our family back. Come on. Can we talk about what we can do to make this work again? What do you need from me to prove things are different? I want you and the kids back in the house every night. It’s not the same without all of us.”

His words seem to have a strange effect on her. Her back straightens, and she takes a deep breath. “It’s not something we can fix. We need to move on. All we seem to do is hurt each other, and I want to put an end to it before the kids are old enough to see and learn from the example we set.”

“What do you mean?”

Her eyes lock with his, and he loses his breath. “If Calla ever ends up with a man who makes her question everything about herself and her worth, I’ll kill him. And if Noah starts treating a woman like she’s just there for his amusement, I plan to beat him senseless.”

The door opens, and she jumps. Lacey sees her, a wide smile appearing on her face, and she hugs her. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to interrupt. Lex, you look amazing.”

“Thanks, Lacey. You’re not interrupting. I should get out there,” she says and walks past him with an armful of

plates.

He watches her leave, his stomach in knots. Her underlying tone hits him hard. She meant him. If Calla ends up with a man like *him*. If Noah turns into the man *he* is. And there's nothing to fix. They can't make things work, and he's fucked. Completely and totally fucked. He should feel despair and overwhelming sadness, but the anger boils over instead. Fine, if that's what she wants, he's done fighting.

# Chapter 17

## *Griffin's Beach*

*Lex*

Lex sits outside on the swing set and escapes the crowd inside. The ceremony was beautiful, and now everyone stuffs their faces with food prepared by Tess and Goldie. She tried to eat, but her stomach tied itself in knots, and she couldn't force anything down.

Thinking back to her own wedding celebration, it should have told her exactly what would happen in the future. She'd been so angry at so many people when she married Colt. The club had betrayed her, but she gave them another chance. Chance after chance after chance. And now, the club broke her world into a million pieces. She's still really fucking angry.

The air inside became thick with tension as the booze started flowing. It became obvious those wearing the Drifter leather don't know how to act around her while Colt watched her from a distance, and it became too suffocating. If it wasn't Shep, and she wasn't the maid of honor, she would be gone by now. Hell, she probably wouldn't even be here.

Tara walks out and sits on the swing next to her. "Hey, you."

"Hey, yourself."

"There's so much going on in there. Man, they really like to party."

Lex smiles and lets out a small laugh. "Yeah, you have no idea. This is tame compared to some others. But you better get used to it because from the way Ty talks, he plans to keep you around for a long time."

"I hope it gets easier. I really love him."

"It does. Trust me. And he loves you, too. He's never brought someone into the club, so that told me right there how special you must be to him."

Her eyes look at the ground where she kicks it with her sandal clad feet. Her bright green nail polish captivates Lex. “I heard about you and Colt. I’m really sorry.”

And the spell breaks. Her eyes glance down to her own feet in the strappy wedge heels that turned out to be much more comfortable than she anticipated. “Thanks. Regardless of my standing with the club, my offer to smack a club bunny around still stands. To be honest, it’s really the only thing that would feel normal in there right now.”

She laughs and nods. “I’ll be sure to let you know. I’m not as worried about them anymore. My ex has my focus at the moment.”

“Excuse me?”

“He’s back and stalking me, but not stalking me. Making it known he’s here, and he’s not going away.”

Before she can say anything else, VP steps out. “Hey, Tara, can I talk to my daughter?”

“Sure,” she says and winks at Lex before walking inside. She makes a mental note to circle back with Tara later.

Her father sits down on the swing next to her, and she realizes she can’t remember him ever playing on playground equipment with her. He was always too busy with Zane, and she went to the park with Diesel and Ky or TK and Colt. But looking at him now, she almost laughs at how large he looks sitting next to her. If she weren’t so angry with him, she might chuckle.

“What’s up, VP?” she asks and kicks to swing a little higher.

“You look beautiful.”

“Thanks.” Her eyes look at the sky. “You wouldn’t have sent Tara inside if that’s what you wanted to tell me. So, what’s up?”

He swallows and looks at the clubhouse. “I can see how uncomfortable you are in there.”

“Well, yeah,” she says with a shrug. “It’s kind of to be expected. Especially since the last time I was here, I was humiliated and showcased the weak woman I became.”

“It’s frustrating for me, kid. The clubhouse always felt more like home than our house ever did when you were growing up. For it to be something that causes you to feel uneasy doesn’t make any sense.”

Sighing, she rests her head against the chain, careful not to avoid her hair catching. “It was different back then. Colt and Zane weren’t patched members. And it was welcoming. I wasn’t separated with two kids. There are clear sides in that room, and a good number are against me.”

“Lex-”

“When a couple in the club splits up, there’s a line drawn. Sides are taken. He’s a brother, so he gets priority. And I get it. Boy, do I. I’m just trying to figure out my new place in the world that doesn’t revolve around the club.”

“Do you really hate the club?”

Does she? Kind of. It pisses her off that she misses it after everything that happened. Everyone in that room used to be her family, and now they’re not. “Yeah, a little bit.”

“Come back. Show your husband and the rest of the assholes what a bunch of fucking idiots they are.”

“It’s not that simple, VP. Not to mention how awkward it is considering you’re one of those assholes. Besides, what am I coming back to? The club broke my family. I wish I could explain how hard it was feeling like I did growing up. To always have other people and this entity come before me. And if it was just me, hell, maybe it would have been easier. But I have two kids to think about. One kid who asked me why Daddy didn’t love us anymore and another who wouldn’t have known her father from a group of strangers. To put them through what I went through isn’t fair to them.”

His eyes turn and lock with hers. “Why didn’t you tell me this was happening? We would’ve stopped-”

“I did!”

“Not all of it.”

“Something was going on with Colt, and I still don’t know what it was. I probably will never know. But I needed you, and you shut me down. Didn’t ask me why. Just said the club needs him, and that I should understand that. That told me everything I needed to know.”

“I’m your father. I want to fix your problems, Lex.”

Sighing, she shakes her head and looks away. “I wish I could believe you. And you can say whatever you want, but the truth is, you’ve never fixed the problems you helped create. Why would I believe you’d do anything now? It’s not just you. I’ve lost faith in pretty much everyone in the club.”

“Lex?” Shep calls as he sticks his head out the back door. “The dance is starting. We need the maid of honor.”

She stands and smooths out her dress. “Duty calls. Good talk.”

“Lex, wait,” VP says and jumps to his feet. “You really feel that way?”

It kills her to admit, “I’d give anything not to.”

Walking inside, Ty walks up to her. “You’re my partner. Psycho had to do something.”

Shocker... her supposed best friend probably had to do something for the club and can’t even dance with her like he’s supposed to. Sighing, she smiles at Ty. “What’s up, handsome?”

He takes her hand, and they move to the middle of the room where the tables have been cleared to make a dance floor. “If I weren’t in a committed relationship, I’d totally try and have dirty wedding sex with you.”

For the first time all night, she laughs. Genuinely laughs, and she tosses her head back as she does. “I needed that. Thank you.”

“I’m not sure whether I should feel flattered or insulted.”

“You’re lucky to have found your girl.”

“I know.”

They finish their dance, and she moves to the refreshment table to see what needs refilling. Everything looks well stocked, and her body freezes when she hears a familiar song. *Please Forgive Me* by Bryan Adams.

“They’re playing our song,” Colt says, his voice sending shivers down her spine. “Dance with me?”

Without an excuse to say no, she turns and lets him lead her back onto the dance floor. Their bodies still fit so well together, and her heart races as he presses her body against his. She remembers all the good times. When being wrapped up in his arms was the only place she could find comfort.

The words hit differently when the second verse starts, and he whispers the lyrics into her ear. His hot breath reminds her just how good they used to be together. How long it’s been since they were truly a married couple. How long it’s been since she spent time in his strong arms, naked and sated.

Just as she’s about to break down into tears at the memories, she thinks about the past year and a half. At the man he’s become. She misses the man he used to be, and that’s a man who won’t be coming back unless he can admit his wrongdoings.

“We can change the outcome, Lex.”

“Colt-”

“It’s been difficult without you. The club isn’t the same without you. I’m willing to try if you are. Just tell me what you need, and I’ll make it happen.”

Pulling back, she looks up at him. “You still don’t get it, do you?”

“What?”

Stopping, she shakes her head. “I can’t tell you what to do because you don’t actually want to. If you did, you’d be asking different questions. You’d want to know how I felt. What happened to make it all go south. Then you’d take the



necessary steps to fix it. This isn't about me or us or our family. It's about your pride."

"Stop being so difficult," he says with a sigh.

"You know what? I can't do this. This is Shep's day."

Shep and Heidi walk over to them. "Babe?"

Looking around, she realizes for the first time they were the only two dancing. Being in his arms captured her full attention and caused her to not notice it was all a set up. A set up to play their song. To expect her to give in because she's always had a difficult time saying no to him when they're this close because her body craves him. And everyone in the room seems to be in on it.

"I don't know why I'm even surprised," she says and shakes her head.

Heidi reaches out, but she pulls out of reach. "Lex-"

"Congrats, you two. I'm really happy for you both, but I think it's time for me take my exit."

"Lex!" Colt calls, grabbing her arm. "Don't do this."

"No, you aren't the victim here. This was a mistake, and I should've said no. This isn't my home anymore." Hurring outside, she stops at her car and takes deep breaths. "Please don't follow me."

Even as she says the words, she knows she lies to herself. She wants him to follow her. To run out, tell her he's never going to stop trying, and he wants to take her back to his apartment and show her just how much he loves her. But he won't. He's still too angry, and as long as he lets the anger consume him, they can't move forward.

"Why do you have to be so damn complicated?" she mutters. "This could be so easily fixed if you weren't so damn stubborn."

She opens the door but hears a scream from the road and freezes. A single gunshot rings out, and she ducks down as motorcycles speed by. Her car door blocks her view, but she

sees a shamrock on the back with some type of flame and dagger. Savage Slashers. Shit.

“Help!” a familiar voice screams out.

Running towards the street, she gasps. “Oh, God.” She runs out to the man lying in the middle of the road with blood seeping from his belly. “Grayson!”

“Help!” Ashley cries. “They just rode up and shot him!”

“It’s going to be okay,” Lex says and covers the wound. “Do you have your cell phone?”

“Yes.”

“Call an ambulance. Tell them an officer has been shot. Grayson, stay awake. Open those eyes,” she orders.

This is not good.

## Chapter 18

*Griffin's Beach*

*Colt*

Sighing, Colt leans against the bar, and he knows it was a terrible plan. He knew it the moment Shep and Heidi approached him with it, but the desire to have Lex back in the club kicked in. He knew it was a mistake and ignored it.

*That's kind of your MO these days, isn't it?*

*Fuck off, Casey.*

"Man, I'm sorry," Shep says as Heidi walks up with him. "We thought-

"I know."

"She looked so at home in your arms. Like how I feel when I'm with Taylor. Safe and secure," Heidi says and looks up at her new husband with such adoration. "She almost looked happy again. It's been so long since she looked it."

Punch. To. The. Gut. "Thanks."

"Jesus Christ," she says with a sigh. "I didn't mean it like that."

"Yeah, you did. But it's okay. My wife hasn't been happy for a long time, and it wouldn't have been that easy. She's too fucking stubborn."

"Who's stubborn?" Shep asks, his eyebrows raised.

Colt takes a step back. It's wrong to hit the groom on his wedding day. "You think this is my fault? She's the one who left."

"Yeah, but why the fuck did she feel it was the only option she had? You know what? No, we're not doing this now. It's my wedding day. We can talk about this further after my honeymoon. I don't want to have to wipe blood off my leather before we leave."

"You're going on a honeymoon?"

“Just for a week. We’re heading to Vegas.”

That’s something they never did. They got married in a hospital bed with a blackmailed judge after finding out he’d knocked her up. They never did anything other than the party for the club, and Shep’s doing everything he never did. Hopefully, he’ll have a better chance at keeping his woman happy.

Melanie shakes her head as she walks up to them. “I told you guys from the beginning it was a bad idea.”

“Shut up,” Heidi says.

“I’m just saying.”

“Do you want to turn that dress purple?”

Ty looks out the window. “Uh, guys? We have an ambulance right outside the lot.”

Colt’s heart races. Lex just left. Or should have left. No matter how angry he may be, he still loves her. “Who?” he asks and takes off running with everyone else following behind him.

They all stop when they see the familiar blonde covered in blood from her elbows down to her knees, ordering people around.

“He’s a cop!” Lex shouts at the EMTs rush over. “I applied pressure to the wound, but he’s lost a lot of blood. He’s still conscious but just barely.”

“Lex,” Grayson says, his voice strangled.

“I got you, Grayson.”

Colt stares at his estranged wife, relief washing over him to see she isn’t injured. The emotion takes him by surprise, especially because it’s not quickly replaced by anger.

*If it was her, you know it would’ve been your fault, right?*

*Fuck off, Noah.*

The Police Chief and Captain of the department pull up. They initially look lost but still bark out orders to remind everyone who's in charge. Julian Black walks over to the cops pulling up while Travis Hall walks up to Lex. The Captain has been Grayson's mentor since he started, and he looks scared.

"What happened?"

"I came out to my car, heard the gunshot, and ducked. Once I knew they were gone, I rushed out and found Grayson like this," she says. "I did what I could to stop the bleeding until help arrived."

"You always seem to be around to save him."

She chuckles. "Dumb luck, I suppose."

"Baby," Ashley cries. "You stay awake, you hear me? You don't get to die."

"We'll meet you at the hospital," Lex says to her before Ashley climbs into the back of the ambulance with her boyfriend.

Walking towards the crowd, she looks down. Colt's stomach churns at the sight of her dress soaked with the dark liquid from her chest to her knees. There's so much blood, and it could have been hers. The thought alone chokes him up. "Lex-

"I look like an extra in a horror movie? Story of my life. I need to clean up, and then I'll tell you what I know," she says and walks towards the clubhouse. Looking at Melanie, she smirks. "Guess it's safe to say this isn't something I'll be shortening to wear again."

"Lex," Diesel says and stops her. "Is Ashley okay?"

"Physically, she's totally fine. Emotionally, she's about one step away from being put into a straightjacket."

"What the fuck happened?" Psycho growls.

Sighing, she slaps her bloody hands on the sides of her skirt and small drops of blood splatter. "I guess cleaning up can wait. I walked out to my car and heard motorcycles. Then

I heard a gunshot. I ducked, but I saw a shamrock and a dagger with flames on the back of the kutte.”

“The Slashers?”

“I assume so. I’ve never seen them up close, but there were about fifteen of them. They could’ve killed him, so I don’t understand why they only shot once. But I also don’t understand why they’d target him. He’s a cop, but they’ve got an issue with us.”

“They knew we were having a wedding, and it was probably just an opportunity,” Diesel growls. “Shep, Heidi, I’m sorry. I gotta head to the hospital to be there for my girl.”

Heidi nods. “Go. Everyone, go. The wedding’s kind of dead at this point, anyway.”

“I’m sorry, baby,” Shep says.

“Make it up to me by taking me home and making love to me in our jet tub.”

Melanie leans against the building and sighs. “To be young and freshly in love.”

“It makes me kind of sick,” Lex says. “Especially because I can never see a jetted tub and think of anything other than the two of them getting naked and freaky.”

“I kind of like it.”

“You would. I’m gonna go clean up and then head to the hospital.”

Colt watches her walk into the building and takes a moment to collect himself. He doesn’t want to leave her alone, and everyone else starts shifting towards their vehicles to head to the hospital in support of a daughter. It doesn’t feel right to leave her.

*Weird concept, huh, big brother?*

He can’t argue with that one, and he heads inside and towards the women’s bathroom. Opening the door, he watches her jump as she looks up into the mirror, his eyes locking with hers in the reflection.

“Jesus, you have to stop doing that.”

“I’m sorry. Are you okay?”

She smirks. “It’s the only thing that’s felt relatively normal today. Which I think is a sign of having an unhealthy environment, but fuck shrinks. The only thing that would’ve felt more normal would be punching out a club bunny again. That actually would’ve made my entire day.”

*There was a time you used to make her entire day.*

Ignoring his brother’s taunt, he says, “You jumped into action.”

“It’s just second nature, I guess. It sucks it happened to Grayson. These assholes need to be dealt with the Drifter way, Colt. Psycho-leading-the-charge kind of way.”

He nods. “I promise to make sure it happens.”

“The only guy I saw with a gun had a red handlebar mustache and a beer belly. If you want to keep a promise to me, promise me you’ll find him and make him suffer. Something tells me he’s bad news.”

Swallowing, he looks at the ground. “In order for me to keep a promise like that, I have to go back out to Black Valley.”

“I’m not the one who ordered you to stay here. The only thing I ever asked of you was to be home more often than you were.”

Fuck, that’s true. “Yeah, I know.”

“As long as you’re spending time with the kids, that’s all that matters. And if you need to be in Black Valley to make these guys pay for what they’ve done, so be it.”

His eyes lock with hers as she turns and leans against the sink. “You’re sure it wouldn’t bother you for me to be out there? Knowing Diane’s still there? Well, unless Lacey murdered her. I don’t exactly keep in touch.”

“It would make me a hypocrite if I was upset.”

“What do you mean?”

Her eyes cast to the ground. “I decided a week or so ago that I need to start seeing other people. See what’s out there besides the club. You know, rip the bandage off.”

Stomach dropping, he gapes at her. “You’re going to start... dating?”

“Nothing serious,” she says. “It’s been over six months, and I can finally say I don’t cry at the mere thought of you anymore, and I don’t want anything serious. But it’s time to figure out what else is out there for me. You know, normal, boring people.”

“That’s really what you want to do?”

Her cheeks puff, and she slowly blows air out. He’s overwhelmed with the sight of her mixed with the metallic scent of blood filling his nostrils to the point he can taste it. Or maybe it’s the blood from biting his cheek in scared frustration he tastes. He can’t decide if he’s angry, upset, or devastated. Maybe all three.

“Trust me, what I want and what I’m doing are very different things. But what I want isn’t what I can have, so I need to try something else. It’ll probably suck, but there are a lot of new things that aren’t awesome in my life I’ve had to get used to. This is just another one of them.”

“Do you have dates lined up?” His voice comes out strangled, and he barely breathes. Like someone Ky’s size bear hugs him too long.

“No, not really. I’ve had a few invitations that I’ve turned down, but I think I might take some of them up on offers for dinner when you have the kids. Sitting at home alone is depressing, and I need to stop drinking my dinner.”

“Lex-”

“It’s time we move on, but I wanted to be the one to tell you. I didn’t want you to find out by randomly seeing me out with someone or hearing it from God only knows who. My goal isn’t to hurt you, Colt. I wasn’t sure if you’d even really care, but I thought you should know.”



Hurt him? This actually really fucking hurts. And not care? How could he possibly not care? He can't find the words to say anything, so he just nods like a mute idiot.

Giving him a sad smile, she wipes her hands and walks to the door. "Looks like I was right."

"About what?"

"Everything. Seeing how happy Heidi and Shep are reminded me of how we used to be. We deserve to find happiness again, Colt. I'm not sure exactly how to do that, but I'm determined to try. You should, too."

Their eyes lock, and he tries to find the words, any words, to tell her how he feels. The problem is, he doesn't know how he feels besides the fact he doesn't want her dating anyone else. And he has no intentions of dating anyone, either.

"I'm going to head to the hospital to check on Grayson. Can you go to Karmen's and spend time with the kids? I'll feel better knowing you're there since we don't really know what the hell the Slashers are doing."

"Of course. Let me know if anything happens with Grayson."

"I will."

She walks away, and he stares in shock. It feels like all the air disappeared, and he welcomes the burning sensation in his lungs because it replaces the overwhelming ache in his chest. An ache he hasn't felt until now.

His wife is done. Completely done with him. But the thought of her with anyone other than him makes him want to murder someone. Rip out their tongue, hang them in the basement, and castrate them.

For once, Noah has no comment. Neither does Casey, and he kind of misses the sarcastic assholes. "Nothing to say now?" he asks aloud. Shaking his head, he clenches his fists. "Put this rage into finding the Irish bastard and make him pay. Be fucking productive. Keep one damn promise to your wife."

# Chapter 19

*Griffin's Beach*

*Ky*

The pale green walls of the hospital waiting room reminds Ky of baby puke. The color hasn't changed since the nineties, and he feels nauseous watching his sister pace the floor in front of him like a hypnotist trying to lure him into a trance.

He tries to focus on the uncomfortable plastic chair he sits on rather than her blood-stained dress he thinks used to be yellow. Now it's an ugly dark brown. Her hands remain red and crusty with the dried liquid, but she doesn't seem to care as it crumbles and falls to the high traffic gray carpet while she wrings her hands.

"I knew we shouldn't have gone to the wedding," Ashley says, her hands slapping the sides of her thighs. "He was so insistent. He doesn't even like Shep. Well, he doesn't dislike him, but it's not like it was Psycho or something. Shep never saved his life."

The rest of the club waits outside the hospital to give the family some space as they wait for a cop to get out of surgery. The fact a group of outlaw bikers wait outside the hospital for a cop blows his mind. Things have definitely changed.

"Ashley, sit down. You're going to wear a hole in the floor," Diesel says. "And you're making your brother as green as these fucking walls."

Her eyes snap to stare at him. "Don't tell me what to do. This is your fault, isn't it? It's because of the club he was shot, I bet."

"I'm not-"

"Just go. I don't want you here. If this was because of the club, you've done more than enough."

Ky stands and walks over to her, but she steps out of his grasp. “I know you’re upset-”

“Upset? I watched the man I’m in love with, the only man who’s ever treated me like a queen, get shot and lay bleeding out in the street. Outside the clubhouse. The place that should be my sanctuary.”

“We’re not the enemy, kid,” their father says.

“This is probably retaliation for Black Valley,” Ky admits. “And if their intention was to kill him, and they find out he’s not dead, those assholes might come back. We’re not leaving you, Ash. Or Grayson.”

Tears fill her eyes, and she avoids looking at him. “You don’t care if he dies or not.”

Pulling her into a hug, she surprises him when she clings to him as her sobs take over. “We care because you care. No matter what we may think about him as a cop, he makes you happy. He’s your other half, and we’d die protecting both of you.”

“What if he doesn’t make it, Ky?”

“He’s a strong motherfucker,” Diesel says. “He’s been shot and beaten and who knows what else. And if it wasn’t club related, this is the type of risk he takes every day when he puts on his uniform.”

She leans back and squints at him. “That doesn’t really make me feel better, Dad.”

“Shit, I was never good at this.”

“Neither was Mom,” Ky says with a laugh. “She’d probably say something horrific, like, ‘What’s meant to be will be.’ Something meant to make you feel better but comes out in the totally wrong context.”

Her laugh startles them, and she wipes her eyes. “Yeah, Mom was definitely not the sensitive one, either. But I do wish she was here right now.”

“I wish she was here all the time,” Diesel says, his voice quiet. It’s no secret their father misses their mother all

day, every day. “And she would’ve sided with Lex when it came to whether we should bless your relationship.”

“It may not have been as eloquently put as Lex, but she would have,” Ky agrees. “As tough as she was, she wanted us to be happy. No matter what.”

“You really think she’d be okay with me dating a cop? I love him more than anything in this world, but part of me always worries she’s even more ashamed of me than before.”

Diesel stands and pulls her into his arms. “Your mother was never ashamed of you. Even when you were in the height of your addiction, she was probably more pissed at us for not doing what we needed to in order to get you out of it.”

“I can’t help but feel like a disappointment.”

“If you’d gotten together with a Devil, she would’ve been disappointed. And we would’ve had to kill you to let her deal with the post-death consequences,” Ky says. “But then she’d be disappointed with us, and the two of you would probably gang up and haunt us, and it would really have just gone to hell fast.”

Reaching over, she slaps his arm. “You’re such a dick.”

Dr. West, the unofficial club doctor at this point, walks out. “Family of Grayson Tate?”

“I’m his girlfriend,” Ashley says.

He glances down at the paperwork and nods his dark brown head. “You’re on his list. He’s out of surgery and on a ventilator. We lost a heartbeat a couple of times on the table, and we’re not sure if there are any lasting effects just yet. We’ll know more if he wakes up.”

“If?” she murmurs. “If?”

Ky watches her blink as she processes the words. He vows to murder whoever the hell did this to his sister. After everything she’s been through, she doesn’t deserve this.

“There’s always a chance. I’m confident he’ll make a full recovery, but there’s always a level of uncertainty. I like to prepare for the worst but hope for the best. He lost a lot of

blood, and we had to repair three vital organs. But we remain hopeful.”

“Can I see him?”

He shakes his head. “Not yet. We just moved him to his room from recovery.”

“But what if he wakes up and no one’s there?” Tears stream down her face. “He can’t wake up alone.”

“Come on, Doc, have a heart,” Lex says and walks into the room from the same direction Dr. West just came from. Ky eyes her suspiciously. “By the way, he’s awake.”

