



RIDING *my* BROTHER'S

*Best Friend*

FLORA FERRARI

RIDING MY BROTHER'S BEST  
FRIEND

**AN AGE GAP, CURVY GIRL ROMANCE**

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A MAN WHO KNOWS WHAT HE WANTS, 333

FLORA FERRARI

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The following story contains mature themes, strong language and sexual situations. It is intended for mature readers.

## RIDING MY BROTHER'S BEST FRIEND

**He used to read bedtime stories to me. It was just a silly crush, but now we're speeding across the country together.**

I've always been the dorky kid sister. Kai is eleven years older than me, ripped, rugged, and so intense every girl in town wants him, but he's never had eyes for anyone. So there's no way he would look twice at me.

The last time he was here, I was seventeen. Now, at nineteen, he looks at me differently. At first, I think his broody, intense energy is anger, but then he offers to take me on a trip. I think he's just trying to be nice. I don't guess he's hiding a secret until it's too late—until my brother is already in danger.

Ryan and Kai have been friends since before I was born. They're inseparable. They run the Titans together. Nothing is supposed to be able to come between them except me, apparently.

**What isn't Kai telling me? And why, when I say I want to go home, does he tell me he'll keep me prisoner if he has to?**

***"You belong to me, firecracker. You're not going anywhere."***

\* *Riding My Brother's Best Friend is an insta-everything standalone romance with a HEA, no cheating, and no cliffhanger.*

## NEWSLETTER

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# CHAPTER ONE

---

**K** ayla

“You *knew* he was sick?”

My voice is torn with agony and disbelief.

Ryan stands at the window of our kitchen. It’s the same one Mom used to bake apple pies in, the room smelling so homely. It’s the same place we’ve had countless family scenes and so much happiness. We never worried that Mom would die in a bus crash and Dad, a few years later, would get an incurable illness—the big C. I hate even thinking of its name.

Since I was sixteen, it’s just been me and Ryan, and now he won’t look at me, gazing out over the dusty hill that leads to our small corner of California. He’s wearing his Titan’s MC jacket, the motorcycle club my dad started.

Ryan glances at me, his mop of black hair falling over his eyes. I’m nineteen. He’s thirty-two. He’s always been just as much of a father figure to me as Dad, and that was doubly true when Dad passed.

“Talk to me,” I snap, hurrying across the room.

Ryan sighs and stuffs his hands in his pockets. He’s tall and lean, with sharp cheekbones. He has Mom’s eyes. It always makes me sad when I think about that.

He’s watching the hill as if expecting an army of motorbikes to surge over it any second. He’s been tense lately, maybe



because he recently split with his girlfriend, or perhaps it's something else. He won't talk to me.

I grab his arm, spin him roughly, and force him to look at me. "Did you know Dad was sick?"

Dad hid his illness for a year, spending most of his time at the motorcycle club, not telling me and, I thought, Ryan.

"I thought we were *both* in the dark, but you knew?"

He swallows and nods shortly. "I'm sorry. He told me soon after they diagnosed him."

"Did he make you promise not to tell?" I demand.

This could be the saving grace. If Dad, dying, had *begged* Ryan not to tell me, then I can understand. I can forgive him.

"No," Ryan says. "I made that decision myself."

I take a step back, shaking my head.

"It's the anniversary tomorrow." What an upbeat word for what it is the day my dad died. "I'm ready, and you drop this on me *now*?"

Ryan's eyes flit to my duffle bag. We have a tradition of camping on the peak that overlooks our small town. It's where Dad used to take us when we were kids. Just me and Ryan, remembering the good times. This will be our third year. Or it *would've* been if Ryan hadn't thrown this news at me.

"I don't understand why you didn't tell me. We've always told each other *everything*."

"There's no excuse," he says darkly.

"Aren't you going to defend yourself, at least?"

"I don't think I can."

"Jesus, Ryan."

He bows his head and nods, his teeth gritted. "I never wanted to lie to you, but you must know."

"You have to give me a reason."

He folds his arms, turning fully to me now. A thousand versions of him flutter across my memory. My wannabe poet's mind starts composing some probably terrible lines.

*A titan, staring,*

*But I'm not lost.*

*The ocean glaring*

*And now we sail together.*

*Just us, only us,*

*We can do it.*

*We can do anything.*

God, how dramatic, and now I'm almost crying. I feel so immature as I walk across the room and grab the kitchen towel, roughly pawing at my cheeks. Memories of Dad attack me: bobbing up and down on his knee, his voice as he read bedtime stories to me.

But *that* leads me to the other man who used to read me stories: his husky voice and dark eyes. The calm concealed a world of fire, heat, and potential violence—

Kai. I won't think about him. He's been gone for two years. When I was seventeen, he left to work with the European branch of the Titans. I sometimes hear him and Ryan talking on the phone, my entire body tingling at Kai's voice, but I lock that away. I lock it down deep.

Ryan and Kai have been best friends for as long as I can remember. Hell, when Kai *started* reading stories to me, we were both kids. I was four, and he was seventeen. Mom and Dad loved Kai so much and treated him like family, which helped because he never had one of his own.

"I'm going to stay at the apartment," I say, not looking at Ryan. I'm not sure if that comes from guilt or rage.

The apartment is the two-bedroom Ryan bought in town a couple of years ago. Sometimes, he'll stay there when handling business, or I'll stay there if I'm spending time with friends or working late at the diner.

I've taken some holiday time, just like last year when working at the diner as a summer job. Now, there's no more high school, just the diner and the wild, weird dreams of being a poet—the most unsustainable and unlikely profession.

“I understand,” Ryan says, walking over and wrapping his arms around me. I almost yell at him to take his hands off, but the feeling is too familiar. Falling into his arms, holding him, and letting him hold me. “I love you.”

There are more tears in my eyes. “I have to go.”

“Kay—”

He's about to say *Kayla*, but I only hear the first part. It's almost like he says *Kai*, and that reminds me of when I was a kid, writing *Kai & Kay* in notebooks, knowing I could never act on these feelings. It would've been a betrayal, just like Ryan betrayed me.

I leave the room and almost run down the hallway. I've got my sneakers on, so I push the door open and walk down the windy, dusty road leading to town. I could've taken the pickup, but the keys are on a hook in the kitchen. Anyway, I want to walk. Maybe the motion will clear my head, though I've never been the biggest fan of exercise.

I walk with my head raised. If I stare at the ground, my thoughts will collapse inward like a sinkhole. I won't be able to do anything except think about all the moments I missed. Ryan supported Dad, caring for him, but I didn't even know anything was wrong.