The doctor turns around and stares with a frown. “Alexis? How did you-”

“Really? At this point in our relationship, you’re really going to ask how?”

“How many times do we have to talk about this? That is for authorized personnel only.”

She shrugs in her blood-stained dress and twists from side to side like a school kid. “A sign is just a sign if you choose not to read the words on it.”

Rolling his eyes, he turns back and walks through the doors without another word. Ashley pulls her into a hug. “He’s really okay?”

She nods and gives her a reassuring smile. “Of course, he’s going to be okay. You really believe he’s going to let a biker take him out? Come on, now.”

Ky shakes his head as his sister hurries back to see him. “She’s learning too much from you.”

“Well, it’s about time.”

“What were you doing back there, Lex?” Diesel asks.

“I made a promise to Grayson.”

“You told him you got him when they loaded him up. That wasn’t just about saving his life?”

Chuckling, she tilts her head. “I’m no doctor. No matter how many episodes of *Grey’s* I watched. Pre-McDreamy death, of course. Post-death is just hurtful.”

“You saved him.”

“Nah, but I had to sneak back there to get something before Ashley happened to stumble upon it. And then he confirmed my suspicions that I’m now going to tell you about because you need to act on it.”

Ky leads her to one of the plastic chairs. “What’d you get?”

“You have to promise not to say anything.”

“No,” Diesel groans.

Holding out her hand, she opens it to reveal a little black box. “Yes.”

“He thinks we’d just be okay with it?” Ky asks with a laugh. “It’s one thing for her to be dating a cop. It’s another to have a cop in the fucking family.”

“That’s why he was so insistent about coming to the wedding. I told him he’d need your blessing before she’d accept, and that’s what he wanted to do. Even though I told him it would likely end in a fruitless fight, he still wanted to try.”

“Fuck me,” his father says and leans back. “He was going to put us in a position to be the assholes.”

“Oh, it gets better. After I tell you the second thing, if you still say no, you’re *fucking* assholes,” she says and leans back.

The hair on the back of his neck stands on edge as he stares at one of his best friends. For the first time in a long time, Lex looks like her old self. Mischievous and bold. “What are you talking about?”

Licking her lips, she lets out a sigh. “It seemed weird to me that with fifteen of them, only one had a gun out. And on top of that, they only fired one shot.”

“I don’t understand,” Diesel says with a shake of his head.

“They didn’t aim for Grayson, but he took the bullet.”

Ky’s stomach drops. “What?”

“I had a feeling because it just didn’t make any sense. Do they even know who he is? But then he told me he moved Ashley out of the way and behind him when he saw the gun. That bullet he took had our girl’s name on it.”

“You suspected and didn’t say anything at the clubhouse?”

“I only saw part of the scene, but think about it. They have beef with the Drifters, not the cops. Especially in Griffin’s Beach. It didn’t make sense.”

He jumps up. “Dad, you stay here with Ashley. I’m going to go and talk to Jennings to get a few men to stay here to stand guard. Lex, you’re heading to your new place to change, and then we’re getting your kids. We’re locking you up in your house with men outside for protection.”

“Ky-”

“This isn’t a debate. These men just changed the game by going after our families in retaliation, and I’ll be damned if I let a woman or child of the club take a bullet-or worse-for us. I’m following you to both places. Let’s go.”

Her eyes look to Diesel, who nods at her, and she sighs. “Fine, but for the record, I’ve already taken a bullet for the club. For your family, actually.”

“That’s so not the point,” he groans as she stubbornly walks outside.

## Chapter 20

*Griffin's Beach*

*Diesel*

When Ky left, Diesel asked him to send someone to pick up clothes for Ashley. Her bloody attire makes him sick to his stomach. Seeing her covered in blood brings back too many memories he wants to keep buried until the day he dies. Memories he drinks every night to forget.

She took the clothes Beckett dropped off before heading to Lex's place and finds a bathroom to wash up and change. Diesel takes the opportunity to sneak back to sit next to Grayson's bed while she's preoccupied.

"Hey," Grayson says, his eyes heavy and voice raspy. All things considered, the man doesn't look too bad.

"We don't have a lot of time, so I need to know what happened."

Swallowing, he winces and reaches for the glass of water on the tray by his bed. "We arrived late because she fought me about going in the first place. I'm guessing Lex already told you why I needed to be there."

He nods. "Yeah, she did. We'll get to that, but I need to know about the attack."

The comment clearly doesn't comfort him, and he sighs. "We had to park across the street because the lot was full. We took my personal vehicle, and we heard motorcycles. Part of me thought it might be guys from out of town coming for the party, so I didn't think too much about it. But then I saw them. Fifteen or twenty, I think. I saw one had a gun."

That's what Lex said, but he'd hoped she was wrong. "Lex was right."

"She'd have the best recount of what happened. I guess they didn't want it to be overkill or something. He took aim,



and I realized he wasn't aiming for me. My heart damn near stopped."

"Grayson-

"I grabbed her and threw her behind me. I couldn't push her out of the way because they were coming at us full steam ahead. There was too great of a chance she'd get run over by one of the bikes. If the bullet managed to hit her, at least it would have been slowed down as it went through me. I took the option with the best outcome. I swear it, Diesel. My only goal was to protect her."

Running his hands over his face, he sighs. "She wasn't injured at all."

"I knew this wasn't for me. I've never seen these guys before, and there's no way it was an opportunity to take out a cop. They had no way of knowing I was one. They had a target, and it wasn't me."

"It's fucking retaliation," Diesel says. "The fucking Savage Slashers."

"What'd you do?"

His eyes snap up and lock with his. "I didn't do shit."

"I meant the club. Trust me, I'm not a cop right now. I'm drugged up and just a guy talking to the father of his girlfriend."

"They have beef with the Drifters, and it's escalated. Up until now, it's been out in Black Valley. Guess they decided to attack the mother charter."

"By going after the women of the club?"

Sitting in the chair next to the bed, he sighs and tugs at his beard. "I don't know what their end game is. Why they're doing this shit. What their beef is, exactly, but at the end of the day, we can't sit back and do nothing. They went after my daughter."

"You're gonna want extra security on Lex, Lily, and Kai," Grayson says, his eyes closed as he leans back against the pillow.

“Why?”

“If they went after Ashley because she’s the daughter of the club, they’ll hit twice as hard on daughters who happened to also be old ladies. Or ex-old ladies. Whatever Lex’s title is now.”

He’s right. They’ll get it taken care of. These men won’t get another chance to hurt a woman of their club. “There’s something else to talk about, Tate.”

“The ring.”

“Yep.”

“I don’t know what you want me to say, Diesel. I love your daughter. There’s the whole ‘cop’ thing I know you hate, but I don’t want to ever be without her. And there is no one you could ever find who will take care of her the way I plan to.”

Sniffing, he leans back and stares hard at the man in the white gown with blue diamonds on the fabric. Who the fuck designs these damn things, anyway? No one looks tough wearing a hospital gown. “And you think we’re going to let a cop into the family?”

“I’m not marrying you,” he says with a laugh and winces, his hand clutching his stomach. “Fuck, that hurts.”

“If you marry my daughter, you marry me, her brother, and the whole fucking club. Is that something you’re willing to do?”

“As long as I don’t have to consummate the marriage with you guys, guess I’m okay with it.”

Great, now he has images of this man fucking his daughter. Shaking them from his mind, he leans forward and rests his elbows on his knees. “What happens when you have to decide between your job and my daughter because of the club? What happens then?”

“What are you talking about?” he asks, shifting in a vain attempt to get more comfortable.

“Stop moving,” he orders. “It’s pointless, anyway. Until they give you the next dose of drugs, nothing will be comfortable. All you’ll do is pull at the stitches, and from the sounds of it, you had a shit ton worked on inside of you.”

Sighing, he resigns and falls into the bed. “How do you know this?”

“I’ve been in your spot three times before. Back to the question.”

“Why would I have to choose between Ashley and my job?”

“Dating her is one thing, but being married is another. Will the men on the force trust you because of your relationship with the club? Or will they constantly question if you have a conflict of interest?”

His eyes open, and he stares at the older man. “I have a job to do. And I’ve always done my job.”

“No, you haven’t. Not always.”

“Yes, I have-”

“ATF coming for us ring a bell? We all know you worked with Lex and Lily to give them inside information. Helped form a plan when you were pulled from the inner circle of trust to still get them what they needed to get the assholes off our backs.”

Biting his lower lip, he nods. “Okay, there was that one time.”

“Have you already forgotten about Bane, Ash’s ex? You shot that motherfucker and gave him to us to take care of.”

“They don’t know about that.”

“No, but these decisions come up. I hate to say it, Tate, but that wasn’t the last time you’ll need to decide what side of the law you want to stand on.”

“I plan to tow the line. I think I’ve made decent decisions in the past. Besides, it’s not like we don’t all know

the relationship you guys have with Travis and Julian. How you scratch each other's backs."

He laughs. "It's different. They're not fucking one of our daughters."

"It's more than that," he snaps, his hand gripping his abdomen again. "Jesus Christ, this is worse than the last time I got shot."

"Hit three organs. You're gonna be sore for a while."

"I love Ashley, and I'd do anything for her. But just so we're on the same page, are you asking me if I'd turn a blind eye for the club because of your daughter?"

Wiping his nose, he leans back again. "Do you think you could arrest her father or brother and not feel guilty about it?"

"Whether we're married or not, I'd feel some type of way. Same with Lex or Lily's dads. Not guilty, but not awesome nonetheless."

"If she asked you not to arrest us, would you do what needed to be done to make that a reality?"

His brow furrows. "Do you think she'd ask me to?"

Diesel levels him with a glare. "You know as well as I do that she's got a soft spot for us no matter how tough she seems. Hell, the two of you wouldn't be together right now if it weren't for Lex because my daughter chose us. And if we don't give our blessing, she won't marry you. Is it really that hard to believe she'd ask you to bend the rules to keep us solid?"

"Honestly, I don't know what I'd do. I think it would depend on the situation and what you were being arrested for."

"If it was something you could justify, you'd help us out?"

"I've helped Lex. I've helped Psycho. What's the difference if I add to the list for the Drifters?"

He smiles. “Ashley needs a strong man. I think you’re a strong man, but I think you’re a little naïve to think this won’t cause problems. My concern is whether or not my daughter will get hurt because of it.”

“I’d do whatever I need to make sure she’s good. She’ll never be hurt if I can help it, Diesel. But you are right about one thing: I need your blessing if I have any hope of making her my wife.”

“If my daughter says yes, we’ll give our blessing. If she asks us, we won’t lie and say we don’t have reservations, but we won’t stand in your way, either.”

Grayson’s eyes widen. “Wait, seriously?”

“You took a bullet for her to protect her. There’s nothing else I need to know about what you’re willing to do for my girl. But there is one thing I need from you.”

“What’s that?”

“Take that ring you bought back. I want to give you her mama’s ring.”

“Are you sure?”

Ashley interrupts them by walking into the room and jumps at the sight of her father sitting there with her boyfriend. “Dad?”

“Hey, baby,” he says. “I was just chatting with Grayson to see if he had any other information he could give us about these assholes.”

“I already told you everything,” she says, her eyes narrowed. He knows her suspicions are high.

“I’m a cop, babe,” Grayson says, saving him. “I’m trained to observe more than the average person.”

Her body relaxes, and she smiles at him. “God, I’m glad you’re awake.”

“I’m going to be glad to get the next round of pain meds. This hurts like a bitch.”

“I’m so sorry this happened,” she says and hurries to the other side of his bed, her eyes glaring at her father.

Her hand takes his, and Diesel can’t help but think of Nancy. Ashley and her mother are so much alike it’s uncanny, even if his daughter refuses to admit it. And seeing her with Grayson reminds him so much of his late wife. She was just as protective of him as Ashley is with Grayson.

“I’ll leave you two alone,” he says and stands. “But we have extra men here to keep an eye out. If their goal was to kill a cop, they may come back. So, Ash, you don’t go anywhere without protection. Got it?”

“You really think they’ll come back?”

“Honestly? No, I don’t. I think they have an agenda, and they’re moving forward. But I won’t take any chances with you.”

She gives him a small smile. “Thanks, Dad.”

“Get better soon, Tate. And to answer your question... Yeah, I’m sure.”

# Chapter 21

## *Griffin's Beach*

*Lex*

When Lex pulled up to her house with the kids and Ky in tow, she found Beckett Cohen, one of the Army Five, and Brian Morris already camped outside. She knows things with the club are only getting worse, and she can't decide if her current relationship with them makes it better or worse for her.

She'd changed and gotten the kids down when the familiar sound of a motorcycle catches her ear. Looking outside, she sees Shep walking up to the house.

"What are you doing here?" she asks and opens the door. "Do I really need a third man stationed outside?"

Shep shakes his head and shuts the door behind him. "No, I wanted to talk to you. Heidi's at the clubhouse, so she's safe and sound until I get back."

"The kids just fell asleep, so we'll need to be quiet. Aren't you supposed to be leaving for your honeymoon?"

He sits at the kitchen table and stares at it. "We're going to give it a couple of days to make sure everything's good here first."

"What's up, Shep? You're kind of worrying me."

He sighs, and she feels her heart race. Did something else happen? Did Grayson have a complication after she left? "I'm sorry, Lex."

"For what?"

"For the set up at the wedding."

Laughing, she shakes her head. So damn dramatic. "Trust me, it's not even close to the worst thing that's happened today."

“I just really thought if you were reminded of the love you had for him, you’d reconsider.”

“Trust me, I wish it was that easy.”

“Why can’t it be?”

Her hand reaches out and takes his, his eyes meeting hers for the first time since he arrived. “Do you really believe I’ve forgotten how much I love him? I barely get through each day because I miss him so damn much, but I have to find a way to be happy without him.”

“Why?”

“Because loving him like I did made me stop loving *me*. No relationship should ever take you away from who you are at your core, and that happened. I lost myself and became someone I never wanted to be.”

“No, it didn’t. You’re still you. You were still always you. Hell, you punched Kandi and broke her nose a few months back. There’s nothing more Lex than that.”

Licking her lips, she looks at their hands together on the table. “It’s not as simple as that.”

“Tell me what makes it so damn complicated. I want to understand, Lex. I really do.”

“No, I don’t want to create issues. It’s best if you just trust me. You saw me that night he forced me into the clubhouse and humiliated me. That’s all you need to know.”

Pulling his hand from hers, he stands. “I thought we were friends. Hell, I consider you my best friend, and I thought you felt the same.”

The hurt in his voice stabs at her chest, and the bleach she used to clean up earlier assaults her nostrils as she breathes deeply and churns her stomach. “You are my best friend, Shep. One of the only ones I have left these days.”

“Then why can’t you talk to me? Maybe if you’d been a little more open about what happened with Colt, I wouldn’t have tried to get you two together at the wedding. It’s clearly



something terrible, otherwise you wouldn't be here. When did I end up being one of the people you can't trust?"

She takes a deep breath and blows the air out slowly. "It's not that I don't trust you-"

"Then talk to me!"

Her finger flies to her lips. "The kids are sleeping, remember?"

Flinching, he lets out a breath and shakes out his arms. "Sorry. I'm just... it hurts. It hurts to know I'm not in the circle of trust anymore."

"It's not that simple, and you know that. You're part of the club. He's part of the club. The entire family is part of the club."

"The club doesn't come before this," he says, his hand moving between them. "I can't believe you'd think that. Not after everything we've been through. Hell, I may not be with the club if it wasn't for you."

If only he understood how much she wants to believe the club doesn't come first when it comes to them. How her entire body yearns for it to be the truth.

"But it does, Shep. I love you, and I trust you with my life. But the issues with Colt run deep, and it all ties back to the club. You either end up in a position where you have to choose a side, or you let what happened between him and I alter how you feel about him. Which can have deadly consequences. You know this."

He looks at the ground. "I just thought you had more faith in me than this. That you knew me better to know this wouldn't be an issue."

"Tell me, after that scene in the clubhouse, when our dirty little secret came to light, did you hold a grudge against Colt?"

"Well, yeah-"

"And how does that affect the club?"

Sitting, he sighs. “You’re more than the club to me.”

“I’m not in the club anymore, and it’s all different now. It’s not something that can just magically fix itself one day. We aren’t going to go back to being happy and one big family overnight. I don’t think we ever will.”

“You’re not part of the club anymore?”

“I can’t be.”

He crosses his arms over his chest and leans back. “Now I need to know what happened. Because I’m not sure I want to be part of this club if you walk.”

“You don’t mean that.”

“I do. You’ve saved our asses on more than one occasion. Don’t you get it, Lex? I owe you. You saved me. You’re the one who gave me the ability to redeem myself when I’d gotten so far off track no one else would’ve done that.”

Laughing, she looks at the table. “I think you’re giving me too much credit.”

“I’m not.”

“Don’t you think this might be part of the problem? I’m so sick of being on this damn pedestal, and it’s so high, I can’t stay on it any longer. At some point, I have to fall. No, I have fallen. I’ve broken my face and all my bones, and it hurts. It really, really hurts.”

“We don’t put you on a pedestal.”

She glares at him, her eyebrows raised. “Really?”

“Okay, maybe we have more expectations for you than we do others, but-”

“It’s inevitable I fail. No one can maintain the perfection expected of me. And with what happened with my marriage, it came sooner than I expected. I knew it was bound to happen. I’ve been thinking about it for so long, and it’s not something that’s maintainable.”

His eyes widen. “You’ve been thinking you want to leave even before Colt fucked you over?”

Chuckling, she looks away. “I never planned to leave. Up until all this shit went down, I was going to die for the club. Who am I kidding? I probably still will. But I knew I needed to step back. It’s too much to try and do, and I keep getting reminded that I’m not a patched member.”

“I don’t even know what to say right now.”

“You don’t have to say anything. And you don’t get a say in this, Shep. I’m sorry.”

“It’s like you’re a completely different person now.”

The air escapes her before she thinks about it. “Yeah, that’s probably true. I’m someone I never expected to be. I’m in a position I never thought possible. But I’m here. And I’m doing the best I can.”

“By your own choice!” he whisper-shouts. “You made this decision. You can choose a different outcome, but you’re too damn stubborn.”

Her eyes widen as he stands and walks towards the door. “I saw my childhood in Calla’s future, and I couldn’t do that,” she blurts out. “Not to my little girl.”

He turns and stares at her. “What are you talking about?”

“I always came second. Or third. Zane and the club always came before me. You know I don’t celebrate my birthday because of Zane. And I can’t tell you how many times VP let me down with reasons that always came down to the club.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Calla didn’t even recognize her own father, Shep. He was gone more than he was home, and when he was home, she was scared of him. Colt was a complete stranger to his own daughter.”

He sits back down. “What?”

“If it was just about me, this would be different. You know that. I’d either suffer until I went crazy, or I’d be gone in Arizona. But with my kids, I can’t risk my childhood being theirs. I just can’t.”

“Lex-”

“Noah kept asking why Daddy didn’t love us anymore. Why he didn’t want to spend time with us. And when he asked me if it was his fault, I knew it was time to start making decisions because something had to change. I had to make some really tough decisions.”

He gapes at her. “I had no idea.”

“No one did. He missed my birthday. Once we were married, he’d always do something special for the two of us to remind me it wasn’t all bad, and he was in Black Valley this year. Then he forgot our anniversary. Didn’t call when he was late, then he showered and passed out. And how about Noah’s birthday? He did make it home for his actual birthday, and he luckily gave him a present big enough to make him forget his dad missed his party. But then he missed Calla’s. Her first birthday.”

“I remember he wasn’t here for it.”

“He stopped answering my calls. The number of hours he was home in the last six months before I left comes to maybe two days total. And that’s being generous. But what kills me is the person I became. I begged him to stay for a weekend. Two whole days. On my hands and knees, begging, and he still walked away. God, it’s so humiliating to realize how low I got. What I was willing to do to try and save our family.”

His mouth drops open, his eyes wide and unblinking. “What? I didn’t realize it was literal.”

“Oh, it was,” she says, vomit rising in her throat. “I hate myself for it, but I had nothing else. I’d tried everything. The kids need their father, and he said no. The club needed him. The club was more important than his family, and I wish

I would've left that night. Skipped the rest of it because it doesn't even matter in the grand scheme of things."

"He just walked away from you?"

"Shep, I wish I could explain how far off-track our relationship got. And I don't even know why. But then the messages and calls from Diane started. You know I wouldn't leave for that. But the night I got the picture of him completely naked on a bed followed by a sonogram with her name on it, I'd realized just how far away from *me* I'd gotten. I didn't even recognize the person I'd become."

He leans forward and takes her hand. "What do you mean?"

Tears fill her eyes. Getting a roundhouse kick to the face from Chuck Norris would hurt less than admitting this to anyone. If she wasn't at risk of losing one of the only people in the club she knows she can count on if she really needs something, she wouldn't tell him.

"I blamed myself. That there was something about me that needed to be fixed. I was the reason he wasn't home with his kids, and then I ran through everything I could do to try and make myself more attractive. That's not me. And I'd never waste money on plastic surgery, but I was in such a dark, desperate place that I honestly contemplated it. I thought maybe he'd have an interest in me. The one thing I can thank Diane and her lovely care package for is putting a hard stop to all that."

He takes her free hand in his own, and he stares at her like one would a scared child. "You're perfect."

"No, I'm not. And that's okay. I'm not supposed to be. But I need to be me, and I lost her. I became a person who tolerated things she never would have, and who questioned who she was. But even then, I still gave him a chance. I tried to get in touch with him, and I got ignored. Again. Did you know it took him three days to realize we were gone?"

Shep clenches his jaw. "Three days?"

Taking her hands from his, she leans back. “Are you happy now? You now know just how far I’ve fallen from grace. It’s not pretty.”

Shaking his head, his fingers tap on the table. “No, I’m not happy now. I’d have been happy if you’d told me this a year ago, so I could kick his ass into shape before we got here. But I am glad you told me now.”

“He’s not a bad person. Something happened in Black Valley, and it’s affected him. I don’t know what it is because he shut me out a long time ago, but he’s not a bad person. Don’t let this change how you feel about your brother.”

“Yeah, that’s not exactly possible, but I won’t kill him.” She levels him with a glare, and he adds, “And I’ll stop anyone else from killing him. But only for your kids.”

“Thanks,” she says and smiles. “I appreciate it.”

## Chapter 22

*Griffin's Beach*

*Colt*

Colt never made it to his mother's to be with the kids after Lex dropped the bomb on him about seeing other people. Guess he can chalk this up to one more thing she can be disappointed in him for.

The thought of his wife with anyone other than him makes him crazy. Crazy enough to consider stalking her and taking out every man who dares speak to her. It's overkill, but what else can he do at this point besides fantasize about killing any other man near her?

*Nothing. Because you know this is all your fault.*

This time, rather than Casey or Noah's voices, Colt hears his own. Part of him feels disappointment. He knew deep down they were manifestations of his own conscience, but part of him liked the idea they haunted him. In a way, he felt like he didn't really lose them.

"Care to, I don't know... move?" Felicity asks as she attempts to move the table he sits at with a full glass of vodka back to its rightful place.

"Oh, sorry," he says and stands, moving the chair for her. He's contemplated drinking the liquid for an hour.

"Upset your plan to get her to fall at your feet after one dance didn't work? Here's a tip: that thing in your hand helped you create this mess."

The table legs scrape on the hardwood floor and make him cringe. "No, that's not it."

"Then what has you thinking of throwing everything down the drain? Missing your bunny back in Black Valley?"

"I never fucked her," he growls. "Get it right, Felicity."

She rolls her eyes. “Whatever, but you’re not convincing anyone.”

“She dropped a bomb on me tonight. Lex, not that bitch in Black Valley.”

“That she’s planning to make you work even harder than just getting benched by the club to stay local and dance one measly dance?”

“She plans to see other people.”

The brunette’s mouth falls open. “What? Are you sure?”

“She told me she wanted to rip the bandage off. Learn to date someone who isn’t the club and get the awkward parts over with. What she means is date someone who isn’t me.”

Sitting in the chair he vacated, she rests her chin in her hand. “That seems weird.”

“Weird?” That’s the word she picks? He can think of at least twenty more fitting.

“Lex was always meant to be part of the club. Hell, if she’d been born with a penis, she’d have overthrown Jennings by now and had this place whipped into shape years ago. I can’t... this doesn’t make sense. God, you really fucked up, Colt,” she says and smacks him on the arm.

He sets his glass on the bar top. “I know.”

“No, you really fucked up. She’s leaving all of us. I hate you even more than I did before. This is worse than when she disappeared after all that shit went down with the Havoc Outlaws.”

Colt sighs, and his stomach drops. Lex left him shortly after she and Shep concocted a plan to get her kidnapped to save herself because the club wouldn’t listen. They had problems because he couldn’t get over his trust issues brought on by his mother, especially after Noah died, and she had to resort to putting her life on the line because she didn’t have faith in him or the club.



Why can't he remember the pain he felt living without her? Oh, that's right. Because he never thought she'd leave him again.

"Is it worse? At least she's still around."

Felicity glares at him. "She's still around, but she's not really here. And not a part of the club. Wow, that's how it must've felt for her. Lonely. Even with you around. You make me sick."

"Don't hold back, Felicity," he mutters and grits his teeth. God, he wants that vodka.

"Someone should have told you this long before now... You're a fucking prick."

"I know, okay?" he snaps, and she jumps in surprise. "I'm a fucking asshole. But what the fuck can I do about it now? Nothing I do means shit. She's done. I pushed her so far past her limit, she'll never come back to me. I get it. Trust me, no one understands better than I do now."

Recovering quickly, she gets in his face and narrows her eyes. "Yeah, but your actions affect the rest of us. That's the part you don't seem to get. We're all involved because we also have to deal with the loss of her."

Her finger jabs at his temple, and his anger flares. He's not the one walking away, but he gets all the blame. How the fuck is that fair?

Diesel hurries inside with Ky right on his heels, and Gavin and Gracie hurry behind their father.

"Colt, Chapel, now," Diesel orders as most of the men shuffle back into the clubhouse, their women and children behind them. "Felicity, we're going on lockdown."

Her eyes widen, but she says nothing as she hurries towards her kids, Colt forgotten. He walks into the Chapel, his drink forgotten as everyone looks equally confused. "What's going on?"

Jennings hurries in, and the doors shut with a loud bang. The anxious energy has everyone silent. "I've left

Beckett and Brian with Lex along with Shep. Promised we'd fill them in later."

"What's going on?" Psycho repeats Colt's question. "Why are we on lockdown? Because the Slashers shot a cop?"

"That normally helps us, doesn't it?" Patriot asks and looks around. "Not that I condone going around shooting cops, but that seems more like an attempt at a favor than an attack."

Jennings tosses his phone on the table, and Chicago's voice comes through. "We're all here."

"Us, too," he says and looks at Diesel. "I'll give you the floor."

"The Slashers attacked tonight right outside the clubhouse during a fucking wedding," he says.

"Shot a cop," VP says. "I gotta agree with Patriot, though. I don't really follow the emergency lockdown."

Ky shakes his head. "They weren't aiming for Tate. They aimed at Ashley, and he took the bullet for her."

Colt immediately sits up, his stomach in knots. "What?"

"Tate said there was only one with a gun out of fifteen or so, and Lex said the same. And only one shot was taken. The target was my daughter, and he saved her fucking life," Diesel says. "So, no, they aren't helping us. They're attacking our fucking women and children."

"Motherfucker," Chicago shouts as the rest of the Black Valley club erupts in a slew of curse words.

Colt's stomach drops. That makes Lex a target. The Slasher she saw might've seen her and... "Shit."

"What?" Psycho asks.

"No fucking way."

"What?" Ky shouts, his hand hitting the table.

His eyes look up and lock with Psycho. "Lex saw the shooter. Said he had a red handlebar mustache with a beer

belly. They were driving west, so she only saw the left side of his face.”

“Jesus Christ, are you saying what I think you’re saying?” he says. “Are you sure she saw him correctly?”

“No fucking way,” Chicago shouts through the phone. “We fucking killed O’Malley!”

“Lex couldn’t pick these guys out in a lineup outside of their leather. Damn it, I didn’t even think about it when she told me because we thought we killed him.”

Psycho shakes his head. “She wouldn’t know if we did or didn’t. But they’re Irish. He can’t be the only fat dude with a red handlebar mustache.”

Josh Hood looks around the room. “I mean, you all look alike to me,” he says with a shrug.

“Same,” Ash Arnold, the first African American member of the club, says with a smirk.

“The real question, here,” Jennings interrupts, finding their joke unamusing, “is whether or not you truly killed O’Malley.”

“We shot him in the fucking face!” Ian shouts. “Yeah, we fucking killed him.”

Diesel tilts his head. “In the middle of the face?”

“What does it matter?”

“Humor me.”

“Right side,” Psycho says. “Jesus, fuck, it could be him.”

Colt looks around. “Talk to Tate and see if he remembers the asshole having scars on his face. Besides, she wouldn’t have forgotten a detail like scars on his face. He can’t look pretty.”

“You honestly believe he survived a gunshot to the face?” Chicago asks. “Psycho shot him. We were there, Colt.”

“But we didn’t bury him,” Psycho says.

TK looks around. “What did you do? Just leave him?”

Chicago sighs. “He was a message. We let them clean up their dead President and VP in their own goddamned clubhouse.”

“For fuck’s sake,” VP growls. “Are you new to this?”

“I told you we should’ve taken him and cut him up into small pieces. But no... that was too much,” Psycho says and waves his hands in the air mockingly.

They did this. They didn’t take the right precautions, and instead of doing what he knows should have been done, he blindly followed Chicago’s orders. Their message isn’t clear if they didn’t *actually* kill their charter President.

“We didn’t think he had a chance at survival. We shot him in the fucking face!” Ian shouts. “Who would’ve thought he wouldn’t die?”

“I don’t know,” TK growls. “Maybe the dead guy who isn’t actually fucking dead. He clearly had a stronger will to live than you anticipated. A hell of a lot stronger than the bullet you put in his face.”

Psycho growls. “I’m going back to Black Valley and bringing Lacey with me. If that motherfucker’s still alive, I’m finding out.”

“Stay till morning. It’ll be safer to go in daylight,” Jennings says. “Everyone else, we’re on lockdown. We’ll keep the men outside Lex’s place, and we’ll send someone out to Karmen’s.”

“I’ll do it,” TK says. “My daughter’s out there.”

Patriot stands. “I got you. Kai can stay here at the clubhouse.”

“I’m going to Lex’s place,” Colt says.

His father shakes his head. “I don’t think that’s a good idea, son.”

“She’s still my wife. Plus, my kids are in that house, just like Klaire’s in Karmen’s. No one’s going to protect my

family better than me.”

“Some might argue otherwise,” Zane says, his voice quiet but still loud enough to be heard. The nerve of this motherfucker after all the damage he caused.

His nostrils flare. “You got something you wanna say?”

“I’m just saying, Lex would be here with the kids if you weren’t such a fucking dipshit. We wouldn’t need to station people outside her house because she’d feel like this was her home like it’s always been.”

“And who the fuck started all the shit by making her feel like her house wasn’t really her home? Because it didn’t fucking start with me, that’s for damn sure.”

His brother-in-law stands, fists clenched. “Fuck you, Colt. We’ve moved past all that.”

“You have, but has she? Because it’s continued to come up through our entire relationship. Starting when we were kids. Hell, she hates celebrating her birthday because of what you put her through. It’s not all in the past.”

“Yeah? Who sent her running with just a dance tonight? Wasn’t me. Wasn’t Dad. It was the man who has her looking like a goddamned skeleton with skin. You want to pass judgment, maybe look in the fucking mirror, Colt.”

“Fuck you,” he says and moves towards the door. “I’ll be at my wife’s house protecting my kids.”

As he walks out, even he hears how absurd those words are. He really has become his father.

## Chapter 23

*Griffin's Beach*

*Lex*

Lex sighs as Shep clutches the beer she gave him. It's been about fifteen minutes of him sitting there, silently stewing, and she just sits and waits for him to speak. Sharing the intimacies of her marriage wasn't on her to-do list for the evening, but she didn't exactly have a choice. Not if she wanted to keep her friendship intact. He just needed to know.

"I can't fucking believe him," Shep growls. "The images you've painted won't leave my fucking head."

"This is my problem, not yours," she says and looks at the door as someone knocks. "He's your brother, and that doesn't change anything."

"Yeah, yeah," he says and takes a drink from the can.

She stands and walks over to the front door. Opening it, she jumps as her stomach drops. "Colt."

"Hey," Colt says and pushes his way inside. She continues to stand, holding the door open like an idiot.

His nostrils flare, and she can tell by the rise and fall of his chest just how angry he is. Really angry. "What's wrong?"

"I'm here to relieve Shep. The club is on lockdown, and I'm staying with you and the kids."

Shep stands and glares. "Are you sure you should do that? The club won't need you in twenty minutes, and then you'll take off leaving your family behind like you've been doing for a fucking year?"

"Don't you start with me, too," he growls, his fists clenched at his sides. "I'm not in the fucking mood."

"Too?" Lex asks. "Who already started with you?"

"Your brother," he says and takes the door from her. Nodding towards it, he glares back at her friend. "You're free

to go to your new wife.”

Shep turns and looks at her. “Are you okay if I leave?”

Is she? Part of her wants to say no. She hasn’t been alone, in close quarters, with her husband since the night she begged him to spend the weekend with them. But the other part of her knows she has to prove to herself she can do this. Even if every fiber of her being wants to jump his bones and find the release she hasn’t had in ages, she needs to prove everything will be okay.

“It’s okay. I’ll be fine.”

“If you’re not, just call me. I’ll be here in less than five minutes. And I’ll be ready to kick some ass.”

“Get the fuck out of here,” Colt snaps. “I got this.”

He laughs. “Yeah, that’s not exactly a believable statement there, bud. But whatever you say.”

Just as he steps onto the porch, Colt grabs the door. She reaches her hand out. “Don’t slam the-”

The door slams hard, and Calla screams.

“Door,” she finishes.

His eyes widen. “Shit, I’m sorry, Lex.”

Hanging her head, she turns and sighs. “It’s fine. She never got her bath anyway.”

He follows her to the bedroom where their daughter sits in her toddler bed, shaking in fear. “Sorry, baby girl.”

“Da-da?” she asks, her screams quieting.

Lex’s heart melts. The time he’s spent with her has made a difference, and she feels safe rather than alarmed around him. It’s what she wanted, and he finally did something right.

“Yeah, Daddy was being a dum dum,” he says and hits the side of his head, making her laugh. “I didn’t mean to scare you.”

“Dad?” Noah asks from the doorway. “What are you doing here?”

“Hey, buddy,” he says and looks at their son. “I just need to talk to your mom.”

He rubs his eyes. “Did you slam the door?”

“The wind caught it,” she says, suddenly unsure why she lies. “He didn’t mean to wake you. Go back to bed, baby.”

“Will you be here in the morning?”

The hesitation and disbelief in their son’s voice reminds her the decision made was the right one. It needed to be done, and it’s in their best interest.

“I will,” he assures.

Her heart races, and it hits her like a ton of bricks. The club’s on lockdown, and she’s stuck in close quarters with her husband. Soon-to-be ex-husband. And she hasn’t had sex in so long her body quivers at the thought of him being here all night. Great.

“Goodnight,” he says and hugs his parents before heading back to his room. “See you in the morning.”

“I love you,” Colt says.

“Love you, too.”

Hearing the words of affection choke her, and she fights back a sob. If she were alone after hearing that exchange, she’d be rocking in the fetal position, crying like a baby. This is all she wanted. Months ago, she would have been over the moon, but Colt was incapable. Now that they’re not together, he’s able to do everything he couldn’t before. Maybe it really was her fault.

“Come here, baby girl,” Lex says and takes Calla from Colt. “We’re going to get into the bath.”

“Bath time!” she shouts and claps her hands.

“Will this get her back to sleep or make her more excited?” he asks with a laugh.



Ignoring the joke, she carries her into the bathroom. “I have lavender soap I use to help lull her back into a sleepy state.”

He stands in the doorway, giving her room to bathe their daughter, and she can’t help feeling as though she’s being scrutinized. She feels self-conscious. The bathroom is small but well-kept, and even though she knows he isn’t judging her, it feels off. And she doesn’t like it.

“Hand me the towel?” she asks after what feels like hours of excruciating silence.

Grabbing the small pink towel from the rack next to the bathtub, he hands it to her. Calla settles down, and her eyelids droop. “She’s sleepy again,” he says, his voice soft. “God, she’s beautiful.”

“She sure is.”

“That stuff seems to work. Would it work for me?” he asks as she pulls Calla out and dries her off before slipping her into her pajamas. “I don’t seem to find sleep comes most nights.”

At least it’s not just her. “Lavender is supposed to help promote sleep. I don’t find it as effective as a bottle of wine, but it might work for you. Or you could turn to your trusted friend, vodka.”

She sees him wince at the jab out of the corner of her eye, and she feels a tiny bit guilty as she pushes past him and back into Calla’s room. Sitting on the rocking chair, she holds Calla close and rocks for a few minutes until the toddler snores softly in her arms.

She wishes it would have taken longer to fall asleep and give her an excuse not to spend time alone with Colt, but she knows she’d be a terrible person to do something to wake her up just to avoid him. Instead, she accepts her fate and sets her back in her bed before gently shutting the door.

“That hurt,” he says, his voice soft. “Not uncalled for, but it hurt nonetheless.”

“Sorry,” she says and moves into the living room. “It was uncalled for. I guess I’m a little crabby.”

“Not sleeping much either?”

Ha! She almost laughs out loud. Sleep has become nothing more than an elusive thought she wishes she could have again. “I haven’t really slept in so long; I don’t remember the last time I can say I got a good night’s sleep.”

“Because of me.”

“Because of a lot of things. I learned how to run on fumes and caffeine a long time ago, so I found a coping mechanism. I’m not sure it’s what you’d call healthy, but in a few years, I’m sure it’ll be easier. The kids will both be a little more self-sufficient.”

“Yeah, maybe.”

He sits down on the recliner and rocks slightly while she tucks her feet under herself on the couch. “So, the club’s on lockdown?”

“Yeah. We still have Beckett and Brian outside, but I said I’d be here to make sure you and the kids are safe. Dad’s at Karmen’s with Patriot.”

“Because the man shot at Ashley instead of Grayson, right? The Slashers are coming after women and children of the club?”

His eyes stare at the carpet. “Yeah.”

“Colt, did you really fight with Zane tonight?”

“Yeah.”

“Why?”

He looks up at her and tilts his head. “Really?”

“Me?” Her head pulls back as she scrunches her face. That doesn’t sound right.

“What else would anyone want to fight me on?”

“If it were anyone other than my brother, I’d say you have a valid point. But Zane hated me, and he barely stands

me now. Lane wearing the Lex wig we took from Grayson kind of turned him against me. It doesn't help that she wears it to piss him off, so it's probably rational transference."

The thought makes both of them smile. As creepy as it is to remember Grayson made Autumn wear a curly blonde wig to look like Lex while he had sex with her, the game show she put on, thus putting her brother's girlfriend in a wig to look like her, was entertaining as hell.

"He's not happy with me. The fact you're here versus the clubhouse made him mad. And he said something, so I said something. Then he said something else, and I said something. And here I am."

"Geez, the detail is so overwhelming. Next time, see if you can sum it a little more to make it easier to process," she jokes.

She can't help her curiosity about what Zane may have said out of anger with Colt because he really does only seem to tolerate her, at best, most of the time. And if she hadn't helped save his relationship with Lane, he'd probably still hate her.

"It's the same old conversation. You know what I'm talking about."

Does she? If she had to guess, it's probably about her childhood. And that's something she wants to talk about almost less than admitting what she did to Shep and the lengths she went to save her marriage. "It's getting pretty late. I should head to bed. Are you okay out here on the couch?"

The look he gives her creates a desire pooling in her belly that makes her knees weak. "Do I have a choice?"

Her body screams to let him in. All the way in. "No, not really."

"Then it'll do just fine."

Lex walks into the bedroom, and her body burns for her husband's touch. The only thing hotter would be setting her on literal fire. And it burns in such a delicious way she doesn't know if she can handle him out on the couch for an

entire night. With him so close but denying herself feels like torture.

No matter how much she wishes he'd storm into her room and take her, she knows it would only ruin all the progress she's made. She can finally be around him without bursting into tears, but she knows she's not in a place where she can sleep with him and not have it mean anything.

The events of the day and all the pent-up emotions hit at once, and the tears fall as she buries her face into the pillow to muffle her sobs. The last thing she needs is him hearing her cry her eyes out. As much as she wishes it would knock her out, it won't. The only thing that works these days is alcohol, and she can't trust herself intoxicated with Colt on the couch. So, instead, she lies there. Crying and thinking.

The sobs subside, but her mind refuses to shut off. As does her body. She hums like a magnet, wanting to connect with another lying out on the couch in her living room. That's basically what it is with them, right? Well, used to be.

Something bumps the side of the house right by her head, and she turns to see the clock reads three in the morning. Listening, she hears footsteps continue outside her window. Her heart races. The men who shot Grayson could be outside right now, ready for attack number two. But where are Becket and Brian?

# Chapter 24

*Griffin's Beach*

*Colt*

Colt lies on Lex's couch staring at the dark ceiling. Everything in him screams to go and join her in her bed. Remind her they're husband and wife, and he wants her. Needs her. But when he walked to the door to do just that, he heard her sobbing into her pillow, and his heart broke. He wanted to walk in and comfort her, but he knows it would have made everything so much worse. So, here he lies. Awake, devastated, and fucking horny. It's been too damn long since he's been with his wife.

He hears footsteps in the kitchen, and he turns, sitting up immediately when he sees Lex in the darkness, the dim light from a streetlamp reflecting off the metal of her gun. Grabbing his own from the holster on the ground, he stands, ready.

Her wide eyes stare at him as she points to her bedroom, and they both pause. Neither breathes, and he hears the footsteps outside. Where the hell are Beckett and Brian?

"The kids," she whispers.

"They're going to be fine," he assures her. "You watch from in here, and I'm going out there."

Her head nods, and hope fills him. She still trusts him to protect their family, but he pushes it aside as he slips out the back door. He can only deal with one situation at a time right now.

The darkness gives him a safe cover as he sees a man he doesn't recognize lurking outside Calla's room. He watches for a few moments, and just as his hands reach up to the window to open it, Colt lunges and tackles him to the ground.

"The fuck?" the man grunts and hits him back.

The sting of skin breaking on his cheekbone spreads along his face. If only this guy knew pain only motivates Colt. “Motherfucker,” he says and punches the man twice, a cheekbone cracking beneath Colt’s knuckle.

The man laughs, his eye drooping, and Colt sees red. He punches the man on the left side, hitting his ribs, cracking at least one, and swings with his left fist to pummel the man in the belly. As he bends over, Colt grabs him, pulls him into a headlock, and chokes him.

“Let me go,” the man grunts, his elbows swinging back and hitting his ribs just enough to hurt, but Colt refuses to loosen his grip.

“You picked the wrong fucking family to attack,” he growls in his ear before twisting his head, snapping his neck, and letting his dead weight fall to the ground at his feet.

He pulls out his phone, and Psycho answers on the second ring. “Colt?”

“You still in Griffin’s Beach by chance?” he asks, his voice quiet.

“Yeah, why?”

“I got a dead Slasher outside Lex’s place.” Walking around front, he finds Beckett and Brian on the ground. He reaches down and finds a pulse. At least it wasn’t one Slasher and two Drifters dead. “The guys out front look to be knocked out. Both still alive, though.”

“I’m on my way.”

He slaps their faces a bit, both jumping awake. “What the fuck happened?” Beckett asks, his hand touching the back of his head. “Shit, we got hit.”

“Fuck, that hurts,” Brian says.

“You two good, or do you need me to call and get relief for you?”

“We’re good. Slasher?”

He looks back at the house. “Dead guy in the backyard. Psycho’s on his way to clean it up. Stay awake now.”

Walking inside, Lex lifts her gun and aims at him before quickly lowering it. Her eyes widen in concern as she says, “You’re bleeding.”

“Opted to fight instead of shoot. I didn’t have a good excuse ready for the kids if they woke up from a gunshot,” he says, his voice low.

She turns and closes their doors. “Where are the guys?”

“Knocked out. They’re awake now, and Psycho’s coming to clean up the mess out back. You got a first aid kit?”

“Come on,” she says and pulls him through the master bedroom to the attached bathroom. “Sit.”

Doing as he’s told, he sits on the toilet, and she turns on the light before pulling out the items she needs to tend to his wounds. The lights blind him, but he can’t stop watching her. She really jumps into action. “Do you need to go to the hospital?”

“No, the guy was an amateur. But it doesn’t make any fucking sense.”

“What do you mean?” Her slender fingers tilt the rubbing alcohol onto a cotton swab, and she dabs it gently on his cheek. The sting makes him hiss.

“Because even if I wasn’t here, you’d have easily taken him out. You have a reputation, you know. Why not send someone with more skill if you want damage?”

“He was able to knock out the two guards.”

“But he didn’t kill them. I don’t get that either. Why not kill them?”

“He was a sacrifice?”

Lex leans back and looks into his eyes for one of the first times since she decided to leave him. He almost loses himself in them. “Yeah, but why?”

“A message that they’re coming after us?” Her hands get back to work, and she finishes cleaning up with a surprisingly soft touch.

“You’re being gentle.”

“I thought I was always gentle,” she jokes as she puts everything away. “You should be good now. You’ll have a scar, but I think that adds to the rugged look you have going on. All the girls will swoon even more than they already do.”

He disregards the comment. There’s only one woman he wants swooning over him. “You had a perfect opportunity to inflict pain, and you didn’t. Most women would have.”

Putting her hands on her hips as she stands in front of him, she lets out a slow breath. “I’m not sure why that’s surprising. I don’t want to hurt you. Causing you pain hurts me, and I’m tired of being hurt. You’re the father of my children, and no matter how hard I try not to, part of me will always love you. You’re ingrained in me. It’s what makes this whole situation so hard to accept and move forward.”

Colt grabs her waist and pulls her towards him, burying his face in her stomach. Her hands knot in his hair like they always have, and he wants her. He wants every part of her. “I never deserved you, and I don’t deserve your kindness now.”

Her fingers caress his scalp, and he feels her shiver. “You’ll be alright, Colt.”

“I don’t think I’ll ever be alright.”

His hands move under her tank top, and she says his name so quietly he almost misses it.

Her body doesn’t shift from his grasp, and she doesn’t release him. “If you want me to stop, just say the word.”

Looking up at her, he watches her chest rise and fall as her lids lower. He takes it as a good sign, and his hands slide up to cup her bare chest beneath her shirt, his fingers toying with her nipples.



“Colt,” she says again. This time it comes out as a moan as her eyes close.

“Don’t tell me to stop,” he whispers. “Please.”

“I don’t want you to stop,” she murmurs.

His hands slide down her body to tug at her shorts, his breath hitching as he sees she wears no panties underneath. Her hip bones stick out, and he still can’t get over how skinny she’s become. Because of him.

Burying his face in her sex, he licks and sucks in the ways he knows drive her wild. If he can remind her how good they are together, maybe she’ll reconsider. She’ll see he still wants her, that he always has, and they can find a way to move forward.

“Oh, God,” she pants, her fingers tangling in his hair while her hips buck against his mouth. “I’m almost there.”

His scalp stings in the best way possible as she tugs while she falls apart against him. He’s so hard, he feels the ridges of the zipper digging into his skin through his boxers, and he needs to get them both naked. Now.

Slipping her shorts all the way down, she steps out of them and tugs her shirt over her head. He quickly strips off his clothes and carries her into the bedroom bridal style, the feeling of her skin against his setting him ablaze. It feels like the first time all over again.

He rests his weight on his forearms as he hovers between her legs, his chest touching hers, and she lifts her hips. Accepting her invitation, he slides inside her, both hissing at the pleasure of finally connecting. Being inside her has always been unbelievable, and he wants to live right here forever.

“Fuck, baby,” he mutters and shifts his hips to hit the spot he knows she loves. No matter what changes between them, he’ll always know her body. He can read her movements like a book, and when she starts bucking against him, he revels in the fact they’re back in sync. Finally.

“Colt,” she moans, her nails clawing down his back.

It's been so long since they've been together, since he's been with anyone, and he feels himself reaching the edge quicker than she is. Stilling, he licks his fingers and reaches between their bodies to rub his fingers roughly against her clit.

“Oh, fuck.”

Her body arches, her hard nipples pressing into his chest, and he nearly explodes even as he remains completely still inside her. Watching her squirm in pleasure has always been the most intoxicating sight.

“Move, Colt. Please,” she begs, her fingers scratching his arms.

Removing his hand, he shifts and rests his arms by her head as he thrusts hard and fast into her. Her lips find his neck, her teeth nibbling his skin, and he feels her explode around him. Her body milks him as she shudders, her moan muffled on his shoulder, and he finds his own release.

“Lex,” he groans and collapses next to her. It was short, but amazing. Leaning over, he kisses her shoulder, his hand resting on her chest, and he feels her heart racing. “Baby?”

“This was a mistake,” she says. “We shouldn't have done this.”

He stares in confusion as she jumps out of bed and into the bathroom. Walking out with her retrieved clothes, she tosses his onto the bed and quickly dresses.

“Lex, take a breath. It's okay, baby. This wasn't a mistake-”

“It sends the wrong message and makes things even more confusing. I'm so sorry, Colt. I shouldn't have let this happen.”