Only toward the end, when he collapsed, I finally saw past what I expected him to be to what he had become—shrunk, half of the man he was. I hated myself for not noticing sooner. Maybe I still do. How could I miss that?

After five minutes of walking, the town is in sight, lying in a natural dip in the terrain. Everything is tinted yellow. As the midday sun blazes, I hear a bike engine roaring behind me. I turn to find a cloud of dust swirling in the air, so I can only see Ryan's silhouette. He must want to talk about what just happened, though I don't know if I can, don't know if I've got

any more words in me. Maybe some bad poetry. Maybe some lines of pain.

I turn and walk quicker, though obviously, that's a fool's game. It's not like I've got bionic legs. I'm not outrunning him. The bike gets closer, and I clench my fists. The sound of bikes usually brings a smile to my face. It means my brother or his friends, who are all friendly and respectful to me, are here. It means comradeship and warmth.

Once, it even meant Kai. *That* didn't make me smile. That rumbling made my insides quiver and my soul hurt. It made me think of a life where this huge, handsome, hot-as-hell man and I could be together.

The bike pulls around in front of me. The driver comes to a clean stop. He handles the bike even better than Ryan, which says a lot. It's not my brother. I bite down, stepping back, wondering if I've got a heatstroke. A light layer of sweat covers my body, so maybe that's what's happening here. Perhaps I'm losing my mind.

Kai steps off the bike. I know it's him even before he takes his helmet off and lays it on the ground. He's the same age as Kai, thirty-two, with dark black hair grown a little wild, swept to the side to keep it out of his eyes. A few specks of silver glisten in the sun, giving him a more mature look than the last time I saw him.

He wears his leather, which outlines his broad shoulders and muscular arms. His face is perfect from every angle. I should know. I studied it a *lot* growing up. His eyes are bright green. Maybe that's it, but the green becomes a raging fire in other lights—ready for violence and prepared to do what has to be done for the club. He's not just Kai's best friend. He's his right-hand man.

If I acted on these feelings, I'd ruin a friendship *and* put the club at risk. It's a good thing he'd never want me.

## CHAPTER TWO

---

**K ai**

I don't want her. I *need* her. This wasn't part of the plan.

My manhood is pushing against the inside of my jeans, and my heart is pounding against my leather-clad chest. I clench my fists as I walk across the dusty, sunbaked ground and stand over her.

Before I left for Europe, she was a shy kid in braces. The days of the bright-eyed, confident girl listening to me read bedtime stories are long gone. She was a bookish, withdrawn teenager, nodding hello when I visited and waving goodbye but never anything more.

Now, her braces are gone. Her smile is different, more *womanly*, her full features highlighted by her wavy brown hair framing her face. Her body is delightfully curvy, triggering things deep inside of me. My shaft throbs as if begging for her hand.

She's wearing a light fabric dress that rests against her body, subtly outlining her shape. Suddenly, I imagine somebody else noticing this. I'd kill them.

She's mine. What the *fuck*? But she is, that's the thing. I don't have to question it. Somehow, I know my best friend's baby sister is my girl. I know she belongs to me, and she always will.

I think about grabbing her hips, wide and perfect for childbearing. This is serious. I don't understand what's happening to me. I've never hungered for anybody like this. I'm starving for her.

"K-Kai?" she whispers, as though she's seeing things.

I take a moment to steady myself. If I'm going to do this, I need to stay solid. I can't give in to these thoughts crashing around my head. I can't slowly pull her dress up, revealing her thick, creamy thighs. I can't slide my hand between her legs and palm her pussy.

She'll look at me wide-eyed, nervous, knowing we must stop, knowing we're betraying Ryan. Then her beautiful features will crumple into lust. She'll start moving her hips, driving closer to the pleasure, unable to fight it. Neither of us will be able to, and those tits, dammit.

"Hey, Kayla," I say, breezy and easy somehow. "How have you been?"

"Uh... yeah, good. I'm working at Joe's Diner now. Sorry. You don't need to know that."

I step forward, close enough to smell her perfume. Or is it just her? Whatever it is, it's a tempting scent that has my tip throbbing, roaring out for her touch. The engine inside me rumbles to life, growling as it tells me to guide my woman onto her back and open her legs. Drive my rock-hard dick inside her, claim, and thrust until I explode inside her. Then she'll give me a child.

I've gone from a man content to die alone to a man who can't imagine the rest of my life without my best friend's sister. How have you done this, Kayla? How are you so perfect? I imagine brushing my hand along her cheek, telling her she never has to be sorry.

"I just spoke to Ryan," I say instead. "He told me what happened. I'm only in town for the afternoon. Then I'm heading east. I've got a package to drop off in Illinois. Sort of cargo I can't put on a plane."

I feel bad telling her this. I never expected to feel that way, to care. When I agreed to this, I thought of her as Ryan's baby sister. Now she's all woman, but I can't back out. I made a promise.

"Oh," she murmurs, biting her lip as if stopping herself from asking what the package is. She's known bikers long enough to know I won't tell her. "Okay, well... nice seeing you."

"Actually..."

I step closer, aware there's no one around, just us, and there are plenty of spots I could take her around here. The savage in me wants to lay my jacket in the dust and tell her to kneel on it. I'd push that big sexy ass out, begging me to slam into her from behind and make her pussy cream.

There's another part—the future father of her children, her future husband—who wants to get her the best bed with the best sheets money can buy. I'd treat her like a queen and fuck her like a princess.

"I was wondering if you wanted to come with me," I say.

"To Illinois?"

I knew this wouldn't work. Now, half of me doesn't *want* it to work. If she agrees, it means riding with her across the country. It means having her arms wrapped around me, trying not to get hard, or letting my mind spin into savage, hungry places.

"Yeah. Ryan told me about the argument. I figured you could use some time away from Melusine."

"Ryan told you? When? It just happened."

"He called and told me I might see you on the road." This part is true, at least.

"So Ryan asked you to make this offer?"

She sounds bitter. She might disagree if she doesn't think I want her to come. I promised Ryan I'd make this happen. It's the first thing he's asked me to do since I returned to the States.

“I could use the company, too,” I tell her, knowing this is probably a mistake, knowing we should find another way.

“Hmm,” she says, looking at the ground. “You’ve never needed the company before. People call you a lone wolf. Did you know that?”

“Maybe I’m getting tired of it. Are you going to make me beg?”

Her cheeks turn a pretty shade of red. She glances at me, then looks away as if she can’t stare for too long. It’s just how I can’t look at her for too long without thinking a thousand steamy thoughts. All of them would make me a traitor—the lowest of the low. I’d be a man who hits on his friend’s sister, but Ryan’s more than a friend. He’s the leader of the Titans. I’d be betraying the club, too.

People may call me a lone wolf, but they know I’ll be there when they need me. They know I put the club above everything. They know I’m a solid man. They can rely on me. Can’t they?

“I should be here for Dad,” she murmurs, but a twitch in her voice tells me she’s thinking about it.

Or maybe I just think I can read her far better than I can.

“I could read you a story just like old times,” I say, smirking.

“I’m not a kid anymore,” she snaps, suddenly sassy as hell.

I hold my hands up, chuckling. I have to keep this shield up. The smirk. The casualness. The same old Kai. Nothing about how I really feel can shine through.

Not for a second.

“It could be fun,” I say, shrugging like it doesn’t matter. “And just think, you’ll have plenty of inspiration for your poetry. Are you still interested in that?”

She stands a little straighter, a note of dignity in her posture. “I won an online competition a few months ago.”

“Well done. You should be proud.”

“I don’t mean to brag.”



“I didn’t think you were bragging.”

She sighs, shaking her head and then nodding. “Oh, I don’t know. To be honest, I’d love to get away for a few days, but I don’t want to be a tagalong. You’re only asking me because Ryan asked you to, right?”

“I’m asking because—”

“No.” She steps forward, looking up at me with a mixed expression, one part confident, with several spoonfuls of shyness. She pushes past the nerves. “Tell me the truth. Please, Kai. I’ve been lied to enough today.”

She’s asking for the impossible. I can’t tell her the truth, at least not all of it.

“Ryan asked me to ask you,” I say, “but that doesn’t mean it’s inconvenient. I meant what I said. I could do with the company.”

Say yes, Kayla, or I’ll have to take you anyway.

“Are you *sure* you’re sure?”

“I’m sure, I’m sure. I’m goddamn sure,” I grin. “Come on. We’ll pack a bag for you.”

She smiles shakily. “On the b-bike?”

“Since when did you develop a stutter?”

“I haven’t. I guess I’m just... It’s hot. I just learned something pretty messed up. Do you need any more reasons?”

I smirk. I can’t help it. “Since when did you get so feisty?”

“I’m *not* feisty.”

She marches over to my Harley, the beautiful, sexy liar. She definitely is feisty.

Joining her, I climb onto the bike and look over my shoulder.

“Well, are you coming or not?”

She nods and climbs onto the back of the bike. Thank God my jacket is zipped up, but I still feel her push against my back.

“Don’t you have any grips?” she murmurs.

“Never had any need,” I say.

“So should I...”

I swallow. My dick is almost hurting. There’s so much tension in me, so much hunger.

“It’s fine,” I tell her.

She wraps her arms around me, my heart thudding so hard I’m sure she must be able to feel it.

“Wait.”

I step off the bike, knowing I can’t do this and have to find a way to back out, but wouldn’t that mean putting her in danger?

“Is something wrong?” she murmurs, stepping off the bike, her cheeks even redder than before.

“N-no...”

Now *I’ve* developed a sudden stutter. I lean down, pick up my helmet, and dust it off. I’d never normally place it on the ground, but seeing her, I lost my mind.

“We forgot this.”

I carefully place the helmet over her head. When she raises her hand to adjust it, our hands touch, electricity sparking up my arm. Hunger, as I’ve never felt. Her hand needs a ring on it. It needs to be wrapped around my dick. It needs, needs, needs...

*Need.* That’s what I’ve become, right down to my bones.

“Let’s go.”

We drive back toward the house, her hands pressing against me tightly.

## CHAPTER THREE

---

**K**ayla

As he rides back the way I just walked, I have to remind myself that this isn't a dream. This is actually happening. My hands are wrapped around him. The bike thrums beneath us, the engine vibrating like he's doing it on purpose, trying to add to the pleasure.

*Is this real?*

*This destiny-touched feeling,*

*Being so close to my man,*

*Has my soul reeling.*

Not my best work, but I don't think anybody could blame me. My mouth feels dry. I'm relieved I'm wearing the helmet. Not for any safety concerns, but because I know I'd be tempted to lean up and bite down on his neck. All those bedtime stories, all that hard crushing, and now I'm crushing his jacket in my hands, squeezing tightly.

He doesn't drive up the road to the house straightaway. Instead, he takes a turn toward our family's private cemetery. It's where Mom's buried, too. I want to ask him what he's doing, but I feel like I can't speak. Anyway, I doubt he would hear with the engine and the helmet covering my mouth.

I squeeze my hands tighter against his jacket. What would he do if I reached up and unzipped it, felt his chest, his muscles

pushing through his shirt? The rumbling of the engine makes my sex ache and my belly sizzle.

My belly *sizzle*? What am I, a prime cut of sausage? I need to get a grip on my sanity, not Kai's body.

Finally, he stops on the gravel path. The private cemetery sits a few yards away, surrounded by a small wooden fence. I still remember Kai and Ryan building this fence together. I sat nearby, sadness warring with the hunger I felt—and still feel—every time I looked at Kai. Taking the hint, I step off the bike and remove my helmet.

Kai steps off a moment later, turning to me, his eyes hard. "I'm not doing anything until I pay my respects."

"I understand," I tell him, finding it difficult to look him in the face. Am I really going to be able to go on a road trip with him? What if I completely lose my mind and go into full dork mode?

"The next part might seem a little strange," Kai says in his usual gruff voice.

It's difficult to tell if he's pissed at me for some reason or if this is just his regular tone. Either way, I want to be close to him, find out how he really feels—claw beneath that rough exterior and see the man underneath.

"Okay..."

He laughs gruffly, sounding somehow savage. "It's a club tradition. Your old man brought me and Ryan into the mountains when we were kids. We howled at the moon like animals. He taught us that when the time came, we should be able to let the Titan in us out, but we also had to have control." He looks at me with meaning, though maybe I'm imagining it. "Total control."

An overactive part of my mind wonders if he's hinting at the fact that he finds it difficult to keep control with me, or maybe he wants total control *over* me.

He walks to the small cemetery, opens the wooden gate, and kneels beside Dad's headstone. I walk into the cemetery

behind him, swallowing as grief touches me. Kai bows his head like he's praying. He mutters something.

I inch closer, hearing his low, urgent tone. The huskiness in his voice almost has me screaming. He's saying the Titan's pledge, reaffirming his loyalty to the club. "... I am a Titan down to my bones, down to my blood, and I'll bleed if I have to..."