Standing, he walks over to her, still completely naked, and grabs her arms. “We're good together. We just forgot for a while, but this is how we've always expressed ourselves. I know you still love me. I felt it.”

“It doesn’t change things!” she whisper-shouts, her eyes glancing to the closed door. “We don’t work anymore. And you’ll say you’ll change, and that you want all the things you were running from, but it’ll happen again.”

The cool air washes goosebumps all across his skin, but he barely feels it. Instead, fear consumes him. “I want this. And I’ll change. There was shit going on before, but it’s in the past.”

“Until it isn’t anymore, Colt. Or something else comes up. I can’t go through it again. Losing you so many times should get easier, but it doesn’t. It gets harder, and the kids can’t go through this again.”

“It’s not going to be like it was. I’ll never let something get in the way of our family again. Whatever it is that needs to change, we’ll change it. I’m home. I’m home all the time, and our kids know me. Calla and I have a game we play, and Noah knows he can count on me again. So can you.”

Her hands run through her hair, and he sees them shake. “No-”

“This just proved how good we are together. How much love we still have for each other. We can build off of it. I just need you to let me back in-”

“Just because we can fuck each other senseless doesn’t mean our marriage works. It stopped working outside the bedroom a long time ago. This changes nothing, and I can’t do it again.”

The fear threatens to strangle him. He’s losing her. He almost had her, and she’s slipping through his fingers. “Don’t do this, Lex. Please, I’m begging you. Please don’t do this.”

Her eyes gloss over with tears. “You have no idea what it feels like to be pushed away by you. The pain it causes me to fight for you and us over and over again. It’s happened so many times, and I can’t do it anymore. I’m defeated, and it hurts. It always hurts, and I’m tired of finding myself in the fetal position, crying my eyes out in the shower while I try to

find a way to move forward. I can't do it again. I won't make it."

The damage he caused doesn't seem as repairable as it did fifteen minutes ago. He broke her too much, and he can't fix it. "Please, Lex, don't push me away. Don't lose your faith in me. It's the only thing that keeps me going when I don't think I can. I can't accept you've given up on me. Please, baby, please."

"Colt-

Falling to his knees, he looks up at her in pure desperation. "Don't give up on us. We can come back from this. Our family can come back together."

Her body shakes as she sobs and steps backwards until her back hits the wall, and she slides down to sit on the floor. "I can't. I can't."

The harsh reality slaps him in the face, and he hates himself. This is what she must've felt like that last night he was home. When she begged him, on her knees, to stay for a fucking weekend. To be a family and spend time with his family for two days. Two goddamned days. He was cold and unfeeling when their positions were swapped, but she feels the same pain as he does. Even more because she knows this hurts him.

"I understand," he chokes and somehow manages to stand. He slips on his clothes and runs his hands through his hair. "I'm going to go get some air, but I'll be here in case anyone comes back."

She nods, and he looks back at her one last time before walking out of the room that belongs to his wife. The room he'll never be welcome in again, and he can't breathe. His entire life just ended, and it's all his fault.

# Chapter 25

*Black Valley*

*Psycho*

Psycho holds the door to the clubhouse open for Lacey the morning after Shep's wedding. Everyone already awake and inside shocks him. Then again, it's not overly surprising considering the shit show the wedding turned into with the Slashers making a surprise appearance in Griffin's Beach. Until last night, they stayed in Black Valley.

He walks into the Chapel, and it takes all of thirty seconds after the door shuts for all hell to break loose.

"This can't continue!" Ian shouts, his hand slamming on the table. "We thought we'd taken care of it, but they've gone too far!"

"Take out the whole fucking club," West Cross offers with a shrug of one shoulder. As one of the Army Five, Psycho didn't think he'd like the man. Standing at six foot five and with his background as a specialized officer, he's proven to be a solid addition to the club. Plus, the man remains quiet most of the time, which Psycho appreciates. It's usually the quiet ones who are the deadliest.

Derek Lee shakes his head. "I like where you're going with that, but they're one of the largest clubs out there. International. We can't take out the entire club."

"Repeat what we did to the Devil's Advocates. Psycho led that charge to take out charter after charter until the mother charter's president called begging for a truce," Creeper says and looks around. "You don't have to take out an entire club to completely immobilize them."

Psycho smirks. He remembers well running around with Tripp, killing every Devil in sight after they kidnapped Avery, lit her on fire, and drove her over the cliff. They thought she was dead for an entire year, and in that year, they took out five charters before they begged for mercy. He looks

back on those days like most look back on their childhoods. Fondly.

“Let’s just blow up their fucking clubhouse,” Tito Walker says. “Set them all ablaze.”

“What if they have others inside?” Creeper asks. “You can’t just blow up a building that might have women and children in it.”

Knuckles, a man who looks like he’d be a better fit as a linebacker for an NFL team rather than an outlaw biker, crosses his arms over his large chest. “I’m all for an eye for an eye.”

“Are you serious?” West asks, his eyes wide. “Tell me you’re joking.”

“We need to show them we’re serious and done taking their shit,” Fox Simpson says.

Psycho stares at the former Sergeant at Arms. No wonder he stepped down. He’s a fucking joke. “You better be blowing smoke.”

“It’s not ideal, but if we’re throwing ideas out there, I think it’s a valid one.”

Waylon shakes his head. “No.”

“No?” Chicago asks, his eyebrows raised. “You suddenly get the Pres patch I’m not aware of?”

His fist hits the table, and his eye twitches while the vein on his temple throbs. Psycho’s never seen Waylon this angry. “We’re not gonna risk killing innocent people and say ‘oh well’ when it comes to light. That’s not how the Drifters have ever operated, and we never will.”

“This is a new generation of Drifters,” Knuckles says with a smirk. “We’re former Phoenix Rising, so we don’t adhere to the Drifters past like you do.”

Waylon chuckles. “No, you were a dying club we came in and rescued by patching over. Your ways clearly didn’t work, so don’t fucking play that shit with us.”

“You’re out of line,” Chicago warns.

“No, you are!”

“Why can’t we just give them a taste of their own medicine?” Knuckles asks and shrugs. His nonchalance rubs Psycho the wrong way. “Since we’re clearly tossing aside the idea to blow up their clubhouse.”

Psycho narrows his eyes as Waylon looks to the other Drifters originals sitting opposite Chicago. “What does that mean exactly?”

“Do what they’ve done to us.”

“Spit it out,” he growls. “I wanna hear you fucking say it.” The words can’t be assumed, or he’ll look dramatic when he becomes feral.

“They’re going after our women and children, so let’s go after theirs.”

The room erupts with agreement from the Rising men, minus Derek, and they all talk of ways to go about it. Psycho looks to his right and falls into a mutual angry silence with the Drifters. The real Drifters.

Chicago slams his gavel on the table. “Okay, we’ll take a vote. Everyone in favor-”

“Before we get into that,” he interrupts. “Which one of you motherfuckers is willing to kill a woman or child?”

Knuckles laughs. “You’re kidding right? Aren’t you kind of known for being, I don’t know, a psycho? It is your club name, after all.”

“Oh, so when you suggested we go after their women and children, you meant me because you’re too big of a pussy to stand behind your own fucking idea? For the record, I ain’t doing that shit. And before you all agree to move this shit idea forward, just remember one thing. I hate assholes who harm women and children and take pleasure in inflicting excruciating pain on them. Your patches won’t save you.”

“You’re the Sergeant at Arms,” Tito says. “That’s kind of your job.”

He turns to Fox. “You’d go out and murder random women and children simply because they somehow were affiliated with the Slashers when you were in this role?”

Fox looks around. “Well, no, but I’m not you.”

“Look, I take my role seriously. And I’ll do whatever I need to in order to protect my President and club. For now. But this is not protecting the club. This is retaliation in the sickest way possible, and fuck all of you for even thinking I’d consider it.”

Chicago hits the gavel on the table again to quiet the room. “Psycho, I appreciate your boundaries, but we have to do something drastic here. Show them this has to stop. And if you’re not man enough to step up-”

“No, I’m too much of a man. Because real men don’t target innocent people. If you wanna be just like them, go ahead. I’m glad I know the group of fucking pussies I’m sitting at a goddamned table with.”

“Your loyalty isn’t as strong as we thought.”

Creeper slams both hands on the table. “Fuck you, Chicago! No one would go down in a blaze of glory for the Drifters more than that man right there, but what you’re suggesting goes too far. And before you even bother to ask, we’d tell Jennings to go fuck himself if he came up with this idea, too. Difference is, he’s not a little bitch and would never suggest it.”

“Fuck you!” Knuckles shouts. “You don’t get to talk to the Pres like that!”

“We’re taking a vote,” Chicago says, his jaw tight.

Psycho crosses his arms over his chest. “If it passes, I’ll give Fox this patch back.”

“You’ll give up your role because you don’t like the outcome?” Fox asks with a humorless chuckle. “Glad I gave it up for you.”

Doc stands. “No, it’s because this shit ain’t right. This ain’t the Drifter way. It’s not the reputation we’ve ever had,



and it's not the reputation we want."

"You don't want to be known as tough motherfuckers who don't take shit from anyone?" Tito asks. "Yeah, that would suck."

"No, fuckhead, we're not women and children killers."

Creeper shakes his head and lets out a dry laugh. "Yeah, you'll look real tough doing that. You're such a fucking bitch, you know that?"

"The fact you're even entertaining this and bringing it to a vote, Chicago, tells us you're not the right man to have in the President seat," Waylon says. "I said it, and I stand by it."

"No, I think he is," West says, jaw clenched. "But I think it's the right seat for the Phoenix Rising, not the Deranged Drifters."

"Excuse me?" Chicago asks, standing up. "What the fuck are you saying?"

"I won't speak for anyone else, but I'm about thirty seconds from ripping the Black Valley patch off and walking," Psycho says.

The original Griffin's Beach men nod and stand in solidarity.

"Is that right?"

The disbelief and challenge in his tone pisses Psycho off even more. Grabbing his phone, he dials, putting it on speaker before tossing it on the table.

"Jennings."

"Hey, Pres," he says. "Hopefully you don't have anything planned for any of our rooms in Griffin's Beach yet. We might have half this charter coming home tonight."

"What's going on?" he asks with a sigh.

Creeper's hands shake as he walks over to stand next to him. "These motherfuckers decided to bring the idea of going after Slasher women and children to a vote."

“What?” Jennings shouts. The phone shifts, and he mumbles to the others to head into the Chapel. “Say that again. I have most of us here.”

“Chicago’s about to call a vote on whether we attack the families of the Slashers,” Waylon says.

West laughs. “Then they had the balls to question Psycho’s loyalty to the club when he said he wasn’t going after innocents.”

Fox snorts. “We haven’t even voted on this yet.”

“And you fucking won’t!” VP shouts. “My daughter was targeted last night. And her kids.”

“All the more reason to show them we’re not going to take this lying down,” Tito says. “I don’t understand you people.”

“We don’t hurt women and kids!” Rocco shouts. “We make the motherfuckers who do pay for that shit.”

Chicago hits the gavel on the table. “We’re not asking for permission, Jennings!”

“You bring this to a vote, I’m out,” Creeper says. “I’m back with Griffin’s Beach and will never step foot in Black Valley again.”

“We aren’t blowing smoke here, Dallas,” Doc says. “I won’t take part in this.”

Psycho takes off his leather and grabs his pocket knife. With swift precision, he cuts off his officer patch and tosses it to Chicago. “I’m fucking done. Lacey and I will live in the goddamned clubhouse back home if we need to. This is fucking stupid. Take your patch and shove it up your goddamned ass.”

“Chicago, this doesn’t go to a vote,” Jennings shouts. “Shut it down now!”

“Jennings, I get you’re used to being the only President, but that’s not-”

“Get your fucking Rising leather dusted off because this won’t happen with any man rocking the Drifter patch. We’ll cut all association with you, including shipments, and you’ll have no support from us. What little progress you’ve made with your enemies will be undone so fast you won’t know what happened before you’re buried six feet under. See how fucking far your bullshit entitled attitude gets you then.”

Psycho smirks. The anger in Jennings rarely makes an appearance, but when it does, watch out. He’ll slit someone’s goddamned throat.

“You can’t just do that,” Fox says.

VP laughs. “Fucking watch us.”

“This ain’t how shit’s done,” Shep shouts. “We tried to teach you assholes, but you’re clearly too fucking ignorant.”

“Fuck you, Shep!” Ian shouts.

“No, fuck you!”

Chicago sighs. “Okay, everyone calm down. Jennings, we can talk about this.”

“There’s nothing to talk about. Conversation’s done.”

“I’m not much of a president if I don’t get the men a chance to speak and vote. You know that as well as I do.”

“Yeah, you’ll be the greatest fucking president of the Rising when what’s left of your club lies in an unmarked mass grave,” Psycho says. “I’ll help the Slashers take your asses out.”

Waylon cracks his knuckles. “You guys failed on your own. You tried, and we appreciate the fact you want to be your own entity, but you gotta understand you’re representing all the Drifters with shit like this. The logo on your back is all of us.”

“You’re not a separate entity, Chicago,” Jennings says. “Our entire reputation is on the line, and if you’re going to do something we don’t agree with, there’s no going back.”

“You’re fucking kidding me.”

“Knife or fire?” Psycho asks.

Ian’s mouth drops open. “What?”

“To take the Drifter ink off your skin. If we leave you without the Drifter logo, we’re taking it all with us. So, what’ll it be? Slice or burn?”

“This is stupid,” Flynn Jones says, a man Psycho isn’t sure he’s heard speak before. “We’re not going to hurt innocent people.”

“You’re voting against this?” Fox asks.

“It’s not going to vote. It got vetoed. It’s a stupid idea brought up out of anger and fear, but we wouldn’t move forward even if it did pass. The person you expected to carry out the stupid plan said no, and none of you guys are gonna step up to do it. Just fucking let it go because I’m not sticking around if the Drifters walk. I almost died too many times for this damned club before, and I won’t agree to certain death. Fuck all of you who assume we will.”

Ian shakes his head. “This doesn’t just go away because someone says no.”

“That’s kind of exactly how it works,” Psycho says. “You fucked up, and Daddy put you in your place. Deal with it.”

“Let go of your pride. That’s why we never get out of this push and pull scenario. The old ways didn’t work, and we don’t have to prove ourselves. We’re all big, bad, and have huge cocks, okay? Put ‘em away and just accept this wasn’t a good idea,” Flynn says.

Psycho nods at the man. He likes Derek, and he kind of likes Flynn now, too. Two of the original club... not great numbers.

Waylon leans on the table. “The sins of men won’t be taken out on their families. We’ve always stood by this.”

“When the Devils targeted my daughter-in-law,” Jennings says, “we took out five of their charters. Because the sins of one charter was reflected on all. That’s what we’ll do.”

We'll attack the nearest charters. Take out as many men as we can."

"Fine," Chicago says through clenched teeth. His face flames as his nostrils flare. He's not happy. Good. Serves him right.

"Psycho, let me know what's decided. You guys always have rooms here."

The line goes dead, and Chicago glares at them. Taking the officer patch, he tosses it back to him. "Put that back on, and let's get back to planning."

He tosses it back. "I don't want that thing. Not anymore. I'm here because I'm a Drifter through and through. Jennings and the other Original Ten saved me when I was on a suicide mission, so I'm here to make sure our reputation doesn't die with you. But after this bullshit, I can't say I'll be sticking around Black Valley too long after the dust settles."

"Come on, Psycho," Ian says. "We're all heated, and we're all angry. We're not moving forward."

"Doesn't matter. I don't know you guys like I thought I did. And I don't fully trust you now. Bad decisions have consequences, and you gotta live with them. One of these days, you guys will finally learn that. But that's not my seat anymore."

Creeper rests his hand on his shoulder. "We got your back."

"I know who I can trust, and who I'm not sure about. From here on out, consider me suspicious of everyone from the Rising. Minus Derek and Flynn. You two don't seem to have your heads permanently shoved up your asses like the rest of them."

West clears his throat. "Just so we're clear, we're a charter divided. We put our faith in you, and you showed us how big of a mistake that may have been. You have an opportunity to prove this isn't who you really are, so I'd suggest you figure out how to do that. Because don't think for

a second the rest of us won't walk if Psycho does. I stand by him over you, Chicago. All day, every day.”

York, the other Army Five, nods his head in agreement. “Better start kissing his ass, boys.”

Psycho moves to the end of the table and leans against the wall. He stares down Chicago and crosses his arms in a sign of defiance. Maybe he should've never left Griffin's Beach.

## Chapter 26

*Griffin's Beach*

*TK*

Karmen's arms wrapped around his waist as they pull up to Lex's place feels different than it has in a long time. Ever since he started thinking about their failed marriage, and the part he played in it, everything looks different. Staying in the house he used to call his own last night did nothing but stir up even more confusing thoughts and feelings.

They spot Colt sitting alone on the front porch, the battle wounds of the fight he hadn't heard about until this morning pulls him from thoughts of his estranged wife. Brian and Beckett nod to him, and he sees the dried blood on Brian's neck as they pass. They took a beating.

They walk over to Colt, but he barely acknowledges them as they approach. Instead, he continues to stare off with a miserable look in his eyes.

"Sweetheart, are you okay?" Karmen asks, reaching out to touch his chin and examine his cheek, her dark blue nails capturing TK's attention. "Is it bad?"

"I'm fine," he says and pulls his face from her hand. "I'll heal."

TK crosses his arms and leans against the railing at the bottom of the steps. "Just one Slasher?"

"Yeah, it was so fucking stupid. The man knocked the guys out but didn't kill them. And then it was a guy Lex would have easily taken out if he entered the house. I didn't *need* to be the one to kill him. It was like it was..."

"A message."

His green eyes look up. "Yeah, that's what Lex said, too."

"The question is why. Do they think we'll fall into a false sense of security and think that Lex and the kids are safe

to attack again? Or are they tipping their hand to give us a preview of what's to come?"

"Neither of those outcomes sound comforting," Karmen says. "It feels like it's getting worse than it was before. What'd you guys do to these guys?"

"No idea," Colt says and shrugs defeatedly. "They're already pretty big, so it's not like taking us out will make a name for them."

TK looks at the closed door and squints. Where are Lex and the kids? He'd expect them to all be together. "What're you doing out here?" he asks, changing the subject.

Running a hand over his face, he looks at the ground. "I fucked my wife last night."

"That's good, right?" Karmen asks, looking between them with confusion on her face. "Why do you have the same look on your face that you did when someone ran over our dog twenty years ago?"

"It was fucking amazing. After the whole asshole fiasco, Psycho came and took care of him while Lex cleaned me up. One thing led to another."

Something in his tone shouts not all is right now that he's bedded her. "But?"

"I spent the night on the front steps."

"I don't understand," his mother says and moves to sit next to him. "Why?"

A humorless chuckle sounds, and he looks off at the horizon. "I tried to show her just how much I love her, and fucking miss her. It kills me to have her here with the kids every day instead of at home with me like they should be."

"Well, from the sounds of it, it wasn't bad. Unless she didn't enjoy it."

"It was mind blowing, thanks. Just like it always had been. But afterwards, she panicked. Jumped up, said it was a mistake, and that it doesn't change anything. Kind of freaked me out, actually, how she lost it."



TK feels his anger boil up. Colt's trying, and Lex doesn't see it. No, she does, but she refuses to. She's made up her mind, and he's about three seconds away from walking inside and telling her exactly how selfish she is. What she's doing tears everyone up, including her kids. Especially the kids. She's a better mom than this.

"What'd you say when she said all that?" Karmen asks, surprising him. How can she side with Lex over their son? "Did you let your pride get the better of you?"

Wiping his eyes, he shakes his head and looks to the side. "I got on my hands and knees and begged her to change her mind like a goddamned pussy."

"And she told you to fuck off?" he asks, his blood pressure rising.

"I don't blame her," he says with a shrug. "She started sobbing and curled up into herself saying she can't trust me to mean what I say. That she has to protect our kids from it all again. They can't do it again."

She rubs Colt's back. "I'm sorry, baby."

"I want to punch myself in the fucking face."

"What are you talking about?" he asks.

Swallowing, he wipes his eyes again. Colt isn't angry anymore. He's defeated. "When I was on my knees begging her, I had a taste of what she felt. What I did to her, and I see it now. God, I was such an asshole."

"What happened, Colt?"

"When I begged her to give us a chance, she had a reaction. My pain hurt her. I told her how she had a perfect opportunity to inflict pain when she cleaned me up, and she said my pain becomes hers. She was so gentle, and I didn't deserve it. But months ago, she was the one begging me on her knees just to spend the fucking weekend with them at home. She said my kids didn't even know me anymore, and I said no. I got pissed, and I left. I knew she was hurting, but it made me angrier."

“Pissed... why?”

“Because she didn’t understand why I needed to go. This is my club, and she of all people should know. But the real reason I needed to go was because of something I never told her. Instead, I left her with all these reasons to question everything about us. About her. God, that kills me more than anything.”

The thought of his daughter-in-law begging his son on her hands and knees to spend time with their family feels like a freight train just rammed into him. That’s not Lex. He looks at Karmen, who just stares at Colt with sad eyes. She really did everything she could to fight for their marriage, and he just let her do it alone. Like he did with his wife. Fuck it if they aren’t two sides of the same fucked up coin.

“Maybe she’ll come around,” Karmen offers.

He shakes his head and chuckles dryly. “No, she has a wall up, and she’s not going to let it down. It’s become too reinforced after all the years of damage we’ve all done to her that I can’t break it down. Not even if I had a damned sledgehammer. I’m just so fucking pissed at myself for not realizing what I was doing.”

“Why were you spending so much time in Black Valley?” TK asks. “You said it wasn’t because of Diane, so what was it?”

Colt licks his lips. “It’s so stupid now.”

“Have you told Lex the reason?” Karmen asks.

“No.”

“Speak,” he orders.

His eyes look up. “Because of Casey.”

Casey? The young kid the Slashers killed. “What?”

“He sacrificed his life to save mine. He was young, but I had kids.”

“That’s what brothers do for each other,” Karmen says. “That’s what Trunk did for Jennings.”

“It’s not just that,” he says and sighs. “He was a year younger than Noah would be right now. And somewhere, it got all fucking muddled, and I couldn’t separate Casey from my brother. I heard their voices in my head telling me all the shit I did wrong. As luck would have it, the moment I realized just how badly I fucked up, the voices stopped. They just delivered the shit I didn’t want to accept.”

*He seemed haunted.* Karmen was spot on. “Colt, why didn’t you say anything? To me? Or better yet, to Lex? You wouldn’t be here right now if you had.” As he says it, he knows he’s a hypocrite. He always bottles his shit up, too.

“Because I felt guilty and ashamed. Like I didn’t deserve to be spared. And then I found out Casey’s mom is sick, and he joined the club to bring in enough money to help her stay at home and provide her protection. He was her only family, and I was out there making extra money to give her.”

“We would have done that,” his mother says. “Well, the club would have done that.”

The way she corrects herself, clarifying she isn’t included, bothers him. It’s his own fault. He made it clear she was no longer part of the club.

“I felt responsible. He gave up his life for me and left his sick mom alone.”

“Go inside and tell Lex this. Tell her the truth about what happened, and she’ll probably forgive you,” he says.

“No, this doesn’t magically excuse the fact I stopped being the man my family needed. I’m making it up to my kids by being here now, but when you let your kids down, it hurts their mother in a way that’s nearly impossible to fix. I get it now, Mom. Everything you said, I fucking understand.”

Letting out a deep breath, she looks at her hands clasped together in front of her. “I wish you didn’t, baby. I really wish you didn’t. But Lex isn’t me. She’s a hell of a lot stronger than I’ve ever been.”

“That’s kind of the problem. She’s too damn strong. Part of me wishes she would have fucked around with

someone. We'd be together right now if she had because we'd be even."

"No, you wouldn't. That trust would be broken on both ends, and you two aren't the type to get over that. You would have broken irreparably."

"There's no fixing this, so it's a pointless suggestion, anyway."

The front door opens, and TK nearly gasps when he sees Lex. He knew she'd lost weight when he saw her last night at the wedding, but seeing her in shorts and a tank top shows the stress she's dealt with.

"Oh, hi," Lex says, her eyes avoiding TK's. "I didn't realize you guys were out here."

"Lex, you gotta eat," he says without thinking.

Colt glares at him. "Dad..."

"I'm working on it," she says and looks down at herself. "I went from one extreme to the other, didn't I?"

"What?"

Colt whips around. "You thought you were fat?"

"You know how I felt," she whispers.

TK's mouth drops open. There's no hiding the damage. Damage none of them would've ever expected, and her swollen, bloodshot eyes tells him she cried all night while Colt hated himself on these steps.

"The kids are asking for you, Colt," she says, her voice louder. "Do you two want to come in for breakfast?"