Then, suddenly, he throws his head back and roars at the sky. I take a few steps back; the sound is so animalistic. He roars again, then turns it into a howl, standing and beating his hands against his chest. I can hear the grief, rage, and pain in his voice. He hammers his powerful fists against his muscular body. Slowly, he lets the howl turn quiet, then turns to me.

"I told you it would seem strange."

I shake my head, my mind full of inappropriate thoughts, especially considering where we are. I should be thinking of Dad, of him and Ryan and Kai out here howling together. Yet when I heard Kai turn full beast, I only wanted to cling to him and for him to hold me and tell me I'm his.

"Uh, it's okay," I murmur.

He approaches me. I take another step back. It's instinct. It's not like I do it on purpose. Something deep inside me knows that if I don't move away, I'll lose any semblance of control and throw myself at him.

"Did I scare you?" he says. It's difficult to tell if he sees this as good or bad.

"No," I say, honestly.

*This isn't fear in my heart,*

*Longing like I've never dreamed.*

*Maybe this is only the start,*

*Or maybe...*

I can't think of any more lines. He's standing so close, staring down at me, *into* me. For a crazy second, I think he might kiss

me. There's no way life would be this perfect. Of course not... He turns away.

"We should get going," Kai grunts. "Ryan's waiting for me, but I had to pay my respects. Always. Your old man saved me."

We return to the bike. I take the helmet from the back seat and pull it on. When Ryan climbs onto the bike, I focus on not losing my cool. If we're traveling together, I need to get used to touching him, but I know each time will feel like the first. At least he's got that leather on, meaning I'm not touching his muscles, feeling his heat, strength, and protectiveness. No, *stop*. He's not protective of me. I'm just his friend's dorky kid sister. That's all he'll ever see me as.

---

"They're downstairs now," I tell Natasha, my best friend and the only person who knows about my crush on Kai.

Natasha and I have been friends since middle school. I try to imagine how I'd feel if Ryan had a crush on her. I know I'd hate it. It would make me feel so betrayed and wronged like the universe doesn't make sense. The Hypocrite of the Year award goes to...

I'm in my bedroom packing a small bag, nothing extravagant. Natasha is on speakerphone, though I have to listen closely to hear her past the radio. I turned it on the second I called her like we're in a spy flick, and I can't risk being overheard.

"You sound drunk," Natasha says. "*Are you?*"

"No, I don't drink. You know that." I'm still reeling from the scene at the cemetery and the ride over here. If I sound intoxicated, *that's* why.

She laughs softly. "I *know*, but seriously, you sound giddy. You can tell me you're nervous and unsure if you should do this, but you can't deny you *want* to."

"If it wasn't for the argument, there's no way I'd leave right now. I'd normally be here for the anniversary, but I don't

know. I just can't."

"You don't have to justify it to me. Honestly, I think you should enjoy it."

"Enjoy it?" I try to laugh as if I can pretend the thought of finding pleasure in this hasn't crossed my mind. "I'm not sure I'll be able to."

"Think of the sights, the experiences, at least. Isn't that what Miss Poet would want?"

"That's what Kai said," I murmur. "It would be a good inspiration for poetry. I was a little surprised he even remembered I liked poetry. Maybe Ryan mentioned it to him or something."

"Or maybe you made more of an impression than you think."

"Ew, Nat," I say. "I wasn't even eighteen the last time he saw me."

"I don't mean like *that*. I think you're a special person. It's not surprising to me he remembered something about you. Anyway, you're his best friend's little sister."

"Like I need reminding of that."

"Sorry. I'm not helping, am I?"

I stuff a T-shirt into my bag, knowing I have to preserve space. "No, *I'm* sorry. You're right. I should try to enjoy it for what it is. It's not like *he* has any of the same feelings."

Natalie doesn't disagree with this. Instead, she tells me she has dance practice in a few hours. After graduating, she moved out of town and joined a dance troupe in LA. She's bussing tables and cleaning offices to make it financially viable. It's hard, but she's doing it. I respect her so much for that.

"Remember what I said," she says toward the end of the phone call. "Try to *enjoy* it."

"I will."

It's crazy, but there's a big, big part of me that blames Ryan for this. If he'd never told me about Dad, the secret, I know I could find the willpower to stay. I'd have to for my and Ryan's

tradition for Dad, but clearly, Ryan doesn't care. He's the one who asked Kai to take me. Ryan never would've done that if he knew the truth, but he did. He asked him. He wants me gone.

I zip up my bag, taking a moment to summon my resolve. I'll ignore all the ways Kai tempts me. I won't cave to the desire inside. He's a lone wolf, but maybe he could exempt me. No, I need to let this love die.

Wait, am I writing poetry by accident? It's rhyming in my head. I've always been mentally linguistic, thinking in words more than images. I imagine Kai's mind all hunger, scents, and primal impulses, and then his voice calls over it all when *he* feels like it, a God's voice, husky and strong.

I pick up my bag and take a breath. I think I'm ready. I hope.

---

I stop outside the living room, knowing this is wrong but that they haven't heard me yet. The door is slightly open, but not enough for them to see me.

Their voices come through the walls like when I was a kid. Back then, they talked about fighting and bikes. Sometimes, Ryan would talk about girls, but not Kai. He'd just grunt or stay silent.

I used to tell myself it was because he was waiting for me. Like I said to Natasha, that's *ew*, but it's what I used to think. Now, I step close and push my ear against the wall.

"Thanks for doing this," Ryan says.

"You don't have to keep saying that."

Kai sounds even more pissed than I *guessed* he would be. He sounds like he's just been tasked with entertaining the boss's annoying tagalong sister.

"I mean it," Ryan replies. "She needs to get away for a few days, clear her head, forget about Mom and Dad and all that crap."



“You’ve had it tough. Both of you.”

Ryan laughs quietly as I adjust my position against the wall. I was about to step on the notoriously squeaky floorboard by mistake.

“We haven’t experienced anything compared to you.”

Kai’s laugh turns into more of a grunt, just like the old days.  
“That old stuff? It’s ancient history.”

“You were a kid.”

“I said it’s ancient history.”

There’s an edge to Kai’s voice. It’s common knowledge that *something* terrible happened to Kai as a teenager before he moved to Melusine to live with his aunt at eleven. Then his aunt up and left, leaving Kai with her ex-boyfriend. Then the boyfriend left, and Kai lived in that house alone with help from the Titans. He showed right away he was born to the life.