He wants to go inside just to make sure she eats, but he looks at Karmen and knows they need to have their own conversation. "No, we need to get going. We just stopped by to check on everything. Didn't hear about the guy last night until this morning."

"Yeah, it was lucky we had Colt here. Is the lockdown still in place?"

The waver in her voice annoys him, mostly because he knows the anxiety doesn't stem from any potential danger. No, it comes from the fear of having her husband staying in the house with her another night. "I'm not sure. We haven't talked yet this morning. But we'll be sure to let you know."

"Give the kids a kiss for us," Karmen says.

"I will."

She climbs off the step, and TK quickly walks up the stairs to Lex, and pulls her into a hug. "We love you. Please don't ever forget that."

"Thanks," she says, but even as he releases her, she refuses to make eye contact. How the hell did they all miss this? The signs flash in goddamned neon, and they all just blindly went on their merry way.

"Lex, look at me."

She does, and she wears all her pain on her face. "We're still your family."

She attempts what looks like a smile, but it comes off more like a grimace. No, it's not the club that ruins women, it's the men. He did the same damn thing Colt did. Karmen was right when she said their son followed in his footsteps. Damn it.

## Chapter 27

*Griffin's Beach*

*TK*

TK parks outside the house he used to call home, but he stays seated after Karmen hops off the back. He knows they need to have this conversation, but part of him fears the truth.

“Do you want to go? I’m sure I’ll be fine alone,” Karmen says. Her voice sounds almost disappointed, but she wears a good mask. She’s had years to perfect it.

He looks up at the woman who finally looks her age. For the longest time, she fought it by coloring her hair with the latest trends and wearing more makeup than she had when she was in her twenties. Her diet was minimal, and now, he can’t help but wonder if it was his fault after seeing Lex.

“Did you question yourself like Lex does?” he asks, his heart pounding. “Because of me?”

Her head looks side to side at the neighboring houses. “Can we talk about this inside? I think the neighbors have gotten enough shows over the years.”

His foot kicks out the kickstand and quickly follows her inside. He needs to hear her answer, even though it might just kill him.

Looking around, he realizes nothing’s changed. Every other time he’s been here, he hadn’t paid much attention, but now he notices their one measly wedding photo still hangs on the wall. She never took it down. His beat-to-hell leather chair he loved still sits in the same spot in front of the TV. She didn’t change a single thing. Did she leave it all even when Rush was here, or did it come back after they murdered the asshole?

In the kitchen, she stops and turns. “Do you want some coffee?”

“Sure,” he says, “but don’t think this gets you out of answering the question.”

She sighs and fills the pot with water from the sink before pouring it into the coffee maker. “It was hard not to, TK.”

“What do you mean?”

“When your husband doesn’t seem to have any interest in you anymore, it messes with your head. You start to wonder if you’re too fat, too old, too ugly. Is there someone else out there he wants more? Is she younger and prettier? Do her boobs not sag after having three kids? Should I get work done? Am I sexy enough? It just plays on a loop you can’t shut off.”

The words stab at him, and he takes a moment before saying anything, letting them absorb into his mind. He looks around the large kitchen she loved to spend mornings in. It was the main reason they purchased the house, and she loved making them breakfast. Sitting at the island she served him breakfast every morning reminds him that even at the end, she still tried to show him her love.

*But how many meals did she eat alone because you stayed gone?*

“Are you seeing anyone?”

Karmen laughs. “Uh, no. I learned my lesson the hard way.”

“What do you mean?”

“Lex has a better shot since she’s a hell of a lot younger than I was when we split, but she’ll realize there’s only the club for women like us. And there’s no one who’d want anything to do with me after what happened. Besides, I don’t want anyone. I didn’t really want Rush, so I’m alone until the day I die.”

He waits for her to ask him the same question, but she doesn’t. She’s privy to the knowledge he’d been bedding two busty blondes, he supposes. No need to ask.

“If you didn’t really want Rush, why go through all of it?”

Turning, she rests her tailbone on the counter and crosses her arms under her chest. Her eyes avoid him, and it annoys the shit out of him. “Because I wanted attention. He had it out for you for some reason, and he was giving me what you didn’t.”

“You didn’t feel like you got what you needed from me?”

“It sounds stupid. It *was* stupid. If I could go back and change it all, I would. I was desperate and just wanted you to see me. When nothing I did seemed to work, I just settled for someone who gave me what I was looking for.”

Standing, he walks around the island to pin her against the counter, his body pressed against hers. “I took you for granted.”

She turns, her back to his front, and reaches for the coffee mugs in the cupboard above them. “It doesn’t excuse what I did, TK. I’ll never forgive myself. Never. That was nothing more than a terrible decision made by a desperate woman, and I hate myself every day for it.”

“If I had been a better husband,” he says, his lips right by her ear, “you wouldn’t have become a desperate woman. In a perfect world, you would’ve never wondered if I still wanted you.”

“The world isn’t perfect.”

“No, but you should have been able to tell me and have me listen. I’m listening now, Karmen.”

Swallowing, she takes a deep breath and lets it out slowly. Hesitantly. “What are you saying?”

“I’m saying it’s my fault. I’m the one who let us die.”

Her body trembles against his, and his heart pounds in his chest and moves to throb in his fingertips. He avoided this conversation for so long because, deep down, he knew it was



his fault. That he did this to them, but blaming her for everything came so easily.

“What are you saying, TK?” she asks again. Hope. That’s what he hears in her voice, but she tries to hide it.

“It’s not your fault,” he whispers as his hand slides up her shirt and cups her chest. His lips move to her neck, and her nipple hardens against his palm like it always used to. Her body reacts just like it did before, even after all this time.

Her chest rises and falls quickly and tears fall from her cheek. “TK, stop.”

His body immediately stills. “Stop?”

“I know you want to hurt me for everything that happened, but I can’t take this.”

Releasing her, he turns her body to face him, but she refuses to look at him. “What?”

“This, between us. Because of what’s happening between Colt and Lex, you think you made a mistake, but you didn’t. I did. Your decision was well-founded, and I know you think you want this. I know your body wants this,” she says, and he feels the strain of his zipper with the desire he hasn’t felt in a long time for her, “but after it’s all said and done, you’ll leave me again. I can’t do it. I just can’t do it.”

He watches her look away as the sobs shake her entire body, and his chest hurts. Aside from Noah dying, she’s always been the strong one out of the two of them. She’s held him together when he thought he would break. Hell, being an ex-old lady isn’t easy, but she’s done it with grace and humility.

“Look at me.”

Her eyes reluctantly look into his, and he reaches out to wipe the tears with his thumbs as he cups her face. “What?”

“I know what Colt’s feeling. And I know it’s easier to blame Lex than it is to look at what he did to cause the shitstorm he calls his life now, but he did what I wasn’t capable of until now.”

“What’s that?”

“He realizes his blame in the situation. That his actions have consequences, and now he’s paying the price.”

Karmen lets out a shaky breath and looks away. “I’m familiar with paying the price for your actions.”

“My pride got in the way of admitting I was wrong. I’m at fault for Noah’s death, but by the time I realized it, it was too late. At least I thought it was too late.”

“What are you trying to say?” The desperation in her voice quickens his breathing.

He looks into her eyes, hoping she sees the sincerity he feels. Emotions aren’t exactly his thing. “I don’t want to leave you alone. I want to come home. Please, let me come home.”

Her lips find his, and he pulls her flush against his body. His tongue slides into her mouth, her tears making her the perfect mix of sweet and salty. He’s spent many nights with women in the club trying to forget everything, but no one has ever been her. No one will ever be, and he fooled himself into thinking he wasn’t just a shell of his former self without her.

Pulling apart, he turns her back around to face the counter, and her hands brace herself as he slides one hand up her shirt while his other slides down into her jeans to toy with the curly hair she never used to have. She wasn’t lying – she hasn’t been with anyone.

Her back arches, pressing her tit hard against his palm, and she gives no resistance. His fingers work her nipple and her clit, and she reaches her left hand back to tug on his hair.

“Let go for me, baby,” he murmurs into her neck, his lips sucking and licking her soft skin.

“TK,” she moans.

Sliding his hand further into her panties, he slips two fingers into her slick heat and grinds his palm against her sensitive nub. “I want to feel you fall apart on my hand.”

“Fuck!” Her body shakes, and he pulls her tight against him. His need presses painfully against his jeans and her backside, and he can’t remember ever wanting her this much. It’s been so damn long.

Releasing her, he lets her turn around to face him, her cheeks flushing even more when he sucks her juices off his fingers. “You still taste the same.”

Her hooded eyes stare at him, mesmerized with every move he makes.

“I need you, Karmen.”

“Just let me run and shower. I only need fifteen minutes.”

She turns to walk away, and he grabs her wrist to stop her. “Don’t you dare.”

“Excuse me?”

Reaching down, he unbuttons her jeans and slides them down. “I need you. Now.”

“Are you sure?”

“I plan to have you every night for the rest of our lives,” he says and releases himself from his own pants, finally feeling relief from the constricting fabric.

Karmen falls to her knees and takes him into her mouth. She remembers exactly what he likes, and her hands fondle his balls while she takes him deep into her throat. No one suppresses their gag reflex quite like she does, and he almost loses all control.

“Stop,” he grunts. “Not like this.”

Releasing him, she leans back on her heels, and he loves just how submissive she’s willing to be. Only a handful of requests come to mind that she’s ever denied him, and right now, he wants her. All of her.

Guiding her to stand, they strip each other of their remaining clothes. He stares at her, and notices not much has

changed. She's exactly the same as he remembers, and he bends down to suck one of her nipples.

"Oh," she moans. "Do you mean it? Really mean it?"

Letting her breast fall from his mouth, he stares at her. "Mean what?"

"That you want to come home?"

He lifts her and sets her on the island, the chill of the stone hardening her nipples to pointed peaks. "I want to come back, Karmen. I want us to be husband and wife again. A real husband and wife."

"I love you. I never stopped, but I can only do this if you mean it. Really mean it. Please don't toy with me and break me by leaving. I don't think I can come back from it again, even though I know I probably deserve it."

As tears well up in her eyes, he knows exactly what he wants. He reaches down, grabs his clothes, and slips them on, adjusting himself painfully. It would've been easier if he'd let her suck him off, but hindsight and all that.

Without a word, he hurries out to his bike and takes off with a cloud of smoke behind him.

## Chapter 28

*Griffin's Beach*

*Karmen*

Karmen sits completely naked, on the granite countertop of the kitchen island, and stares at the front door. TK took off without a word, and her heart breaks all over again. Not only did he just up and leave, he left her sitting there fully exposed. If he wanted to humiliate her, he succeeded. But he didn't need to string her along by telling her he wanted to be a family again.

"At least he didn't leave after making love to me," she whispers, sobs forcing her to bend forward and cup her head in her hands.

Climbing off the counter, she picks up her clothes and walks into the master bedroom. Tossing them into the hamper, she grabs one of TK's old t-shirts he left years ago and pulls it over her head. She wears it so much it now has two holes along the neckline hem and one in the left armpit.

She crawls into bed and curls up with his old pillow to let her pain out in guttural cries. Klaire won't be home from school for hours, and she needs time to settle the gaping hole she feels in her chest before putting her mom face on.

The pillow smells like his cologne from when she sprayed it the other night, and it gives her an odd sense of comfort even though he just shattered her into a million pieces. He's the only man she's ever loved, and he's the only one she'll ever give her heart to.

She doesn't hear the front door and jumps when she sees TK appear in the doorway with two bags over his shoulders. "TK?"

"Hey, why are you crying?" he asks, dropping his bags on the floor and hurrying towards her.

"You took off without a word. I thought... What's going on?"

Stripping out of his clothes, he climbs into the bed with her, his thumbs wiping her tears. "I'm sorry, baby."

"It's okay. You have a right to change your mind-"

"No, you don't understand. I didn't change my mind. I went to get my shit from the clubhouse and move back in here. Shit, I gotta get used to that again."

A crease forms between her eyebrows. "What?"

"Communicating. It's not just me in my own head anymore."

"I don't understand. You left me naked on the counter to go and get your things from the clubhouse?"

He chuckles. "Well, it was inopportune timing, and the entire ride felt like torture, but you needed to know I was serious. I'm serious, Karmen. I'm home, and I plan to stay."

"Really?" she asks, the tears turning into happy tears. She's never been a happy crier, but there's only one other thing that would make her happier right now.

"I need you," he says and pulls the shirt she wears over her head. "I need to show you how much." He pauses and looks at it. "Wait, is this mine?"

A flush washes over her, and she looks to the side. "Maybe."

"You wear my old clothes?"

"Only the shirts you left here. It sounds stupid, but it comforts me when I've had a bad day. One of the only things I could do to feel close to you when you left."

His lips find hers as he shifts to settle between her legs and slides into her with ease. The last time they had any intimacy like this was the night Noah died, and it was a frenzied rush to find comfort in each other. This time, he seems to take his time with long, slow strokes.

"Fuck, you feel so good. I almost forgot."

Her body builds with pleasure with every thrust. "Baby, I'm close."

“Already?” he asks, a smirk on his face.

He always liked to see how quickly he could get her over the finish line. It was almost like a personal feat if he made it happen in under five minutes, and most of the time, he succeeded.

Her hands cup his face, his movements continuing the same pace. “You know it’s never taken long when you’re inside me.”

He shifts, and she laughs when she finds herself on top. “Ride me like a fucking bronco.”

“Yes, sir,” she pants and braces her hands on his chest. Her hips move and grind against his pelvis, finding the friction she craves. “Oh, God, TK!”

Her body shakes as she cries out, her orgasm causing tingles throughout her limbs. It’s been so long. So. Damn. Long.

“Can I make a request?” he asks, his hand reaching up and toying with her nipples as she pants.

“What’s that?” she pants and moves her body again. She never thought she’d have him again, and she wants to ride this high as long as she can.

His thumb reaches out and rubs her clit, her body jolts through her curls. “Keep it just like it is.”

Karmen pauses and looks down at him. He can’t be serious, and she almost laughs. “Really?”

“Aside from when you were pregnant, I’ve never had you natural. And that was only because you couldn’t reach over the belly carrying my babies. I’m the only one who’s ever had you like this, right?”

Swallowing, she nods. “Only you.”

“Keep it. Trim it, design it, but don’t shave it.”

Something in the way he says it tells her this is his way of marking their fresh start. Her heart swells, and she nods. She’d do almost anything he asked right now. “Yes, sir.”

“I fucking love when you call me ‘sir,’” he growls. His hands grip her hips to still her. “Get on your knees.”

Her eyes widen as she anxiously does as he orders, sliding off his length and shifting into position on all fours, her ass in the air.

“That’s a good girl,” TK says and slaps her ass.

The sting makes her mew, and she feels her excitement drip down her leg. Never has she wanted him as much as she does now, and in this moment, she feels like a teenager again. And when he slams into her, she nearly combusts.

“Fuck,” she gasps and reaches out to brace herself on the headboard as he continues crashing into her.

Just as she feels the orgasm, he stills. “Are you close, baby?”

“I was right there,” she pants. His hand slaps her left cheek, and she clenches around him. “Again.”

He follows her order, and she’s not sure she could be any closer to orgasm if he was sucking on her clit. “You’re so fucking wet.”

“It’s been so long.”

“You’re dripping,” he says and tugs at her hair, pulling her head back. “I don’t remember turning you on like this.”

Her body tingles as he moves again with his fist tangled in her hair. His strokes move from hard and fast to long and slow, and she feels the torture of denial. He brings her right to the brink and stops three more times.

“Please,” she begs.

His hand slaps her ass twice more before gripping her hip and picking up his pace. He thrusts into her three more times before her body convulses, and the orgasm rips through her so hard she ends up in tears.

He finds his own release, his hot seed filling her, and he mutters, “Fuck, baby.” The moment he sees her tears, he releases her and slides out, pulling her to face him. “Did I hurt



you? God, Karmen, I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to. God, I'm such a fucking ass-"

Her kisses interrupt him and reaches up to wipe her tears. "No, I'm not in pain," she says with a giggle. "That was so damn intense."

"You started crying?"

"I didn't mean to. It just kind of happened," she says and laughs as the tears continue to fall. "It was like you fucked me right out of my body."

His face changes from concern to confusion to amusement before laughing with her. "That good, huh?"

"So, good," she says and kisses him.

Laying her down, he pulls her onto his chest. The air between them remains silent, and she feels so content just being there with him. She can't remember the last time she felt this settled.

"How long have you been wearing my shirts?" he asks, breaking the silence.

Sniffing, she plays with his chest hair. "Since we ended things."

"Even when you were with Rush?"

"God, it pissed him off to no end."

"Good."

She laughs. "It's pathetic, I know, but it's not the most pathetic thing I've done."

His lips kiss her forehead, and he runs his fingers through her hair. "What else have you done?"

"I don't want to tell you."

"You can't say that and not tell me!" he says. "Please?"

Sighing, she shrugs. What else does she have to lose? "I keep a bottle of your cologne in the bathroom."

"That's not pathetic."

“Smell your pillow.”

She hears his heart race under her ear, and she can't help but wonder if she's divulged too much. Made herself look obsessive and tell him this was just a big mistake.

“I love you.”

The words take her by surprise, and she sits up to look down at his face. “You do?”

“I never stopped... I was just so angry.”

Her eyes look at his torso, unable to meet his eyes any longer. “I get it.”

“I took it all out on you, and that wasn't fair. It was easier.”

“We needed to grieve the way we did. I deserve it all, and I don't blame you for any of it. Everything you did, I deserved.”

“No, you didn't. You shouldn't have cheated, but I shouldn't have pushed you so far away you felt that desperate. I mean it when I said I took you for granted. I knew you'd always be there, and I stopped trying. That wasn't fair to you or our family.”

Sniffling, she holds back her tears. She's cried too much today, and she doesn't like it. “I miss him every day, TK. My baby boy was taken because of my stupidity, and I can never forgive myself. Never. Part of me knows I don't deserve you here right now. That you should say this is one big joke, and break me all over again.”

“You don't deserve to be punished over and over again,” he says and cups her face in his large hands. His calloused skin feels rough on her own, but the gentle way he touches her puts her on cloud nine. It's been so long since he's touched her with such tenderness. Or looked at her with anything other than hatred.

“We'll have to agree to disagree.”

“It's both of our faults, but it's more mine than yours. And it's time I take some of the burden off your shoulders.”

“I’ve gotten pretty good at carrying it,” she jokes, trying to lighten the mood.

He gives her a sad smile and pulls her down to him, kissing her lips. “You’re not alone anymore, baby.”

“You have no idea how long I’ve dreamt of you saying that.”

“Can I ask a favor?”

“Anything.”

Sitting up, he smiles. “Will you make me lunch?”

A wide smile appears on her face. Cooking for her family has always been her happy place, and besides the sex, it’s what she misses the most. “What do you want me to make?”

“Whatever you want. I miss so many things about you, and your home cooking is at the top of the list. It’s something I could never substitute.”

“Hopefully, the sex wasn’t as good either,” she says and jumps up to slip his shirt on. “Then again, you did get the one thing I’d never agree to.”

His brows furrow as he looks at her. “What’s that?”

“A threesome. I heard all about your busty blondes.”

He pinches his face and covers his eyes with his hand. “Karmen-”

“It’s water under the bridge. As long as it’s just us from now on.”

Climbing out of bed, she takes in his naked body with appreciation. Even unaroused, the sight of him sends an electrical current through her body, zapping her in the most delicious way possible.

“Only us. Unless you want to invite a busty blonde into the bedroom.”

“Not a chance,” she laughs. “I’m a possessive woman. What’s mine is mine.”

His lips find hers, their tongues tangling, and desire pulls at her core again. She's missed this every day since he stopped paying any attention to her, and she wants to stay just like this forever.

"Now, go make me food, woman," he jokes and slaps her backside.

"Nothing would make me happier," she says and walks into the kitchen.

Even though she should be wondering how and why this happened, she pushes the thought to the back of her mind and decides to live in the present. The past haunted her for far too long, and it's time to let it go. Let it all go.

# Chapter 29

*Griffin's Beach*

*Grayson*

Staring up at the old brick building that feels like his second home, Grayson smiles. Not getting up and going to work for weeks has felt like pure torture. The doctor only cleared him for desk duty, but at least it involves more than a shower and stuffing his face until his girl comes home. As much as he loved his sexy nurse willing to tend to every single need he had, not having a job to get to every day started messing with his sense of purpose.

Aside from a vacation or being sick as a dog, he's never been the type to do nothing for more than a few days. And usually, those few days are still active. Productive. That's what he needs. Productivity.

The moment he steps foot in the small but bustling bullpen, he feels his sense of purpose return for the first time in weeks. Being a dedicated police officer for over a decade shows how much he loves helping people in his community. Catching the bad guys. Solving puzzles. Making the streets safer. It's where he belongs, and one day, that Captain title will be his. Travis will step down or get promoted, depending on how long Julian milks his job. Either option works for him.

He sits at his desk and nods to the others who glance over at him, but no one makes eye contact. He's been at home for weeks, but it feels longer. And it appears everyone feels the same way because they all keep glancing at him with anxious glances. The air around him shifts, and he feels a sense of unease.

Ignoring it, he starts his computer and enters his password. Mrs.AshleyTate1002\*\$

The screen displays an error, but he just closes it without reading. "Damn password security requirements," he mutters.

For security purposes, they have to change their passwords every six weeks, and his must've expired while he was out on leave.

"Grayson," Travis says and stops at his desk as he walks by. His boss looks startled by his presence and glances around. "You're here."

"Didn't you get the note from my doctor? I'm not going to be running down any drug rings anytime soon, but I'm able to be on desk duty. And considering how much everyone around here hates paperwork, I figure I can be helpful."

He stares at him with his brows drawn so close together it looks like one unibrow. "I thought Julian called you."

Pulling out his phone, he looks through his call log. "No, I don't see anything. Is something wrong?"

"Let's go talk with the Chief."

He realizes how silent the room got, and everyone avoids making eye contact. Something is clearly wrong, but he can't figure out what. Are they worried he won't want to only do paperwork? They should know him better than to assume he believes anything falls beneath him. Even though he's the most tenured officer on the force below Travis, he's never tried to pass off his duties to someone newer. He carries his own weight, and he thought people respected that.

"Chief," Travis says and leads Grayson into the large office, shutting the door behind them.

Julian turns around, jumps slightly, and sighs. "Tate, I didn't know you were coming back today."

"Didn't you get my paperwork? I was cleared to ride the desk. I can call and get it sent over again." He reaches for his phone, but the man reaches and places a surprisingly dainty hand on the desk to stop him. How has he never noticed the feminine hands the Chief of Police has?

"No, we got it. I just didn't expect you."

“I don’t understand.”

Leaning back, he looks to Travis, who avoids eye contact with either man and looks anywhere else. “The shooting has brought up some concerns.”

“Concerns?”

“About the safety of the department.”

That’s what everyone seems concerned about? “Guys, I wasn’t the target.”

“Tate-”

“It wasn’t intentional. The person who did this didn’t even know I was a cop. I was out of uniform, and I’ve never seen them before. They also had no idea where I’d be when it happened, so it-”

“It’s not that,” Travis interrupts him.

He looks between the men. “Then what is it?”

“It’s your affiliation with the club,” Julian says.

The way he says it instantly pisses Grayson off. “My *affiliation?*”

“You’re sleeping with a daughter of an Original Ten.”

The fact everyone talks like he’s simply bedding someone rather than building a future makes him want to punch both of them in the face. “That’s not how it is.”

“It might be more beneficial if it was,” Travis mutters.

“You’re in a relationship with someone who has close ties to the club. You have to understand how this affects everyone,” Julian says. He shakes his head and shrugs as he leans back like Grayson’s the ridiculous one in this situation.

“Wait, this is about my relationship, not the fact I was shot?”

Travis leans against the wall and tilts his head to the side. “They’re related.”

“You’re gonna have to dumb this down for me, guys.”

“No one wants to partner with you,” Julian says and folds his hands on the desk. “They don’t know where your alliances are, and you were shot because of the club. You would’ve never been there if you weren’t screwing a daughter of a well-known club member. A founding member, in fact.”

His jaw drops. His loyalty comes into question because he took a bullet for the woman he loves? No, wait... They think it’s for someone he’s temporarily screwing. He doesn’t know if it makes it more or less offensive.

“We know you’re a good guy, but you’re too involved with the club. And we can’t have people questioning whether you’d put the club before them. Or the law,” Travis says.

“Involved?” he exclaims. “I’m nowhere near involved.”

“Ashley is.”

“Wait a minute,” he says, his anger rising far too high to maintain self-control. “You two have an alliance with the club. How is it any different?”

“We have an understanding. A mutually beneficial relationship,” Julian interrupts before Travis can provide a rebuttal. “But we also know which side of the law we both fall. With you, that line seems blurred. Especially now.”

Blurred? They work with the club to harm people they can’t arrest. That makes them no better than him. In fact, it makes them worse.