I don’t know the specifics, only that he must’ve been one hell of a kid to hang with the club at such a young age. Dad once told me they never had him do anything bad, but he proved his worth every single day.

*What happened to you, Kai, before you moved here? Where did that darkness come from?*

“Fair enough,” Ryan says. “Have you got the package?”

“Safe and sound.”

“Try not to lose it.”

Kai laughs gruffly. “Really? I was going to swing by the Grand Canyon and drop it in.”

“Ha, ha, ha.”

“You’ll take the fifteen, then the seventy?”

“Most likely.”

“Don’t be afraid to go on a few detours. No need to rush back. The longer she’s gone...” His voice gets grim. “The better.”

I tell myself I don’t care. *He’s* the liar. He can get as cocky and cruel as he wants, but hearing so much anger in his voice still

hurts, like it's somehow my fault.

"I wish I could stay here."

Another stab to the heart. Kai sounds like he'd rather be doing anything else than taking me. Should I call this off? But I can't hang around town when Ryan's being such a dick. Or is that an excuse? Maybe I really want to go with Kai, even if he's doing it reluctantly. I can tell myself it's inspiration for poetry or to get away from my brother. Maybe it's just this feeling, this ache, this desire.

I packed my notebook—one of my old ones, with *Kai & Kay* written in it. Why would I do that? What's wrong with me?

When I hear footsteps approaching the door, I hurry into the kitchen and put my bag on the table. Kai enters a moment later, green eyes narrowed.

"Everything okay?"

"Yeah, why?"

He nods, but he's still looking at me perceptively. "Are you ready?"

"Yeah, just let me grab my helmet."

I rarely use it now that I have a license, but I used to ride with Ryan fairly often. He hardly ever uses cars, so if I wanted a ride, it was the bike.

As I walk out the front door, I'm sure I can *feel* Ryan watching me from the front window, but I don't look back.

## CHAPTER FOUR

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**K ai**

I can't tell if Kayla overheard us. When I found her in the kitchen, she looked mischievous as hell, trying to hide it with her wide, innocent eyes and those flushed cheeks. Her hair was a little tousled, like she'd moved quickly.

I tried to note it all distantly as if it didn't matter. As if just looking at her wasn't making my shaft swell, precome leak, and hunger burn—everything roaring at me to claim, own, and take her.

She made an excuse and hurried upstairs. I'm wary about following her. There's a beast in me, more than a Titan. It's a hungry, savage impulse to strip off her clothes and indulge endlessly in her curvy body. Lick and bite and kiss and spank and *own*.

I take the stairs slowly, my heart pounding so damn hard. Pausing outside her bedroom, I remember the last time I was here when she was a kid, and I had one of those silly storybooks in my hands. This is that *same* girl. I've got to remember that—my best friend's little sister. Just because she's got curves and kissable lips and...

She looks startled when she opens the door and sees me standing here. My manhood aches. My balls are way too damn full.

“Uh, you okay?” she asks, cheeks flushing a deep, tempting red, making her look even more youthful.

“I was going to ask you the same thing,” I say gruffly.

She flinches. I need to work on speaking more respectfully, but it’s difficult to speak to her at all. If I let out how I really feel for a moment, there’s a danger I’ll let it *all* out. I’ll tell her she better get in that bedroom and bend over right away, show me her curvy ass, and get ready for me to turn it red with possessive spanks.

“I’m fine,” she replies. “I just wanted to know if you’re cool with me tagging along. That’s all.”

Truthfully, no. Hell no. I know that traveling with my woman is a high-risk scenario. If I let my defenses lapse for a second, it’s over. My hands will be all over her. I’ll kiss her like I mean it. I’ll tell her she’s mine, only mine. She’ll never belong to anybody else. It’ll be bad news, but I made a promise.

“I wouldn’t have offered otherwise,” I say. “Are you having second thoughts?”

She arches an eyebrow at me like she’s trying to imply something. Maybe she *did* overhear. It doesn’t matter. I have to take her.

“N-no,” she says after a pause. “Not if you’re not.”

I step forward, aware Ryan is downstairs. I could reach forward right this second, place my hands on her hips, squeeze, and feel her thickness. She has no idea how wild she’s making me. My body hungers for her touch again, even through the leather jacket. To feel her against me, naked, skin on skin... Fuck, I’m getting hard.

“Good,” I grunt. “Then let’s get going. We’re wasting time.”

“This must be a really important package,” she says.

I turn away. I can’t lie to her again. Though, I should get used to it. It’s not as if I can tell her the truth. This road trip is going to be full of lies. It’s a damn shame, but it’s how it must be.

“I’ll be outside,” I say, heading for the stairs.

“Okay,” she replies. Then, in a quieter voice, she says, “Rude.”

I almost turn and start bantering with her, but it’s better if she sees me as distant, even mean. It’s better than the reality of what’s happening here.

---

Now, we’re driving across the dusty plains out of Melusine. The horizon shimmers in the heat. My body is sweaty in my leather, but not from the layers. It’s from her, my Kayla. *My Kayla?* Jesus. That’s how I think of her now. My Kayla, her arms wrapped around me, squeezing tight.

Every few seconds, I imagine pulling over to the side of the road, pulling her helmet off, kissing her, feeling her, massaging those thick, perfect hips. I have to push these fantasies away, let them thrum at some distant point in the back of my head.

I try to think of her as the little kid lying in bed as I read from one of her books. Mostly, it was to pay the Lewis family back for everything they’d done for me. They liked me reading to her, and I didn’t mind, but I can’t connect the woman clutching onto me with that kid. I know they’re the same person, but it doesn’t feel that way. She seems so different.

Am I a good man? I try to be as much as this life will let me.

I ride for a while, then pull into a gas station just off Route 15. My woman climbs off, stretching her arms above her head. She changed into denim overalls with a leather jacket at the house. Now, she’s a gorgeous, messy-haired biker chick, making her even more attractive than earlier.

“Do you want anything from inside?” she asks.

“I’m fine.”

“Okay.”

Things are tense between us, far more than I want them to be. I have to keep reminding myself that this awkwardness is the

best situation. It's better than showing how I really feel.

Still, as she walks toward the gas station, I can't help but stare at her. Her hips move provocatively. She's not purposefully putting on a show, but in my mind, she is just for me. My fingers twitch like I'm practicing what it will be like, grabbing and massaging her ass.

After I fill the bike, I head into the gas station, the AC blasting me with icy air. Kayla is at the counter, finishing up.

She turns with a bottle of water in her hand, giving me some seriously evil eyes. She must've overheard us. Or maybe she was listening intentionally. If that's the case, I bet she misinterpreted a lot of things.

She walks right by me, her arms folded. The leather jacket is open, showing the top of her overalls. She's wearing a light T-shirt underneath, and I can just about make out one of her pink bra straps. I'm torn between tearing off her clothes and telling her to zip up the jacket.

At the counter, the cashier smiles. He's a friendly older man.

"Just the gas," I say, nodding outside as I reach into my jacket for my wallet.

"For the bike?" the man asks.

"Yessir."

"Your friend already paid," he said.

"She..."

I look outside to find Kayla leaning against the bike, her arms still folded, glaring at me like she's trying to win a prize for the world's prettiest pout. I can't help but smirk, then chuckle.

"Well, all right then. Have a good day."

"And you."

I leave the gas station, the air immediately furnace-like. It's different from England, where I spent most of my time these past couple of years doing predictable and easy work for the club. It was important work, too, helping the Titans over there become self-sufficient.

“Why the long face?” Kayla says when I approach.

She thinks she’s so clever. She is clever and beautiful. She’s going to make the best babies. I shouldn’t let myself flirt, but I can’t let her win this, as petty as that is. Clearly, *I’m* not the mature one here.

“I think he might’ve overcharged me.”

She pushes away from my bike and looks me up and down. “For what? You haven’t got anything.”

“For the gas.”

“Wait... what? He charged you for the gas?”

“Yeah, I think he overcharged me by ten dollars.”

“But...”

Her eyes narrow, righteous rage filling her. This was supposed to be a subtle way to one-up me. Not a chance for a gas station to make some quick, shameless cash.

“I, uh, forgot something,” she says.

I smirk and wave a hand. “Go ahead. I’ll be here.”

I sit on the bike, whistling a tune. The whole time, I’m telling myself that this *isn’t* flirting. It’s just me being friendly with Ryan’s sister by playing a prank on her. It’s not something we’ll tell our kids about. It’s *not*.

She talks with the cashier, then turns and looks at me. I grin over at her.

“Not funny,” she says once she’s back. “You just made me look like one heck of a doofus.”

“I hate to be childish, but you started it.”

“Are you going to be this annoying the entire trip?” she huffs, so beautifully flustered.

It makes me want to take her somewhere cooler. Maybe find a pool, or a lake, a private place just for us. Strip her naked and watch the water glisten through her wavy brown hair, over her shy, sassy smile, down her curvy body, clinging to her full nipples.

“Think of all the poems you could write about it,” I say, my voice husky as I struggle to suppress these thoughts—thoughts that never end, not even for a second.

“*Here’s* a poem. Kai is a jerk, but his antics won’t work. And, uh, my interest, you haven’t *perked*. Shut up.”

I laugh at her playful tone. She can’t help it. *We* can’t help it. If this is flirting, I don’t think it’s one-sided.

“I’m not saying anything.”

“Let’s just go before I die of embarrassment.”

“Sounds good to me.”

I’d never let her die, though, of embarrassment or anything else. I’d never let anything happen to her.

“Where’s our first stop?” she asks, climbing onto the bike.

Her hands wrap around my middle, jolting me back to reality and my duty.

There’s too much hunger in me. My dick is getting hard at the slightest touch. If there wasn’t leather between us, would I be able to stop?

“We can overnight in Vegas,” I tell her. “I’m sure there’s lots of inspiration there.”

“Isn’t your package important? Shouldn’t we get it delivered as soon as possible?”

Now, I’m sure she overheard. She must’ve listened as Ryan told me not to rush back.

“We’ve got some wiggle room,” I say gruffly.

“Okay. Vegas it is.”

“From now on,” I tell her, “I pay.”

“You’re not my babysitter. I’ve got my own money.”

We’re just sitting near the pump as if we don’t want to stop talking or raise our voices over the rushing wind.

“Working at Joe’s Diner,” I say. “I know. That’s good, honest work.”



“And the poetry competition paid one thousand dollars. I don’t need you to pay my way.”

“What if I want to?” I snap.

“Why?”

“It’s called being polite.”

“Because you’re *so* polite, Kai.”

Am I dreaming, or did she playfully press down on my stomach when she said *so*?

“Hey, I try to be. Anyway, you need your money. You’re young. I’m an old man. Nothing to spend my cash on.”

“That is the craziest thing I’ve ever heard. You’re not *old*. You’re in your early thirties. That’s your prime.”

“It’s old compared to a kid like you.”

“Is that how you see me, huh? A kid? Just because you outsmarted me once.”

I could tell her *yes*. She’s a kid in my eyes, but it would be a downright lie. She’s all woman, and even if I should, I can’t let her think I don’t see it.

“No, Kay, I don’t.”

“Kay?”

“Yeah?”

“No, Kay?”

“Why are you pronouncing my name like that?” I ask.

She laughs, hugging me tighter. I’m not sure she even means to. This bike is letting us get way closer than we otherwise would. I know the risks, but I have to keep going.

“What’s so funny?”

“I’m saying, *Kay*, not *Kai*. That’s the first time you’ve called me Kay.”

“Is it? It sounds right.”

“I... I think I like it, too.”

“Good.”

I bring the Harley to life. Enough talking. Enough flirting. From now on, I have to be good. We put on our helmets, and we ride.

## CHAPTER FIVE

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**K** ayla

Our arrival in Vegas isn't the spectacular light show that it's been the other times I've visited. Mainly because it's only four thirty p.m., the sun is still blazing, and the Strip's not shining into the desert as it does at night.

My body is sore from the riding, so I'm relieved when Kai stops at a diner just outside the city. He pulls into the parking lot, and we both step off the bike. Despite the soreness, part of me wants to stay on the bike with him. It's the perfect excuse to press myself against his body, to feel his heat, to feel something deep within us both communicating, starving for each other.

No, I can't think about that. We had some fun at the gas station and a few laughs. That doesn't erase what I heard. He doesn't want me to be here. He's just making the best of it.

"Hungry?" he asks.

"I could eat."

He looks down at me, his black hair messily swept to the side when he removes his helmet. His jaw is tight like he's holding back all that fire, the raging infernos I used to write poems about.

*Kai, burning.*

*My soul, yearning,*

*My desire churning.*

That was a juvenile attempt. I can't remember the rest. It was a little sloppy but also true.

We go into the diner, a few truckers sitting at one end, a family at the other. The floor and surfaces gleam as the sun shines through the window walls.

“Let's sit over here.”