“I’ve worked with the club to help save this department. Twice! And just because I’m in love with a woman who left the same club you yourselves work with for almost twenty years, I’m suddenly seen as a traitor? For loving a woman with next to no involvement with the club you have a ‘mutually beneficial’ relationship with?”

“You have to understand how it makes others feel, especially with you being injured. It puts the rest of us at risk working with you. Your relationship has made you a liability, and we have to protect the rest of the department.”



No, not the department... them. The man he sees as his mentor just shoved his ass out the door, and he can't even look him in the eyes.

"That's rich considering both of you wanted women of the club. You're telling me I have to choose between the woman I love and my job simply because she shares DNA with a Drifter?"

Julian lets out a deep breath and gives him fake sad eyes that makes him want to rip his face off. "I'm sorry, Grayson, but you're no longer employed with the department. HR has cleaned out your desk, and all access has been terminated."

"That's it, then?" he asks and looks at Travis. It makes sense now. His password wasn't expired, his login was terminated. They punked out and let him come in and embarrass himself. Everyone out there knew. "I get shot as a civilian, and I'm let go because of who I'm in a relationship with? After I've put my ass on the line for you guys for over a decade? Fuck you both."

Standing, he walks out and grabs the box now sitting on his desk with all of his personal possessions. No one looks at him, and the anger builds.

"Grayson," Travis calls.

"Go to hell," he says over his shoulder. "Don't come to me when you need something from the club. I hope they fuck you all over."

Walking out to his car, he sits in the parking lot, his heart racing. This is bullshit. Absolute bullshit. Knowing what he has to do, he runs home to grab his contract before heading to the one person who might be able to help him.

Grayson steps inside the all glass building and heads up to the fifth floor. Stepping off the elevator, he looks around in awe. Never before has he set his sights on an office like this one.

"Can I help you, sir?" a young man at the desk asks.

"Uh, I'm looking for Lily Hankinson."

“Do you have an appointment?”

Shit, does he need one? “Uh, no. But we’re kind of, well... we’re friendly.”

“Name?”

“Grayson Tate.”

The door to her office opens, and Lily’s bright green eyes widen as she looks at him. “Grayson? God, who got arrested? I really didn’t want to spend my afternoon at the police station.”

“No one,” he says and holds up his hands. “I was hoping to talk to you.”

“Yeah, go on in and make yourself comfortable. I’ll be right back. I have to sign for a package in the main lobby.”

“I can get that for you, Mrs. Hankinson,” the man behind the desk says.

Sighing, she nods as he scurries to the elevator. “He’s a little too eager, isn’t he?”

“Is that a bad thing?”

She leads him into a large office, and he looks around, spinning in a small circle and takes everything in. He clearly went into the wrong branch of the law. “He’s new. My old assistant got a new job with his husband, and he left me. I think I’m being too harsh on him because he’s not Gavin. But I loved Gavin.”

“You have an assistant. You must be pretty important.”

“Well, I did make partner,” she says with a smirk. “What can I do for you? Is everything okay with Ashley?”

“Yeah, she’s fine. I was hoping I could talk to you about me, actually. I don’t know how this works since I’m not really part of the club, and you work with them.”

Her hands fold on her desk, and she tilts her head slightly. “Are you trying to go after them for something?”

“God, no.”

“Okay then, why don’t you tell me what you need, and we can go from there?”

He watches her, and her body language gives nothing away. There’s no doubt she’s good in a courtroom. And poker. “I got fired today.”

“What?” Her demure demeanor fades, and she stares at him with eyes wide in shock. “Why?”

“Because I got shot. Apparently, I pose a risk to the rest of the department because I’m in love with Ashley. My ties to the club bring questions about my loyalty.”

Sucking in her cheeks, she breathes deeply through her nose. “Is that right?”

“I’ve given my all to that department. When Julian and Travis were pushed out with the ATF in town, I was the one inside working to get things back on track. When I was hired by the Sheriff’s Department after they were removed, I helped cover up some of the shit they did to help expedite their reinstatements.”

“Do you have your contract with you?”

Pulling it out of the folder he carries, he hands it to her. One of the few times he’s thankful for being such a Type A personality. “Here.”

“What’s your end game? You want to sue the department for wrongful termination?”

“I want my job back,” he says. “I have goals and plans, and this is just wrong.”

“I’d rather sue them because they’ve become a major pain in my ass lately, but we can do it your way,” she says.

Her eyes read over the contract, and she grabs a pad of sticky notes. Placing them on the pages, she scribbles down notes, and her face slowly turns into a frown.

“I don’t know how I feel about the face you have on right now,” Grayson says.

“So, I have some bad news.”

“What?”

Handing the pages back to him, she points to the section with a yellow sticky note right above it. “This gives them the ability to remove you from your position without warning. As long as it’s not due to discrimination, there’s nothing you can do.”

“Isn’t firing me because of who I’m dating considered discrimination?”

“Well, the motorcycle club isn’t a protected group of people, but in theory, yes, it shows discrimination. But if we go after them for that, it opens a door I don’t know would be beneficial for you to open.”

“Why not?”

Sighing, she gives him a sad smile. “Because Julian and Travis are privy to what happened with the ATF. You purposely worked against the government to help out the club. They benefited as well, but they could use this against you. Possibly get the ATF to press charges if they can prove conspiracy.”

“Fuck.”

“Can I make a suggestion?”

“Sure, why not?” he says with a chuckle and leans back in his chair. This is just fantastic.

She laughs. “It’s not the same, but you could move into the private sector.”

“Excuse me?”

“Private investigator. You have all the skills needed, and you have contacts. Without wearing the badge, you’ll also probably get information the department can’t, and you’d have opportunities to stick it to Julian and Travis. It’s also better pay because you get to pick your rates.”

A PI? Seriously? Sighing, he lowers his head. He’d never thought of making a living catching cheating spouses, and the idea doesn’t sit well with him. “I’ll think about it.

Thanks for looking at this, Lily. Do I owe you anything, or will you send me a bill?"

"You're an extension of the club, so we'll call it good. Besides, I didn't give you much legal advice outside of telling you it's probably not a good idea. I wish I could give you what you want. Though, if you change your mind about suing, I can almost guarantee a settlement."

"Thanks, I'll think about it," he says and leaves.

Her assistant waves to him, and he leans his back against the cold elevator wall as the doors close. What is he supposed to do now?

## Chapter 30

*Griffin's Beach*

*Grayson*

Driving around aimlessly after leaving Lily's office, Grayson doesn't know what he's doing or where he's going until he spots the familiar black Mustang outside the real estate office. The clock reads just past four, and he pulls into the lot to wait for Lex to leave work.

She told him she took a job here, but part of him still can't believe it. The idea she's here, working to pay bills for her own place, still seems like a long, drawn-out joke he has yet to understand the punchline of. Colt and Lex always seemed so solid.

"Grayson?" Lex says, startled, looking at him through the open driver's side window. "I gotta say, I don't think I'll ever get used to you driving anything other than your squad car."

"Do you have to be somewhere right now, or could we talk?"

Her eyes look down to the large rose gold watch on her bony wrist. "I have a little time before I have to pick up the kids. Is everything okay?"

"Ashley's fine," he says.

"Are you okay?"

Is he? Swallowing, he shrugs. "Not really."

Walking around to the passenger side, she opens the door and steps inside. "Let's talk."

"Where to?"

"Wherever you want. I just need to be back in thirty minutes to go pick up the kids."

He puts the car in drive and knows exactly where to go. It doesn't take long to pull into the small parking area to

the playground they used to play at when they were kids close to her childhood home. Before he became one of the “good guys,” Lex, Ky, Colt, and he were good friends. And then he turned eight.

Stepping out, he hurries over to the passenger side of the car and opens the door for her.

“Grayson, you don’t have to open car doors for me,” she says.

“I know. But I also don’t think you’ve had someone do it for you recently,” he says and walks in step with her to the swings.

“Not for quite a few years. Now, talk, copper.” She sits down on one of the hard wooden seats and pushes herself slightly.

He takes the seat next to her. “I guess that’s a better nickname than pig, but neither one applies to me anymore.”

Her eyes snap to look at him, and her feet plant on the ground, bringing her to a sudden stop. “What?”

“You heard me.”

“You quit?”

“Got fired.”

His eyes can’t look at her now that the words hang in the air. Instead, he stares at the wood chips beneath their feet and focuses on how he never understood why they couldn’t have sand like every other playground. It hurt a hell of a lot worse when falling on it and had the added risk of splinters.

“What did you just say?”

“They fired me.”

“Why?”

Turning, he levels her with a glare. “Guess.”

“Because of the club?” she nearly shouts. “Are you kidding me?”

“Getting shot also shot my loyalty to hell. No one wants to partner with me because of the danger involved, even though I wasn’t the target. But ultimately, it comes down to the fact I’m with Ash.”

“It’s really fucking entertaining that Julian or Travis would fire you for falling for a woman of the club when both of them want one. Julian wanted Karmen, and Travis wanted my mom. Oh, this makes me so mad.”

He laughs. “Get in line.”

“Did you talk to Lily?”

“Yeah, I talked to her before stalking you. My contract gives them the right to do this, but she did say I could sue.”

Wrinkling her nose, she kicks off the ground and swings higher, her skirt flowing in the wind. “I hate to say it, but I kind of told you so.”

Shocked, he stares at her profile as she moves beside him, but she stares at the jungle gym. “You did?”

“I told you there would come a day when you had to choose between Ashley and your job. Granted, I thought it would be more of a passed-over-for-a-promotion thing. I never thought they’d fire you.”

He thinks back to the conversation they had when she checked on him after Ashley chose her family over their growing relationship. She was the only one who tried to understand what they had, and she told him there would come a point when he’d have to choose between his relationship and his dream job. He just never thought she was right.

“I don’t know what to do, Lex.”

“What did Ashley say?”

“I haven’t told her yet.”

She groans. “You told me before your girlfriend? Dude, seriously?”

“Technically, I told Lily first.”



“That’s different. You realize she’s gonna be pissed, right?”

“I stumbled upon you, and I wanted the advice of my friend. You really think she’ll be mad about that?”

Laughing, she shakes her head. “The lack of understanding you men have just baffles me sometimes. You’re smarter than this, man.”

“So, no advice, then?” he asks, his eye twitching.

“Are you sure you want my advice? I’m not exactly batting a thousand lately. In case you haven’t noticed, my life isn’t what one would call solid.”

“You’re one of the only ones I trust. You see things the rest of us are too blind to see, even when it’s right in front of our faces.”

Stomping on the ground, she stops and stands. “Don’t do that.”

“Do what?”

“Hold me above others. I’m not really better or see things others don’t. I just have a different view.”

“I’m not trying to offend you.”

She looks at the ground and sits back down. “I can’t be everything for everyone. I’m not the all-knowing person who magically fixes everything like everyone thinks I am.”

“Lex, what happened? I mean, I know you and Colt are on the outs, but you seem different.”

“Broken?” she asks with a chuckle. “I am. I’m the most broken I’ve ever been in my life, and I’m not sure I should be giving out any sort of wisdom to anyone when I’m barely keeping my life together with the gum and crazy glue I’ve found.”

Grabbing her hand, he looks into her eyes. “Are you okay?”

“That is such a loaded question,” she says and looks at the sky. “My advice is to tell Ashley.”

“That’s not advice.”

“It is. And you’ll be okay. I know it’s not what you imagined for your life, but you’ll be just fine, Grayson.”

“Lily thinks I should become a private investigator.”

Tilting her head, she stares at him. He remembers a time he would have given anything to have her look at him like she is now, but something about her feels off. And he feels heartbroken for her.

“I could see that, actually. Oh, you could solve the crimes they can’t, and then rub it in their faces when you make the news and the papers on how amazing you are at cleaning up the streets of the city! That’d really piss Julian off since he’s become quite the media whore.”

“Grayson?” Ashley calls from her car parked next to his.

Lex pulls her hand from his as though they were caught doing something wrong. “Tell her.”

The brunette walks up to them, and he can feel her suspicion. “What’s going on here?”

“We were just talking,” he says.

“And holding hands?”

“He was comforting me. Apparently, I look like the train wreck that has become the definition of my life,” Lex says.

Her eyes widen. “You told her she looks like a train wreck?”

“No!” he shouts.

“You two need to talk,” Lex says. “Babe, can I take your car to work so I can get mine to get the kids? Grayson basically hog-tied me and forced me here.”

“You’re not helping,” he groans.

She smirks. “Like I said, don’t put me above others. I’m nothing special, trust me.”

Ashley holds out the keys to the Audi she purchased with her book sale money. “Here. And for the record, that’s not true.”

“Yeah, okay. Thanks. I’ll talk to you later.”

His girlfriend takes Lex’s place and looks at him. “Grayson, what’s going on?”

Sighing, he looks at the ground. “I wasn’t sure what to do, and I stumbled upon Lex’s car as I drove around. I thought she could give me some sort of sage wisdom, but it turns out she’s all tapped out.”

“Yeah, she has a bit of an issue with the club. And men, in general, lately. What did you need wisdom about?”

“I got fired today.”

Her jaw drops. “That’s not funny.”

“I’m not joking. Lex told me before we got back together that there would come a day when I’d have to choose between you and my dream job. Turns out, it wasn’t just my dream job but my actual job.”

“Back up,” she says and waves a hand in the air. “What happened?”

“I returned to work, and Julian and Travis broke the news to me. Getting shot made it clear I was a liability with confused loyalty because I’m in love with you. They let me go.”

Taking a deep breath, she blows it out slowly. “We’ll sue. This can’t be legal.”

“I already talked to Lily. There’s a clause in my contract that allows it. We could probably sue for wrongful termination due to discrimination, but I couldn’t go back even if they offered. No one would trust me, so I have to decide if I want the headache.”

“You talked to both Lily and Lex before telling me?”

He closes his eyes. Damn it. “I talked to Lily as a lawyer, Ash.”

“Okay, but then you sought out Lex? Really?”

“I thought you two were friends.”

“We are. But... you know what? Never mind.”

Rubbing his hand over his face, he groans internally. “I want to know.”

“She’s a sore spot for me, okay?”

“Why?”

She gives him the same glare Lex did, telling him he’s an idiot. “Because you were in love with her, Grayson. She’ll forever be the one who got away.”

Goddammit, hasn’t he been through enough today? “No, I was in love with the idea of her.”

“Same thing.”

“She’s the reason we’re together. You really think she’d go through all that just to make a move now? That I’d make a move after everything we’ve built?”

“I never thought she and Colt would split up, but it happened. And you have to try and see it from my side. You dressed women up to look like her and pined for years. It’s not unreasonable I’d be jealous, so don’t make me feel like I’m crazy.”

He has to admit she has a point. No one thought Lex would be single again as long as Colt still breathes. And part of him feels a little happiness to know she’s jealous. Just a little part. Okay, a really big part.

“You’re not crazy. But you have to know how crazy I am about you, Ash. And how much I love you. Lex is just my friend, I promise.”

“Just tell me things first sometimes, okay?”

He nods. “Speaking of Lex and Colt, do you know what happened? I know they fight and all, but she admitted to being more broken than she’s ever been. And then she started talking some nonsense about not being everyone’s savior.”

“All I know is there was a bunny in Black Valley harassing Lex, and then Colt just stopped coming home. She had a choice to make, and she left him. Pulled away from the club, too.”

“What do you mean ‘away from the club?’ She was at the wedding.”

“For Shep. There’s a shift when an old lady and member end things. The issue with her is that she’s not just an old lady. She’s a daughter, and one we relied on for a lot. Probably too much.”

He sighs. “Things are just falling apart around us, aren’t they?”

Her hand cups his face. “Grayson, it’ll be okay. We’ll figure something out.”

“I’ll bring you to your car.”

“Where are you going?”

That’s an excellent question. “I just need to clear my head a little.”

“Alone?”

“I’m sorry, baby, but I’m not good company right now.”

“It’s okay,” she says, but he can hear in her tone it’s not.

Taking her hand, he pulls her close as they stand. “I love you. You know that, right?”

“I love you, too.”

His lips find hers, and for a brief moment, everything feels okay. But reality hits a moment later, and he’s back to being a man without a job or life purpose. He had a dream, and now he needs to find a new one. But the last time he checked, dreams didn’t just sit around waiting for someone to pick them up. Without one, who is he anymore?

# Chapter 31

## *Griffin's Beach*

*Ky*

The Slashers haven't made an appearance since Shep's wedding, but the Drifters still maintain a rotating shift to monitor everyone's houses, focusing on those with kids. The call they expected finally came: Something happened last night.

Ky sits at the bar in the clubhouse waiting for Church to start, anxiety coursing through him. He just wants his family safe.

Colt walks in, sighs, and signals for a bottle of water. "Fuck, I want vodka."

"She's still not talking to you?"

"Nope," he says. "Fucked me like we were gonna make it weeks ago, but then she pulled the rug right out from under me. All progress I thought we'd made went out the damned window."

"Are you sure it was good for her?"

His eyes narrow, a crease forming in the middle of his brows. "Fuck off."

"I'm just saying, it's been a while. Sex is almost always good for us, but it's not always as mind blowing for them."

"I know how to fuck my wife."

"She's not your wife anymore, Colt."

Jumping up, he grabs the larger man by his shirt and gets in his face. "Alexis Nichols still has my fucking last name."

"I'm just saying, man, it might be better to start getting used to not calling her your wife. She's dating. At least, that's

what Felicity said. Had something lined up the last time she talked to her.”

His fist releases the shirt, and he staggers back onto the seat. “Fucking hell.”

“Need something stronger than water?” Jeff asks from behind the bar.

“Like you wouldn’t believe, but I can’t. That’s part of what got me in this fucking mess.”

Ashley bursts through the door, her chest heaving. “Ky, is Dad here?”

Her face turns pink and looks like she barely holds it together. “Somewhere. What’s wrong?”

He can’t get the sight of her covered in Grayson’s blood after he took that bullet out of his mind, and his blood pressure rises. What’s wrong? What happened?

“I need to talk to Dad.”

“I’ll get him,” Colt says, slapping him on the shoulder in an attempt to reassure him and hurries back towards his apartment.

Standing, Ky guides his sister to sit, rubs her back, and says, “Breathe. You’re going to pass out. What’s going on? Is Grayson okay?”

Fear fills her eyes, and he can’t decide if he wants to hurt or help the man. “I just really need Dad.” It’s been so long since she’s admitted to needing anyone that it sends his unease through the roof.

“Baby?” Diesel calls and barrels into the room. “What’s wrong?”

“It’s all falling apart,” she says. Standing, she falls into him and lets the tears fall.

He wraps his arms around and looks up at his son. Ky shrugs. “She wouldn’t tell me.”

“I’m going to lose him, Dad. He’s going to leave me.”

“The only way he’s leaving you is in a fucking body bag,” he growls.

Diesel shoots him a look, and he stares back with wide eyes. He knows for a fact they were thinking the same thing. “What are you talking about, Ashley?”

“They fired him.”

Colt coughs on the water he drinks and sets the bottle on the bar top. “What?”

“Because he’s with me. Getting shot makes him too big of a risk or something. And his loyalty doesn’t mean shit... because of me.”

“Oh, Lily’s gonna have a field day,” Ky says and laughs. “I almost feel bad for them.”

She shakes her head as she pulls back and wipes her eyes. “No, she can’t do anything. There’s some bullshit with his contract. Dad, he was forced out because he chose to be with me. Because he loves me. That was his dream, and now he’ll never be Captain. They ripped it out from under him.”

“Baby, it’s going to be okay.”

“He has to choose between his dream and me. It’s only a matter of time before he chooses his dream. How could he not resent me? The club is the reason he can’t have both, and I’m going to lose. I’m going to lose him, and I love him. You don’t get it, and I don’t care. But I can’t lose him. I can’t!”

He pulls her back into a tight hug. “It’s going to be okay.”

“How do you know?”

“Because even if he leaves you, they won’t let him back on the force,” Colt says.

Ky elbows him and shoots him a look. “Don’t mind him. He’s just pissy because his wife dropped him like a bad habit.”

“Yeah, about your wife. Thanks for the text about him opening the damn door for her at the park. I nearly wrapped



my car around a tree racing to get there because he told her and Lily before he told me what happened.”

He looks at his friend. “Text?”

“I might’ve seen them driving to the park. And then watched him run around to open the door for her at the park.”

“You were stalking her?” Diesel asks.

“I happened to be there, and it looked like something Ashley should know about.”

He reaches out and smacks him upside the head. “Don’t make shit sound like she’s going to hook up with Grayson. She’s not your mother. And no matter what you did to that girl, she’s never going to be someone else’s other woman.”

“What’d she tell him?” Ky asks, stepping between them to stop the fight brewing below the surface.

“She told him to tell me about what happened.”

Colt sighs and sinks onto the stool. “Because she knew you’d tell your dad.”

Her eyes lock with his. “You think she knew what... You know what? I don’t even care.”

Diesel rubs her back. “Go home and take care of your man. Losing something this important to him wounds the pride, and he needs you. Don’t worry about anything here. We might not get his job back, but we can make them regret their decision.”

Smiling, she wipes her eyes, kisses him on the cheek, and heads out the door. They watch her leave, and Diesel turns to glare at Colt.

“You know, she could have told us about this herself.”

“I’m not the one stopping her from being here!” he shouts.

“You caused this!” he shouts back, and Ky guides him back a couple of steps. He won’t win a fight with his father

over Lex. “You did this. You pushed her away, and now we’re all paying the price.”

Tossing his water bottle behind the bar, he stomps into the Chapel. Ky sighs and looks at his father. “That wasn’t fair. You know that.”

“He’s gotta learn his actions have consequences.”

“And the whole living without his wife and only seeing his kids on weekends isn’t him learning that lesson?”

“Ky-”

“He’s hurting, too. Yeah, he caused this shitstorm, but he doesn’t need us piling on. If he gets pushed down any further than he is, he won’t make it back from this. You know that as well as I do.”

“He gets too many passes. No more.”

Jennings walks in, and the conversation ends as everyone moves to the Chapel. Colt doesn’t look at anyone as he sits in his normal seat with his arms crossed. Ky sits next to him, but he refuses to acknowledge him.

“Our warehouse just outside Black Valley caught fire,” Jennings says. “They have an idea that doesn’t require us to strip the patch from their backs, but... we need bodies out there.”

“What about-”

“I haven’t forgotten about the protection detail,” he says, interrupting Shep. “We’re gonna do a swap so we make sure we still have the coverage we need here. I’m not convinced they aren’t planning on us being short here to attack.”

“Who goes out there?”

“Patriot, Chips, Leo, Zane, Elliot, Josh, Ash, Ty, Brock, and Colt.”

Colt’s head snaps up. “No.”

“No?”

Ky stares in shock while others stare with slacked jaws. Not many people tell the President ‘no’ when he gives an order.

“I’m benched, remember?”

“Yeah, I do. I’m the one who kept your ass here, but we need someone who’s familiar out there and knows these guys. Whether we like it or not, you’ve had more playing time on their field than the rest of us.”

“Send me instead,” Shep says. “I lived there.”

“I’m good with that,” Colt says.

“No,” Jennings snaps. “Shep, you’re needed here because, along with your wife, we have the strip club to worry about. You need to keep an eye on our investment.”

Colt stands and walks out of the room, but Jennings bangs his gavel. “Let him go.”

Everyone stands, but Diesel holds his hand up. “I have something else we need to talk about.”

They sit, and VP nods towards him. “What’s that?”

“Cutting our ties with the department.”

TK looks around the room. “What department? Because I know you can’t be talking about the Police Department.”

“Did something go south with Ashley and Grayson?” Beckett asks.

The hope in his voice catches Ky by surprise. Does the man have a thing for his sister? He’s even younger than Ashley than Grayson is, but even though Beckett’s a Drifter, he knows Grayson’s the best match for her. What the fuck is happening to him?

“They fired him because he’s dating my daughter.”

“Are you sure it’s because of us?” VP asks. “We have a good relationship with them.”

His nostrils flare as he runs a hand over his face. “They questioned his loyalty and shit. Clearly, they don’t understand we’d back anyone working with my daughter’s boyfriend. I want them to know they made a bad fucking decision.”

“I know he’s important to Ashley, but we can’t risk ourselves just to spite them,” Jennings says.

Brock holds a hand up. “Actually, we have a shit ton of leverage if we need to use it. I’ve kept records of all the shit they called on us to do for them. Besides, we’re the reason Julian’s been getting all the good press lately. If we stop, it’s only a matter of time until they show just how inept they are.”

“He took a bullet for Ashley. And he’d take one for any of our women and children. He’s earned a bit of loyalty from us, especially after helping save our asses with the ATF, don’t you think? On top of that, he gave us her ex to take care of.”

“What does Lex think about this?” VP asks. “Anyone talk to her?”

Ky chuckles even though he doesn’t find any humor in the question. “She won’t step foot in here again.”

“She told Grayson to tell Ashley. She knew Ashley would tell me. I think that tells us what we’re looking for.”

“Or she wanted him to tell his girlfriend because she’s his girlfriend,” Beckett suggests.

Ty looks around the room. “Does anyone in here really think she’d oppose this?”

“But do we side with a woman who refuses to have anything to do with us anymore?” Leo asks. “I love her like everyone else, but she’s not here. She’s not part of us anymore.”

“She’s my daughter, asshole. She’ll forever be part of us,” VP growls.

“She’d threaten us with something we know she *could* do, but we all know she *wouldn’t* do,” Phoenix says. “Well, probably wouldn’t. She’s a little unpredictable these days.”

Shep looks around. “I back the motion to tell Julian to go fuck himself. He’s gotten a little too high and mighty for his own good anyway. Did you guys see that shit about cracking down on the lowlifes in Griffin’s Beach?”

“But not us, obviously. Because he needs us,” TK says with a roll of his eyes. “Do we tell him?”

“I vote we tell Julian and Travis that Diesel’s our liaison they need to work with. Then he can tell them to shove whatever they have up their asses,” VP says.

Shrugging, Jennings smirks. “Works for me.”

And the change keeps coming.

## Chapter 32

*Griffin's Beach*

*Colt*

Skipping steps on the front porch, Colt pounds his fist on Lex's door. His heart races, and he needs to talk to her. To tell her what's going on before she hears it elsewhere. He owes her that much.

It opens, and Lex stares with wide eyes. "What's wrong? Are the kids okay?"

"They're fine," he says. "They're still with Mom. We had an emergency meeting. Can I talk to you?"

"Actually-"

He pushes past her into the house and starts pacing. "They want me in Black Valley."

"When?"

"I... well, I don't know, actually. But there's a plan, and I said no. But I got overruled."

"Then you have to go," she says and shrugs.

Something about her matter-of-fact tone makes him stop in his tracks and look at her. His eyes search hers, and he takes in the full face of makeup. Not going to work makeup. Real makeup. "I do?"

"It's your club, Colt. For lack of better words, it's your job. Besides, these guys are targeting women and children of the club. Our kids could be next if you don't take them out."

"But I have to go to Black Valley."

"I heard you."

His stomach twists. "I haven't been back since you left. I know you asked me to try and find the guys who shot Grayson, but this, I don't know. It feels different."

Leaning against the counter, she crosses her arms over her chest. “Why?”

“Because it’s not a day trip. I won’t be coming back a few hours after I leave. This is what broke us before, and I’m scared it’s going to ruin us further.”

Her sigh causes a pit to form in his stomach. “Colt, things can’t be ruined further. And not because you’ll go to Black Valley because you have to.”

Running his hands through his hair, he pants and turns back to her. “I’m not going there for Diane. I never was.”

“It doesn’t matter-”

“It matters to me. You believed I stepped out. That I was entertaining someone who wasn’t you, and I wasn’t. There was a whole mess of other things going on.”

“Breathe, Colt.”

He turns and looks at her. Her outfit isn’t her standard Friday night sweats to stay in and drink a glass of wine while watching that housewives show like she usually does. The same one he secretly likes, too. “Are you going somewhere?”

Looking down, she avoids his eyes. “Yeah, I was on my way out when you stopped by, actually.”

A date. She’s wearing a dress and heels with her hair pulled back from her face, wearing makeup for another man. “You’re going on a date.”

“I’m just meeting someone for drinks and dinner.”

“A man?”

“Colt, don’t do this.”

He gapes at her. “My wife’s going on a date with another man, and I’m not supposed to feel a certain way about it? *I’m* out of line?”

“Don’t do this. You knew I was going to start getting back out there. And our marriage is anything but typical.”

“Because it’s like my parents’ marriage?”

“No, our marriage is nothing like theirs. Besides the fact your father was bedding multiple women at the same time after your mother cheated with Rush, they’re back together. We’re not them.”

“That’s different, sure, but wait-” Blinking, he stares at her. “Did you say they’re back together now?”

“Yeah?”

“When did my parents get back together?”

Her eyebrows lift. “You didn’t know?”

“Didn’t know what?”

“Your dad moved back into the house like a month ago. The day after Shep’s wedding.”

“How the fuck didn’t I know this?”

She shrugs. “I don’t know.”

“How do you know?”

“Karmen told me.”

His parents told his estranged wife, who thinks she can go out on dates with men who aren’t her husband, but they haven’t told him they’ve gotten back together. “Huh.”

“You really didn’t know?”

“Nope.”

“Sorry,” she says. “But it’s good news, right?”

Is it? “I guess so.”

“I thought you’d be thrilled.”

“I’m happy for them.”

“But?”

Turning his back to her, he presses his palms flat against the fridge. “I can’t get past the thought of my wife going out with another man to think about that.”

“Colt-”

“Who is he?”



“Don’t.”

“Don’t what?” he asks and turns to face her. “Want to know who the hell the mother of my children spends time with? Is he good enough for you? Does he realize what he’s getting himself into? Is he prepared to die if he hurts you?”

Throwing her hands in the air, she sighs. “Un-fucking-believable.”

“What?”

“It’s just dinner and drinks. I’m not planning on moving in and having babies with the man, Colt.”

“But you want more kids, don’t you?”

Her eyes look out the window above the sink while her arms move to hug her too-small waist. “Whether I do or don’t doesn’t matter.”

“Why not?”

“Because Calla proved I’m not built to have more children.”

“We can do what Tripp and Avery did. We can adopt. We can adopt an entire football team, if you want.”

Her bottom lip quivers. “Stop.”

“Stop what?”

“Stop making this harder than it already is!” she cries.

Making it harder isn’t possible. “I want you to be happy. And I want that to be with me and our family. We can be happy again!”

Stepping backwards, she shakes her head. “Stop it.”

“The fact that you might feel a certain way because I was forced to go to Black Valley drives me crazy. Because the last thing I want is to ever make you question my motives again, but here you are fucking dating.”

“Colt, stop it!”

“It kills me that you’re not dressing up to go out with me.” He stops and stares. They never went out. The only place

they ever went was the clubhouse or the cabin. And it's been years since they went out there. "I never did that."

She blinks, her anger replaced with confusion, and she sticks her chin out. "You never did what?"

"No wonder you want someone new."

"Huh?"

"God, I'm an idiot."

Tilting her head, she stares at him. "Are you having a stroke? Are you okay?"

"That's not something you should worry about anymore," he says, his heart sinking. It's all his fault.

"You're the father of my kids. I'm always going to worry about you, and your drastic switch of topics I can't follow scares me a little."

Running a hand over his face, he walks towards the door. "You used to always know what I was thinking."

"Yeah, but then you pushed me away and locked me out."

Damn it. Like usual, she's right. "I never took you out. We never did what normal couples did."

"We were never what you'd call normal, anyway," she says with a laugh.

He lets out a long breath. "You deserve someone who will give you all the things I didn't. I can't even say you deserve things I couldn't give you because I could have. I just... I didn't."

"It's just dinner and drinks. I'm not planning on marrying the guy."

Closing his eyes, he turns so she can't see the tears he hadn't expected. "And what happens when you meet someone you want to marry? What does that mean for us?"

"I made you a promise, and I'll keep it. I can't believe you're doubting my word. That I wouldn't follow through and

do what I needed to in order to protect the club. That actually hurts, Colt.”

“You shouldn’t have to give up the life you want and deserve because of a club you don’t feel welcome in anymore.”

“Just because our marriage didn’t work doesn’t change my DNA. My brother and father are in that club, but more importantly, the father of my children is. No matter how pissed I am at you, I would never risk our kids losing their dad for something so selfish. They come first. Always.”

“That’s where it got fucked up.”

Sighing, she rests her hands on her hips. “I can’t keep up with your changing thoughts tonight, and you’re giving me whiplash. What are you talking about?”

“The club came first.”

“That’s your family. Your job. Your life.”

“It is now,” he says, swallowing hard. He turns and finally looks at her face. The concern she wears makes him angry, but for the first time, it isn’t directed at her. He can’t believe he did this. “I don’t really have a choice in the matter.”

Licking her lips, she rests her hands at her sides. “What is it you expect me to do, Colt? I told you I was moving on with my life. That I needed to. You had every opportunity, and it’s my turn.”

“Nothing. I expect nothing.”

She follows him to the door as he walks outside. “You don’t get to make me feel guilty. Not after everything we’ve been through!”

He whips around. “That’s what you think? That I want you to feel guilty? I just realized how done you really are. There was a small part of me that hoped you would forgive me, that you’d want to sit down and talk it out for hours and work to put our family back together. But I guess that ship sailed.”

“What I need and what you can give aren’t the same. Not right now.”

Her words cripple him, and he knows he needs to leave. “Don’t say right now when you mean never. I gotta go.”

He jumps on his bike and drives towards the clubhouse. There’s nothing keeping him from Black Valley. Not anymore. Everything he wants left and won’t come back. This is officially the end.

# Chapter 33

*Griffin's Beach*

*Lex*

Staring after her husband, Lex's heart races. Why can't he just admit he was wrong? That he made mistakes? If he just accepted some fault in what happened, accepted fault for the constant chipping away of their relationship, and finally tell her what's eating at him to let her back in, maybe they could move forward. But damn him for messing with her head.

Pulling out her phone, she pauses briefly and scrolls past Colt's name to click on Daniel's.

**LEX:** Hey something came up and I can't meet. I'm sorry

**DANIEL:** No problem. Rain check?\_

**LEX:** I'll call you

Shutting the door, the tears fall down her cheeks as she unzips her dress and slides it down her body. One visit from Colt and she cancels plans to slip into her sweatpants and a baggy shirt. Colt's shirt. When he stayed the night of Shep's wedding, she made sure to hide that she took a couple of his shirts with her. It gives her a little bit of comfort but also breaks her heart.

Her hands shake while she takes off her makeup. Crying makes it more difficult thanks to the damn waterproof mascara and eyeliner she used.

Once it's all removed, she stands and stares at the person in the mirror she barely recognizes. This isn't who she wanted to be, so how the hell did she get here? Oh, right. Her husband didn't want her until he couldn't have her anymore.

"Lex?" Grayson calls from the doorway. "Are you home?"

Wiping her eyes, she walks into the kitchen to find him standing there. “Well, just walk right in.”

“The door was unlocked, so I got kind of worried. After everything that’s happened, I think I’m entitled to worry about you.”

“I’m fine,” she lies.

“Is someone here?” he asks, his hand moving to the belt that no longer holds his standard issue pistol from the department. The way his face scrunches tells her the anger hasn’t subsided. Not that she blames him.

The reason they fired him makes her angry enough to contemplate going down there and giving Travis and Julian a piece of her mind. It would make her feel better, but it wouldn’t help Grayson as much as hurt him.

“No, I’m alone. I’m always alone when the kids are gone,” she says and moves into the living room, slumps down on the couch, and covers herself with a blanket.

“What’s wrong?” He follows her and sits next to her, his eyes wide with concern.

Shaking her head, she smiles. “The same thing that’s always wrong these days.”

“Colt?”

“He won’t let me go,” she whispers.

“Because he’s not stupid. Well, clearly he’s an idiot, but not *that* stupid. He did fuck around and lose you, but he’ll hold onto you until the day he dies. We all know that, and so do you.”

Resting her head on the back of the couch, hot tears fall and pool in her ears. “I wish he’d just let me move on. He made these decisions for me. He pushed me to them, and now he’s acting like I’m out to hurt him. Like I’m doing everything in my power to punish him.”

“It feels like a punishment for him. A punishment he’s earned, but I’ve seen him lately. He seems different. Even

from the version of him I saw when things were good with you two.”

“Can you keep a secret?”

He chuckles. “You know I can.”

“I don’t want to move on. It’s the last thing in the world I want. I have to, but I want him to prove himself. To show me things are different and will continue to stay different. It’ll never happen until he faces his demons, and that won’t happen until he realizes and accepts what happened,” she says.

“I get that. But if you’re not willing to give him a chance to make things right with you, maybe you have to fully leave. Divorce him and make it official.”

Sighing, she closes her eyes. “As much as I hate the club right now, I can’t do that to them. My family is in that club.”

“Your father and Zane will be fine.”

“Not just them. I don’t know how best to explain it, but my childhood was made bearable by so many of them under that roof. And even when I’m livid pissed at them, I could never do anything that could put them in danger. Not unless I had to.”

“It’s not your job to save everyone, Lex. Especially if it risks your happiness.”

*It’s not your job to save everyone, Lex. It’s not your job to save everyone, Lex. It’s not your job to save everyone, Lex. It’s not your job to save everyone, Lex. It’s not your job to save everyone, Lex. It’s not your job to save everyone, Lex.*

The words swirl in her head on repeat, and she lets out a sob. If only everyone believed that. “It’s who I am. It’s what everyone expects of me. Do you have any idea how exhausting it is being the one always looked to for every problem? To find solutions anyone else could see if they stepped back a step? It’s the one good thing about stepping away. It was too much,

and I was going to fall. No, I wasn't going to. I did. Flat on my face. Lost my dignity with it."

"You don't owe them anything. You've given them more than anyone else has."

"Diesel was the father I didn't have growing up. And Ky was my brother. Zane made my life hell as a kid, and still, all I want is for him to love me. VP had to constantly choose, and I lost every time. And I know if I need anything, I can call Diesel and Ky, and they'd be here in minutes."

Grayson studies her. "I don't follow."

"They're the ones I'm protecting. Not to mention Shep and Psycho. And even though I wish I didn't, I still love Colt." The words nearly catch in her throat like a rock, and she lets out another sob. "I don't want to anymore, but I can't seem to stop."

His hand rubs her arm. "It'll get easier."

"No, it won't. And I have a feeling in my gut that my love for him will get me killed one of these days," she whispers. "At least he's learning how to be the father our kids need. He might be their only parent soon."

Grayson freezes, his eyes locked on her. "What did you just say?"

"You're not a cop anymore, so I can tell you all this. The Slashers sent someone to my house the night you were shot. Knocked out the two guards watching the place, and Colt killed him outside as he tried to get in Calla's window."

"Why didn't he kill the guards?"

"Exactly. He was a warning. A message. The fact that only one of the, like, fifteen guys who shot you had a gun and didn't circle back to kill Ashley like they could have was also a message."

She feels his heart race on her arm through the palm of his hand on her shoulder. "What kind of message?"

"They have something planned. This is only the beginning, and I know whatever it is involves me. I can feel it."



I don't know much about them, but I know they're ruthless. There's no way I'll be able to talk my way out of whatever they have planned for me."

"Why you?"

"I don't know," she says with a shrug. "But something tells me I'm who they want. That the guy was a message for me. Because Colt was right. I have my own reputation, and I would've murdered that man right where he stood if he'd gotten into my house. Mama bear is real."

Running his hand over his face, he leans back. "And Ashley could be a target, too?"

"It's possible, but I don't think so."

"How can you be so sure?"

"Because she's not as integrated with the club. She's a daughter, but she's not an old lady."

"So the old ladies are at risk."

He doesn't get it. He's trying to rationalize why her gut is wrong, and she loves him for it. Like a brother. Trying to point out the flaw in her logic in an effort to calm her is nothing short of admirable.

"Could be. But there are only two of us that would be the most impactful."

"Who?"

"Think about it."

He turns and lets out a breath. "You and Lily."

"We're daughters, wives, and mothers of the club. I've already talked to Lily, and Phoenix turned their house into a fortress after Autumn's stalker almost killed Colt in their upstairs bedroom. She's the safest there."

"Then why are you still here?" he asks. "Go somewhere else. Somewhere safe."

"Where do you think is safe?"

“To the family you’re willing to sacrifice any chance of happiness to protect!” He leans forward and rests his elbows on his knees, his left leg bouncing.

Shaking her head, she laughs. “If I’m right, I’m just putting others in danger. I’m kind of between a rock and a hard place here.”

“Jesus Christ. I don’t like this Lex. You’re basically saying you’re on death’s doorstep.”

“What’d you stop by for, Grayson?” She can only change the topic at this point. He’s going to explode otherwise.

He cracks his neck and looks at her. “I heard you were going on a date. Is he coming here?”

Licking her lips, she wipes at her eyes. “Nope. Colt stopped by, and I couldn’t do it. Not tonight, so I canceled. Looks like it’s just me and whatever housewives I can find on TV tonight.”

“I decided to get my PI license. Basically just gotta pass a test, and I have it scheduled.”

“What?” she exclaims. “Dude, you should’ve led with this!”

“Well, you were kind of having a meltdown, so I didn’t want to interrupt.”

She reaches out and pushes him. “Shut up.”

“I need to tell Ashley, but I’m not sure if she’s going to be happy or not.”

For fuck’s sake. “Grayson, you gotta stop telling me things first.”

“You’re my friend.”

“Who you used to dress women up to look like while you fucked them. And who you at one point thought you were in love with.”

“I really wish you’d stop bringing up the wigs.”

“I wish I didn’t know about them, so we’re both shit out of luck. But it’s a sore spot for her. No matter how secure we seem, there’s always that one thing that creates that tiny bit of doubt and insecurity. I’m that insecurity for Ashley.”

His brows furrow. “What’s yours?”

“Lately? Fucking everything. But when Colt and I were good, it was any type of secret. He always went off the deep end when he was holding things back because he doesn’t function well in his own head.”

“That’s actually pretty accurate.”

“Ashley first, Lex second. Unless it’s the ring thing. Then, well, that order doesn’t really work. Wait, did you ever talk to Diesel and Ky?”

He nods. “Yeah, I did.”

“They said no?”

“No, they said yes. Well, Diesel did. I guess taking a bullet for his daughter puts me in his good graces, but things feel too unsettled to ask her to marry me now. I do have her mother’s ring to give her, though.”

She smiles. Part of her knew Diesel would give in for his little girl. “Don’t wait for a perfect time. Trust me, there isn’t one, and you’re good for her. Since you’re not a cop anymore, we can let you into the clubhouse! Well, *they* can let you into the clubhouse.”

“I put a down payment on a lease downtown, and I hired someone to design the logo for my business. Looking at the sample test, I’m fucking stupid if I don’t pass. But I feel like I need to prove I can make a living this way before I legally bind us together.”

Wrapping her arms around him, she squeezes. “Congrats. I think this will be good for you. It’s not the dream you always had, but I think you can do a lot more good without the badge.”

“I sure hope so. I should probably go and talk with Ashley.”

“You think?”

Grayson walks to the door and turns to look back at her. “Be safe, Lex.”

Easier said than done, but she gives him a reassuring smile and walks to lock the door after he leaves. Yes, easier said than done for sure.

# Chapter 34

*Black Valley*

*Psycho*

Psycho stands outside smoking a cigarette with Colt beside him. Offering him the pack, he says, “You sure you don’t want one?”

Colt waves a hand at him. “I quit a while back.”

“Speaking of things you quit, I didn’t think I’d ever see you outside this clubhouse again.”

“Yeah, I didn’t expect to be here again, either, but shit needs to get done. What’s the plan anyway? I’ve been here almost two days, and I don’t really understand what Chicago’s doing. Besides a lot of fucking nothing.”

Laughing, he shrugs his shoulders and flicks the cigarette. “Don’t know. I’m being kept on the outside as punishment. Fucks them over in the long run since I’m the motherfucker who’ll get shit done, so fuck ‘em.”

“What’d you do?”

He lights another cigarette and inhales. “Called Jennings when the assholes started suggesting an eye for an eye and wanted to go after families. Then I threw my officer patch at Chicago, which I think pissed him off more than tattling to the big, bad mother charter president.”

Signing, he leans against the building. “I don’t wanna go in this building, man. I’m honestly worried I might hit a woman if I do.”

“Lacey fucking hates her.”

“She hate me, too?”

“Yeah, pretty much,” he says and laughs. Looking up, the cigarette drops from his mouth. “What the fuck?”

Colt follows suit, his mouth mirroring Psycho’s to form an ‘O.’

Pushing off the building, his long strides bring him face to face with the normally curly blonde walking with a group of men wearing expensive suits within seconds. She wears an attractive black dress with her hair straight and makeup covering her face. They head to the bar across from the clubhouse until he blocks her path. “Lex?”

“Uh, hey.”

“Lex?” one of the men asks as the group of men walks a few paces and turns to look at them. The fear on their faces would amuse him if he wasn’t so shocked seeing her with these pretty boys.

Lex waves them on. “It’s okay, Ben. I’m fine.”

“We’ll wait for you,” the man with a seventy-dollar haircut says, eyeing Psycho up and down.

The group waits by the building, and no eyes leave them, not that he gives a shit. At least they have manners. They’re complete fucking idiots if they think they could stop him from doing shit, but it’s the thought that counts.

“What are you doing here?”

“I’m here for a conference. The bar in the hotel is closed, and they wanted to go out,” she says, her hands rubbing her bare arms. Skinny, white arms.

His eyes narrow. “Conference?”

“Yeah, there’s a real estate conference. Which seems like an odd choice of location, but I think the hotel was cheap.”

“You have a job?”

Her eyes cast to the ground. “Gotta pay the bills somehow.”

Looking back, he watches Colt slowly walk across the street to join them. “You develop a gambling habit or something?”

“No, why?” he asks, stopping a few feet from his wife. His eyes skirt over her. “You look nice.”

She looks at her dress, and Psycho can feel her discomfort. It doesn't make sense, but she says, "Thanks."

"Why's your wife working to pay bills? I know how much you fucking make. You can afford two houses and a lake cottage, if you want. Plus braces and college for both kids."

"Because she won't take money from me," he says, his voice gruff. "What are you doing here?"

"Work conference," Psycho says with air quotes.

Her hand touches his and forces it down. "Don't say it like that. Like it's some made up excuse."

An eyebrow raises. It's been a while since he saw this version of her. "You notice how you're the only woman in this group of men?"

"Yeah, which would be weird if I weren't the only woman who works in the office."

"That doesn't strike you as odd?"

"Not when I've gotten along better with men than women my entire life," she hisses. "Trust me, I'd rather be back home with my kids, but things come up. It's a long story, and I don't owe you or anyone else an explanation."

The man eye-fucking them walks up and holds out his hand. "Hey, guys. I'm Ben Wentworth. Would you like to come inside and join us?"

"No, they wouldn't," she says and pushes his hand away from Psycho before he can grab it. "Go on inside. I'll meet you in there."

"Who's Ben?" Psycho asks, his voice mocking. "You think you can get into a married woman's panties, *Ben*?"

"Stop it!" she scolds. "We work together."

To his credit, Ben doesn't back down. "She's separated from her husband. Has been for a while now."

"He's her husband," he says, pointing a thumb to Colt over his shoulder. "This man can kill you within seconds."

“Jesus Christ,” she groans. “Ben, go inside. Please.”

“Ben, why don’t we have a chat?” Colt says and steps forward with an evil grin. Psycho feels giddy. They may just see blood tonight after all.

“No,” she says, but he walks away from them with her husband.

He wraps an arm around the new man, and she takes a step towards them. Psycho grabs her arm, whipping her around to face him. “What the fuck are you doing?”

“Excuse me?”

“Why the hell are you living apart from your husband?”

“Because we’re separated. You don’t usually live with the person you’ve left,” she says and tugs at his grip. “Let me go.”

He does as she asks, and she crosses her arms under her chest. “How long are you going to keep this up?”

“What are you talking about?”

The exasperation in her voice irritates him. Like he’s the one being unreasonable. “This bullshit separation. You’re married, Lex.”

“Only because he won’t sign the damned divorce papers. Besides, staying married protects the club, so I’m willing to settle.”

Divorce papers? No one said anything about divorce papers. “Say that again?”

“What has he told you?”

“Clearly not enough. But he’s not the one who should have told me. You should have.”

“You’re not around!” she shouts and takes a step back, her chest heaving as she breathes deeply with her eyes closed and pinches the bridge of her nose. “Besides, I’ve kind of had my hands full. It’s been a pretty big adjustment, but luckily, I had plenty of practice being a single parent before we split.”



Both Ben and Colt turn to look at them, and Psycho holds a hand up, signaling everything's fine. "I didn't think being in Black Valley meant my phone stopped working."

"I needed to take a step away from the club."

"Why?"

"That's a long conversation, and I'm cold. I'd like to go inside now."

"You're cold because you're about fifty fucking pounds. God, you're smaller than Lacey. Is that why you lost all the weight and look anorexic? To attract new men? Are you trying to find a replacement for your husband?"

Her hand slaps him across the face. "Fuck you, Psycho."

He stares in shock. The sting calms him, and he sees her now. "You just fucking hit me."