Kai walks quickly to the opposite corner, a booth with its back to the kitchen, most of the diner in sight. He does it instinctively as if he's always expecting something to go down and wants the best vantage point. I imagine him thinking, *I'll see the fight coming. If we need to run, we can go through the kitchen and out the back.*

We sit opposite each other, Kai seeming even bigger in the tight confines of the booth. When he removes his jacket, I try to look anywhere except for his arms. He's wearing a gray tank, his muscled shoulders on display, the red, roaring Titan tattoo shifting on his shoulder as he changes his position. Each muscle is massive, hard, and outlined like a rock, as if touching him could snap a fingernail.

If I notice it—big time—I can't be surprised when the waitress does, too. She's blond and wears a short skirt, her athletic legs on display. She's got a full face of expertly applied makeup, blending and sculpting as I could only dream of. Her nipples are poking through her shirt. There's nothing wrong with any of this. It's her choice. Maybe it helps her get more tips. Perhaps she feels more confident.

However, I don't like the way she eyes Kai. She doesn't glance at me as she asks what we'd like to order. Her voice is bright, bubbly, and inviting. I can't hate an innocent waitress just because she looks at Kai as if she'd devour him here and now. It's not *her* fault I've crushed and am *still* crushing hard on him.

“I'll take three burgers, no bun, no sauce, with a side of scrambled egg and five rashers of bacon. Kay?”

He looks up at me, eyebrow raised. I might be imagining it, but I think he's a little uncomfortable with the waitress ogling him. She's not even being subtle about it, staring at his arms, still not looking at me even when Kai says my name.

"Uh, is this dinner or a late lunch?"

"Late lunch. We'll eat later, too, but get whatever you want."

He says this like he's reading my thoughts. He knows I'm hungry and want to eat, but I don't want him to think I'm greedy. When I hesitate for a moment, he narrows his eyes at me.

I always wished he'd look at me with this level of attention, as though nothing else mattered or existed, as if it was only us, not this waitress, not my big brother, not the guilt. Now that he is, I feel spotlighted, and it's worse when the waitress turns to me with a subtly mocking twist to her lips. Or maybe I'm just being paranoid.

Screw it. Nothing's going on here. Nothing ever will. Let the waitress ogle him.

What do I care?

"I'll take pancakes with chocolate chips," I say, "and a milkshake."

"What's wrong?" Kai asks once the waitress is gone.

I look out the window at the dusty landscape of Vegas, at the Strip just about visible in the hazy, shimmering sun. "Nothing."

He opens his mouth, then thinks better of it, closes his mouth and shrugs. "Okay then."

"I won't be mad," I tell him.

This is going to be seriously immature, but hey, I'm less than half his age. If I can't act a little immature occasionally, what's the point? It's not like he's above that sort of thing, hence his payback prank at the gas station.

"Mad?"

"If you want to, you know, try your luck."

I nod over to the waitress.

Kai glances at her standing at the counter. She leans against it, kicking one leg up, drawing the gazes of the truckers. Even the father of the family in the corner looks over before his wife scowls at him.

Kai looks at me. “I’m not interested.”

I lower my voice. “*She’s* clearly interested. Seriously, I won’t mind.”

He picks up the menu and places it down. It’s more like he slams it down, honestly. “Why do you want me to hit on her so badly?”

There’s no way I can answer this honestly. Maybe I should reach into my bag, take out the notebook, and shove the *Kai & Kay* in his face so he can understand.

“No reason.”

“Hmm.”

“What’s *hmm* about that?”

He smirks, then laughs as he shakes his head. “Are you always so damn suspicious? A man can say *hmm* without going through an inquisition.”

“Maybe we should just sit here quietly.”

He shrugs and looks out the window. I fold my arms and stare out the window, too, feeling like I’ve played this completely wrong. It doesn’t matter anyway. I have to remind myself—over and over, it seems—that this is a favor for him. He’s performing his duty to my big bro as his right-hand man, nothing more.

“Here you go, honey,” the waitress says, putting Kai’s plate down. “And your *pancakes*.”

She raises her eyebrow at me, puts my plate down, and smiles. Then she turns and walks away, swaying her hips as if waiting for Kai to watch her, but he just falls upon his food like a starving man. He doesn’t have poor manners, though. It’s

more like he's a machine, methodically consuming the meat, drinking a glass of water, and doing it again.

We don't talk as we eat. When we finish, he puts some bills down, just enough to cover the cost of the food and drinks.

"Why can I feel you looking at me, Kay?" he says as we walk out of the diner.

"You just, uh, didn't leave a tip."

"No," he grunts, "I didn't."

He strides across the lot toward his Harley, gleaming in the sun.

"Why?"

"For all that waitress knew, you could've been my girlfriend or fiancée."

I'm glad he's not looking at me as he says this. He stands next to his bike, adjusting his leather jacket. He'll be able to see it on my face—how badly I want that to be true.

"But she flirted with me anyway, and I saw how she looked at you. I heard the way she talked to you. Some people think they can get away with anything because they're conventionally attractive."

"So, you think she's attractive?"

He finally turns to me. His green eyes flare like he's going to grab me, pull me closer, and become even more intimate than we are when we're riding.

"I said *conventionally*," he snaps. "I've never been a conventional man."

He climbs onto the bike, pulls his helmet on, then lifts the visor. "Come on, sassy. We should get moving."

"Sassy? Really?"

He laughs, kicking the bike to life, the engine grumbling.

"If you've proven anything since we started this trip, it's that you're sassy, Kay."

"Am not," I say, climbing onto the bike.

“Mature, too.”

“I could be mature in the right circumstances,” I say, trying to make it a joke. However, it sounds so serious, like I’m trying to convince him of something—that I’ll be ready when he wants me.

“Hmm,” he replies, giving me no hint of how he feels.

I pull on my helmet, wrap my arms around him, and hold tight as we ride together.

---

Is it petty to want payback? Even thinking of it as *payback* is a little messed up because it’s not like anything happened at the diner. As pitiful as it might seem, I can’t get the thought of Kai and that waitress out of my head. I keep replaying the scene in the diner, wondering if Kai would’ve done something with her if I wasn’t there.

I want to *scream* thinking about that. I want to howl. I want to hurl something or just plain hurl. As Kai brings the bike to a stop in the motel’s parking lot, I wish I could reach into his mind and thoughts. Maybe he’s wondering how fast I’ll fall asleep tonight, thinking he could head back to that diner and see if that waitress is still working.

God, this jealousy is twisted. He’s nothing to me. I should crush this crush.