"You want to know why I'm so fucking skinny?" she asks, her voice low as she steps closer and glares at him, her nostrils flaring. "Because I spent months picking myself apart. Trying to figure out why my husband no longer wants me. To be near me. And when I finally left my husband, which was never what I planned for my life, by the way, I had to force myself to eat because all the stress that falls into leaving the love of your life and raising two kids alone nearly swallows you whole. To top it off, as if that wasn't enough, I'm bordering on alcoholism because I can't find a way to sleep without the aid of some form of liquor unless I decide to cry myself to sleep. Yes, I did all this to attract men when the only person I ever wanted to feel attractive to barely looked at me. But you got me!"

His eyes widen as he stares at her. "Wait-"

"I'm not doing this. You're a Drifter, and so is Colt. He's a fucking legacy. When couples in the club split up, sides are drawn. You have to back your brother, and that means I'm left out in the cold. Trust me, not only have I seen it, I've experienced it. Only it was my brother instead of my husband back then."

“You’ll never let that go, will you? When will you stop holding onto the bullshit you experienced as a child and realize it’s tired now?”

Stepping back, her hands ball into fists. She’s pissed. Livid pissed. “Well, I guess I’ll let go of it when the prevalent theme that comes with it stops being a constant in my life. You know what, Psycho? You can go fuck yourself. If it’s easier, believe I’m the bad guy. But just know I’m not the one who stepped out of the marriage and didn’t want to be part of it anymore. That’s your brother over there.”

He holds his hands up, realizing he doesn’t have as much knowledge of the situation as he thought he did. “Okay, that was out of line.”

“I don’t need shit from you on top of everything else. There’s enough guilt in my life, especially with having to find a job to support myself and my kids because I don’t want to feel indebted to someone who clearly doesn’t want me. And I need to step away from the club because I’m only one person, and I can’t be everything to everyone. It’s killing me, and no one notices! Or cares. Maybe both.”

“And you’re sure you can’t work this out with him?”

“You aren’t listening to me!” she screams. “He didn’t want to be married anymore!”

Colt turns and looks at her. “What did you just say?”

“No, that’s not technically true. He didn’t want to be home and spend time with his wife and kids. He wanted to spend his time here in Black Valley and expected us to just learn to live with it.”

“Bullshit,” he spits and closes the gap between them.

“Lex, he’s not back here.”

Pointing at him, she laughs. “Then who the fuck is this? Because it looks a hell of a lot like the man I used to call my husband. Is he a hologram? No, wait, I know,” she says and snaps her fingers. “Artificial intelligence, right? You guys knew where to invest.”

“This is different, and you know it,” he growls.

“Nothing here is ever different!” she shouts. “You don’t even think you did anything wrong. There’s no accountability, and you let everyone think this is all my fault. I’m the reason all this happened, but the only reason you spend time with your kids now is because you have designated time with them. If I hadn’t left you, I could have had an affair and seven kids without you fucking noticing.”

“Lex-”

“No, there’s always an excuse with you guys. Always. It’s never your fault. It’s always someone else’s. This is my fault because I’m not willing to forgive when I can’t trust you. I can’t risk putting my kids through the shit they already went through all over again. Yeah, I’m a real bitch.”

“That’s not what we said,” Psycho says.

She shakes her head and takes another step back, and the fact she keeps putting distance between them feels more figurative than simple anger. “I’m not doing this. This is why I didn’t call you. And this, right here, is the exact reason I can’t be part of the club anymore.”

Ben walks over. “Lex, maybe we should just take a breather.”

“I’m going back to the hotel. You’re welcome to come with me, or you can go inside the bar. I don’t really care which, but I need to get away from this fucking clubhouse.”

Psycho stares as she walks away quickly, her heels echoing down the street. Ben shrugs and runs after her, calling her name.

He turns to Colt. “What the fuck just happened?”

“I’m pretty sure my wife just left to fuck Ben.”

“Are we going after her?”

“Nope. She’s free to do what she wants when she wants. She made it pretty clear she wants nothing more to do with me.”

## Chapter 35

*Black Valley*

*Lex*

Ben doesn't hesitate to follow Lex into her hotel room, and she pins him against the back of the door. He doesn't resist when she kisses him, and he slides his tongue into her mouth.

Kissing someone other than Colt feels all wrong. Ben doesn't kiss her like he wants to devour her. Her skin itches, and she silently curses Colt for ruining everything.

Colt could have an entire conversation with his kiss. He used to be able to tell her everything he felt in one lip lock as he made love to her. And the comparisons invade her thoughts, but she fights hard to push them from her mind.

Slim and toned with a runner's body type best describes Ben, whereas Colt has natural muscles. Ben doesn't have an ounce of fat on his stomach, but he doesn't have as defined abs like her husband does. Ex husband. She knows Ben spends a minimum of seven hours per week at the gym, but Colt's never stepped foot in one a day in his life.

"I've wanted this since the day you stepped foot in our office looking for a job. You're the sexiest woman I've ever seen, and damn, can you wear a dress."

"God, I've dreamt of this," he says, his hand tangling in her hair.

Everything feels off. Colt never had to tell her how he felt when they were together. Not really.

*He's not Colt! Colt doesn't want you! When will you accept it and move on with someone else who might want you the way you want him?*

"Even when you found out I was a Drifter?" she asks.

"It made it even sexier."

“Why’s that?” she asks, kicking herself for asking.

*Why do you care? This just makes it even more impossible to get Colt from your mind.*

“Because you’re almost taboo,” he murmurs, his hand cupping her chest. “From the moment I saw you, I knew we’d end up here. Something about you told me you needed someone who can help take care of you. And I want to take care of you in every way. Starting with getting you off and screaming my name.”

The nausea washes over her as she realizes just how different Ben is from Colt. She doesn’t want this. Vomit rises in her throat while she pulls back and looks at him. “Ben?”

“Yeah?”

“What’d Colt say to you outside the bar?”

He chuckles. “He said that no matter what happens, you’re his wife. If I have plans to fill the spot he left vacant, I better treat you right and protect your heart. Said he didn’t, and if I hurt you, it’s the last thing I’ll ever do. Which I’m choosing to believe is a colorful exaggeration. Because those rumors about bikers are exaggerated, right?”

Her heart sinks. “He told you he didn’t treat me right?”

“Yeah, said he was wrong in everything he did, but it was too late for him. And if I chose to move forward with you, I better be serious. I think he wanted to scare me.”

He admitted he was wrong? He hasn’t admitted he did anything to contribute to their situation this entire time, and he chooses to say it to the other man she chose to mess around with out of spite? Why couldn’t he just say this to her instead?

“I have to go,” she says. “This was a mistake. I’m so sorry, Ben. You’re a great guy, and I hope we can still work together, but I have to go.”

His hand reaches out to grab her arm. “Lex, stop. What’s wrong?”

“I’m sorry,” she says and hurries out into the hall to the outside. She has to talk to Colt. Did he mean it?

“Lex, stop! Or at least wait up. This isn’t a good part of town,” he calls and runs after her.

Turning, she can’t help but laugh. “I’m the daughter of the Vice President of the Deranged Drifters. Trust me, I’ll be fine.”

“You are?”

“You didn’t know?”

“No, I didn’t.”

Her eyes study him. “Wait, for real?”

“I knew you were married to one of the bikers, but I didn’t know you were also the daughter of one.”

A dark van pulls up quickly and slams on the brakes, and the tires squeal loudly on the pavement, echoing in the quiet night air. She turns and realizes too late leaving the hotel was a giant mistake. “Oh, shit.”

“Lex!” Ben shouts as a redheaded man jumps out and grabs her.

Her elbow swings up and slams into his nose before stomping on his foot with her heel. “Colt!” she screams.

“He can’t help you, lass,” a man with a thick Irish accent says while the redhead cries out in pain, clutching his nose as blood pours onto the ground like a faucet.

“Fucking bitch!”

She turns to the Irishman and takes in his potbelly and handlebar mustache. The same man who shot Grayson, but now that she can see his entire face, she sees bright red scars on the right side, his eye glossy and likely blind. The evil smile on his face looks even more menacing with his injuries, and her stomach drops. “I knew it.”

“You knew what?”

“You sent us a message.”

“I meant to shoot another daughter of the club, but her boyfriend got in the way,” he says, his accent making it nearly

impossible to understand him with his rapid rate of speech.

Another two men jump out from the van wearing all black and Slasher leather. “Are we going to convince her to hop in the van on her own since you’re just chatting away, or are we fucking grabbing her?”

“Not all of you are Irish. At least, not from Ireland,” she says. Something about this feels strange, but she can’t place why or what. All she knows is she needs to buy as much time as she can and hope someone sees her.

“Are you trying to talk your way out of this?” Ben asks, his voice low, as he stands close behind her. “Because I don’t think it’s going to work.”

“Listen to your fuck buddy there.”

Narrowing her eyes, she looks at one of the men and wonders why he wears a black ski mask and tries to hide in the shadows. He sounds familiar, but she can’t place him. She has to know him if he worries she’ll recognize him. “Go to hell.”

“Trust me, babe, you ain’t seen hell yet,” the scarred man says with a smirk.

The way he looks at her as he says the words tells her he tells the truth. Whatever he has planned won’t be pleasant, and her heart races. She knew this would happen. This was the plan, and she has no way to get out of this. Not alone.

A dark-haired man lunges for her, and she shifts out of his grasp, slamming her foot against the side of his knee. Falling to the ground, he swears and holds his leg while the scarred Irishman claps.

“You have balls.”

“You’d be surprised by what I’m capable of.”

A bald man punches her in the face, stunning her, and she falls to the concrete. A metallic taste fills her mouth, and her knee scrapes on the rough street. “You’re a fighter, but you won’t win this fight, bitch.”

“Lex!” Ben shouts, and scar-face pulls out his gun. “Holy shit!”

“You’re a fucking pussy, aren’t you?” he asks with a laugh. Flipping the gun around to hold the barrel, he slams the handle against Ben’s forehead and swings back to smack him in the face with it. His body falls limp to the ground, a small groan sounding as he hits the ground.

She knows she’s in trouble. Big trouble. The man who punched her winds back and kicks her in the ribs, and she flies to the side, smacking her head hard on the road. “Colt!” she cries.

*Come on, Colt. Come outside. Feel me here, needing help. Needing you. Please, baby. Please.*

“Don’t kill her!” scar-face shouts. “We need her.”

“What about him?” someone she can’t see asks.

“Leave him. Someone has to tell them we have her.”

The bald man moves to grab her, and she balls her hands into fists, punching him as hard as she can in the face. If she’s getting taken, no one will ever be able to say she went without a fight. “Fuck you!”

“Fuck!” he shouts and slaps her hard with the back of his hand. “Don’t worry, babe, we plan to.”

Her right cheek hits the cement hard, the warm blood on her face she feels on her face as it scrapes the ground, and she becomes overwhelmed with the blinding pain of her head. She’s felt this before. Part of her wishes he would’ve just shot her.

“And we’ll make it hurt,” the man with the broken nose says before spitting blood on the ground next to her. “Payback’s a bitch.”

“Payback has nothing on me,” she spits and kicks him in the groin. “Just get the fuck out of here.”

Annoyed with how long it’s taking, scar-face grabs her by the hair and yanks her to her feet. “For Christ’s sake, she’s a hundred pounds and kicked three of your asses.”

“Colt!” she screams again as he pulls her hair, some of the strands tearing from her scalp. She pulls her fist back and



smacks him in the mouth.

*Get up Ben. Get up and run to the clubhouse. Tell her family she needs help. Someone, anyone.*

Instead of letting her go, he swings her around, forming a knot around his hand with her hair, and hits the side of her face so hard the world fades to black.

*Colt...*

# Chapter 36

*Black Valley*

*Colt*

The hair on the back of Colt's neck stands on end as he sits next to Ky on the couch in the clubhouse. "I think I'm gonna get some air," he says.

As he moves to stand, Diane saunters over in a shirt barely covering her nipples. "Hi, Colt."

The sultry look makes him see red. "Get the fuck away."

"Rumor around here says you and your wife are splitsville. If you need help scratching any itches, let me know. I'd be more than happy to give you what you couldn't get at home."

Her dark curls fall in her face as she leans forward, and he can't deny she's attractive. It's part of the reason he let her flirt with him, but it never went beyond that. "Trust me, whatever you have to offer would pale in comparison to what Lex gave me."

"But Lex isn't around anymore, is she? Not in your bed, anyway."

"Yeah, and you had something to do with that. Tell me, how's the pregnancy going with my imaginary child? You know, with the imaginary sex we had in your fucked up head?"

His skin tingles, and something screams to get outside. He's never felt anything like this before.

Her finger traces up his arm and distracts him from his thoughts. "I don't know what you're talking about, but I bet you could knock me up with just a kiss. That's how potent you seem."

Pulling his arm from her reach, he realizes how big of an idiot he was to entertain this woman for as long as he did.

This is what Lex believes he was doing in Black Valley? “I have no intention of fucking any farm animals tonight, so just walk the fuck away.”

Psycho and Ky laugh, and she glares at them. “You think this is funny?”

“What I think is funny is the fact you seem to struggle with simple words. Get. The. Fuck. Away. Really elementary level. Dare I say preschool?” Psycho says.

“Fuck you.”

Lacey jumps up and storms over. Her pale face flushes, and her hands shake at her sides. “What’d you just say, bitch?”

“I told your husband to go fuck himself. Then again, if you were doing your job as his wife, maybe he wouldn’t need to. Maybe he’d actually be pleasant.”

“Maybe if you learned how to stay the hell away from married men, he’d be more pleasant towards you. In fact, he’d probably never even acknowledge you, and all of us would live a happier existence.”

“I can’t help it if men naturally gravitate towards me.”

She releases a deep breath and ties her fire-red hair into a bun. “Trust me, the only thing that gravitates towards you naturally are sexually transmitted infections. I’m not going to tell you again. Get the fuck away from them.”

“Or what?”

Diane gets in Lacey’s face, and Colt can’t stop himself from imagining what would happen if this was Lex. The old Lex. The club bunny would be shaking in fear before bleeding or waking up in a different place. She never shied away from swinging. At least, she never used to. Now, though, he feels like she’s not the same woman he remembers, and he finally really sees just how much of a role he played in that change.

He spent far too much time away from home, but he never wanted to bring his survivor’s guilt to Lex. She wouldn’t understand. Sure, he knew he was hurting his family, but he thought he was doing them a favor by keeping the darkness

bottled up. It never occurred to him he created a different darkness.

“Don’t walk away and find out.”

Diane looks around the room at the other club bunnies who all laugh. “Doesn’t look like much.”

“You fucking bunnies really need to learn your place,” Lacey says and swings quickly, hitting the brunette under the chin, and her teeth hitting against each other fills his ears.

She falls to the ground, eyes closed and completely out. His eyes stare wide at Lacey. “I think I fucking love you.”

“That’s weird because I fucking hate you,” she spits at him, surprising him, and shakes out her fist. “But someone needs to put them in their place. Especially that one.”

“Are you okay, baby?” Psycho asks and stands.

She holds a hand up to stop him. “I’m fine. I just didn’t expect her jaw to be as hard as the cocks she sucks every night.”

They burst into laughter. “Damn, Psycho, Black Valley agrees with your girl! She’s got zingers with a fist to back them up,” Ky says and nods at her approvingly.

Colt can’t deny he’s also impressed, but based on her feelings for him, he keeps his comments to himself. It won’t be received well.

“You’re so fucking sexy right now,” Psycho growls, but Lacey steps out of his embrace. “Lace?”

“Not tonight.”

His jaw drops, and Colt wishes he’d gone outside when he felt the urge earlier. An unsettling feeling hits him, and he feels like concrete sits in his belly.

“Excuse me?”

“I heard your conversation with Lex outside.”

Sighing, he closes his eyes, clearly frustrated. “That doesn’t have anything to do with us.”

“No, it has to do with you. You were her best friend, Carson. Colt fucked up, and you’re not holding him accountable. How can you not see how badly he broke her? How you all have.”

“She seemed fine when she left with that douche and went back to the hotel where she probably fucked him.”

Colt’s stomach rolls. Yeah, Ben may have warmed his wife’s bed tonight, and it’s not a great feeling. Even with the nausea, the solid rock in his stomach doesn’t move.

“It might be best if you stay at the clubhouse tonight,” she says. “Actually, you should probably stay here until the man I love shows back up because this version is kind of an asshole, and I don’t really like him very much.”

She walks over to the bar, and he stares after her. “What the fuck just happened?”

Ky sighs. “You’ve been hit with the loyalty the women of this club have to Lex. Trust me, I’ve gone through it, too. You might as well just admit you were wrong and apologize.”

“What the fuck do you think is, asshole? A hospital? Get the fuck out of here!” Ian shouts.

Colt turns and sees Ben. Blood seeps from a cut above his temple, and he jumps over the back of the couch, pushing him into the Chapel with Psycho close behind.

“What happened?” he asks.

“I got hit with a gun. Who the hell hits someone with a gun instead of shooting them? I think getting shot would’ve hurt less.”

“It doesn’t,” they say together.

“Who hit you?” Psycho asks.

He shrugs. “Don’t know. Lex seemed to know them, though,” Closing his eyes, he swallows. “She called out for you. When they attacked her, she cried out your name, Colt.”

His heart races, and his knees damn near buckle. Alexis Nichols, the woman who can’t look at him without hurt

or anger in her eyes, called out for him when she was in danger? “Where’s Lex, Ben?”

“They took her, I think. They jumped out of a black van, and she fought them. She fought them hard, but there were four or five of them.”

“What did they look like?”

“I don’t remember,” he says and leans against the top of the table. “I feel like I drank an entire bottle of tequila. Worm and all.”

Colt grabs his shoulders. “Focus, Ben. It’s important.”

“Walk us through the night after you walked away from the bar with her. What happened?” Psycho tries.

“We fooled around in her room.”

Releasing his shoulders, he doesn’t think it would hurt worse if he suddenly burst into flames, and he steps back. This asshole fucked his wife. “What?”

“We messed around a bit, but then she asked me what you said outside the bar, and she ran out into the street. The van showed up, she said something about something being a message or warning or something.”

Psycho looks at Colt. “What?”

“The asshole outside her house that night I was there,” he mutters. The night he fucked his wife for the last time. He wasn’t the last one to screw her, though, apparently.

“A redheaded guy tried to grab her, but she fought him. I’m pretty sure she broke his nose. Another tried to get her, and she kicked the shit out of his knee. Looked like it hurt.”

“That’s my girl,” he mutters. “Did she kill anyone?”

He shakes his head and winces. He grabs his skull and moans. “No, but the guy with the Irish accent and wicked scars told them not to kill her. They needed her. What the hell do they need her for?”

“Scars?” Colt asks.

“I tried to help her, but he hit me with the butt of the gun. That’s the last thing I remember before waking up and finding them gone. No, wait, the scarred guy said not to kill me because someone has to tell you they had her.”

“Potbelly and a handlebar mustache?”

Ben blinks slowly. “Uh, yeah, if that’s the style of mustache. It looks so stupid.”

“Were they wearing kutties? What was on them?” Psycho asks.

“Wearing what?”

Colt tugs on his leather. “One of these. Were any of them wearing any of these?”

“Yeah, they all were. And one wore a mask. She was staring really hard at him until one of them hit her.”

She knows one of them. Why cover his face otherwise? Colt’s unsettled feeling grows, and he kicks himself for not running outside. She called out for him. His body knew she was in trouble, and he let her down. Again. Will he ever stop disappointing the woman he loves?

“What was on the leather?” Psycho asks.

He sighs as he thinks. “Uh, there was a flame. And I think a shamrock or clover or something. Are those the same thing? I think they are. Does that sound right?”

“That sounds right. Where did it happen?”

“Right outside.”

Colt grabs him, his anger flaring, but he keeps a level head as he helps the man stumble out to the road where they see marks from tires and a pool of blood. The world starts to tilt as he stares at the red liquid.

“They came to a fast stop behind her,” he says. “Right there. I think she was going to the clubhouse to see you, Colt. That blood there is from the guy’s nose.”

The blood isn’t hers. Thank God. No other large pools of blood catch his eye. “Did you see which way they went?”

“No, I blacked out. I don’t even know how long I was out for. But she’s in trouble. If she’s in trouble, you’re the ones to help her, right?”

“Are your friends still in the bar?”

“I think so.”

He nods towards it. “Go inside and have one of them bring you to the hospital. If they’re not in there, ask for Todd. He’s a bartender, and tell him the Drifters said to take care of you. He’ll get you the help you need.”

“Okay. You’ll save her, right?”

Psycho growls. “If we can’t, we’ll fucking kill every last one of those motherfuckers.”

They examine the road as Ben stumbles into the bar. “I can’t tell which way they went,” Colt says, his heart racing. How can he find her if he can’t even tell which direction they drove away with her? “They came from the east and stopped here, but they could have turned around. Or they could have continued west.”

“We’ll find her.”

Motorcycles fill the air, and they turn to see a fleet of Griffin’s Beach Drifters pull into the parking lot. “There’s too many,” he says, swallowing hard. “Something happened.”

Running inside, he watches Shep paces. “They fucking took Heidi!” he shouts. “I had to check something out at the Puffy Taco, and I only left her alone for less than thirty minutes!”

“What?” Ky calls.

“I came home to find blood all over my fucking living room!”

“Melanie’s gone, too!” Jace shouts, his hands balled into fists at his sides.

“And Autumn.” Rocco looks at Colt, fear taking over.

His stomach churns. “They attacked Lex outside the clubhouse and took her, too.”



“What?” Jennings asks, turning to face him. “You saw this?”

“Yeah, I watched it happen and thought, ‘huh, that sucks.’ No, I didn’t fucking see it. She was with someone, and they got knocked out, and that’s who told us. They only kept him alive to be the messenger. O’Malley said they needed her alive.”

Chicago gapes at him. “You’re sure it was O’Malley?”

Psycho growls and nods. “Yeah, he’s alive, just like we thought. We should have fucking taken him that night in their clubhouse!”

“What the fuck happened?” Jace shouts. “Is that what caused this?”

“We don’t know that,” Ian says. “This could be something they planned all along.”

Rocco shakes his head. “If it’s not retaliation for you motherfuckers not doing your fucking jobs, then what are they doing?”

“Better question is what are *we* doing?” Shep growls. “They have four of our women!”

Colt looks around the room. He came out to Black Valley to act on a plan Chicago came up with, but so far, nothing has come to fruition. Their inaction caused them to lose four of their women. Griffin’s Beach women. And he can’t help blaming himself for not going outside when he knew he should have. He can’t lose her. Not forever.

## Other Works

### Deranged Drifters MC Series:

[Unsuspecting Betrayal: Deranged Drifters MC Book 1](#)

[14 Years: Deranged Drifters MC Book 2](#)

[Without You: Deranged Drifters MC Book 3](#)

[Overdue Revenge: Deranged Drifters MC Book 4](#)

[Final Goodbye: Deranged Drifters MC Book 5](#)

[Ultimatums: Deranged Drifters MC Book 6](#)

[Obsession: Deranged Drifters MC Book 7](#)

[Unlikely Alliances: Deranged Drifters MC Prequel](#)

[Unexpected Revelations: Deranged Drifters MC Book 9](#)

[Change of Heart: Deranged Drifters MC Book 10](#)

[Pasts Intertwined: Deranged Drifters MC Book 11](#)

[Choices: Deranged Drifters MC Book 12](#)

[Mistakes: Deranged Drifters MC Book 13](#)

### Standalone:

[I Still See You](#)

## About the Author

Logan Gray was born and raised in the great state of North Dakota. Growing up an only child, she constantly made-up stories and acted them out with her invisible friends. Many started with her love of the Power Rangers and her first love, Tommy, the red/green/white ranger. And her envy of Amy Jo Johnson who has the skill to act AND sing, mostly because Logan is pretty much tone deaf.

Once she got older, she started writing stories at an early age, even making it to a Young Writers Conference in the 2<sup>nd</sup> grade with a story about an alien in the bathtub. This was even complete with self-drawn illustrations, reminding her that she had better stick to words.

When computer classes started for her in elementary school (yes, she is that old), she loved being on the computer. Some of her first stories were written in the dark on her mom's computer to force her how to type without looking at the keyboard. And she hasn't stopped since.

She has a love of all things crime related, and she has read countless true crime books. The world of motorcycle clubs and the mafia fascinate her, and while the depictions in the Deranged Drifters MC may not match up with the likes of infamous motorcycle clubs, she has researched endlessly about them to add elements of truth in the writing. Some of the research has been in the form of amazing documentaries on the Discovery and History channels, and she's not ashamed to admit it. Besides, what woman doesn't want a bad boy with a heart of gold?

Logan still lives in North Dakota with her husband and fur babies. Her full-time job doesn't allow much creativity and consists of mostly problem-solving, so she loves when she can step away and use her imagination. As she's aged, the imaginary friends in her mind have simply transformed into characters to write about.

If you want to reach out to Logan, you can visit her website at [www.logangray-author.com](http://www.logangray-author.com) or email at [logangrayauthor@gmail.com](mailto:logangrayauthor@gmail.com).