*A girlish dream, nothing more,*

*If love is wealth, I am poor,*

*But when our bodies touch, oh-so sore,*

*He leaves me trembling to my very core.*

I may have to quiet my poetry because it’s hard to compose a decent line when Kai dominates my thoughts, my feelings, my everything. Or maybe I’m just being harsh on myself because it’s what I always do when it comes to my own work.



I follow Kai into the motel's main office, seeing my chance for some payback when I spot the man behind the counter. He looks in his mid-twenties, on the leaner side, with a skin-fade haircut. I can imagine Natasha being attracted to him. I'm not, but that's not saying much. The only person I want—or have ever wanted—is a brooding biker named Kai.

Before Kai can say anything, I approach the desk. An instinct deep inside screams at me not to do this, to *never* flirt with anybody who isn't Kai. I should be able to push this feeling aside with relative ease. After all, it's not like Kai and I are together... or even close.

"Hey," I say, trying to seem as friendly and flirty as possible, even though it feels so wrong.

The man looks up and smiles. "Hello..."

"We'd like two rooms, please."

I look at Kai to see if he'll correct me. Imagine that... My body aches just thinking about it. I can see him stepping forward, laying his strong hands on the desk, and shaking his head. *She's wrong. We're sharing a room and a bed*, but he just stands there like he's carved of stone.

"Sure," the man says.

I want a reaction out of Kai so badly. It's immature. It's a reason that he would never want to be with me, this neediness. *His* women are probably oh-so mature, never stooping to games like these.

"What are you reading?" I ask the man, gesturing to his book.

Another smile. Maybe this is working. I feel bad. It's unfair to this random stranger, making him think he has a chance. Nobody has a chance with me unless they're called Kai.

"*The Great Gatsby*," he says. "I've read it three times already. I return to it every few years."

"I'm ashamed. I've never read it."

"What?" the man laughs. "If you like literature, you have to try it."

I lean against the desk. “Is it a love story?”

“Sort of...” The man stares at me. Behind me, I *feel* Kai take a step forward. I hear the floorboards creak. It’s like he’s getting ready for violence. “But it’s more a tragedy and, in my opinion, a lesson.”

“A lesson?”

“Love can be dangerous. It can turn to obsession way too easily.”

Oh, universe, come *on*. It’s like fate or some other force planted this man in our lives to give me a wake-up call. “It sounds like a good read—”

Kai places his wallet on the desk. Or perhaps *places* is an understatement. He slams it down and then leans over the man. He’s not trying to intimidate him—I don’t think so, at least—but he’s just so gruff, serious, and intense. The man flinches slightly.

“Two rooms,” he says. “Adjoining.”

A shiver moves over my body. Adjoining, meaning there will only be a door between us. It would be so easy for him to open it, sneak into my bedroom, move his hands over my body, and...

“Uh...” The man swallows. “Sure.”

As the man types into his computer, Kai rolls his shoulders. He seems restless like he wants to ride or fight. When the man gives Kai the price, Kai puts twice as much down on the desk. Maybe he feels bad for making the man flinch.

“Keep the change,” he says. “Consider it a tip. Come on, Kay.”

His gruff, commanding tone leaves me with little choice. He strides from the office, pushing the door open so hard it’s a miracle it doesn’t swing right off the hinges. In the parking lot, he turns to me and glares down.

“What’s wrong?” I ask.

He opens his mouth. His eyes are as wild as they were after he howled at Dad's grave. He raises his hands like he's going to grab me. I really think this is the moment he's going to wrap his arms around me, pull me close against him, and push hard so I can feel his manhood, his need.

Instead, he says, "Here you go." He hands me the keys.

I take them, our hands touching, heat and lust sparking between us, or maybe just *from* me—a one-sided surge of lust. He's not jealous and doesn't care if I flirt with a man right in front of him. He's just tired and wants to get some rest.

## CHAPTER SIX

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**K** ai

I sit at the window of my motel room, my gun in pieces on the table in front of me. Cleaning it brings me peace. If anything goes down, I've got a spare in my bag. Luckily, I didn't have a gun drawn as we booked the rooms. When I saw Kay talking with that man, I almost lost it. I almost went full Titan. I have to remember that, as far as she's concerned, as far as Ryan is concerned, as far as the *world* is concerned, she's nothing to me. She can talk to and flirt with anybody she damn well pleases.

I can't hear Kay in the adjoining room, but I know she's there. I wonder if she's in the shower, which makes my body hard—not just my manhood, but all of me. My muscles swell as if getting ready for what I will do. The passion I'm going to claim.

Was she *jealous* in the diner? I was pissed, honestly. The waitress probably earns more tips by being just a little flirtatious. I get that, but I hated that Kay thought I was attracted to the waitress or anybody who wasn't *her*.

The smell of the oil and the gunmetal... I'll focus on that, but I can't stop thinking about the passion in Kay's expression. Or the beautiful flush spreading over her cheeks when she ordered her pancakes. She hesitated as if she was ashamed of herself with her curvy, perfect body. She'll need her appetite if she's going to carry my children.

I place the rag down, watching somebody stroll over to my Harley. He's a tall, built man, taller and more muscular than me. He's wearing a vest that shows off frankly *insane* arms, veins bulging as if he's dehydrated himself for hours. Maybe he's on roids. Or perhaps he's used to his muscles being enough to intimidate people.

I grab my cut and leave my gun. The last thing I need is a shootout in a motel parking lot. As I get closer, I see the man's probably a few years younger than me. His round, puffy face makes me think of roids again. His eyes are dark and beady, set above swollen cheeks, his hair blond and combed back into a ponytail. When the man looks up and sees me coming, he steps *closer* to my bike, a grin spreading across his face.

I make sure to get close to him. If he pulls a weapon, I'll have time to leap on him, grab him, and wrestle. It'll be one hell of a challenge, but I've fought men bigger than me before.

"This is a nice bike," the man says.

I nod.

"The name's Randall," he says, flexing his arms.

He actually does this. He tenses his arms so that his veins bulge out even more. That level of vascularity has always looked odd to me, unnatural.

"Would you mind letting me have a ride?" Randall asks when I don't respond.

I smirk. "I think you know the answer to that."

"It's a nice bike, is all."

"You said that."

"How fast does it go?"

"Fast enough."

The man lowers his hand as if to touch it.

"Don't do that," I tell him.

He pauses, his smile spreading, holding his hands barely inches from the seat. "I don't like being told what to do, Kai."

So this isn't a chance meeting. I wonder if it's related to the Titans, the stuff I can't tell Kay about.

"How long have you been following me?"

The man grins. "A little while. What happens if I touch your bike?"

"If you know who I am, you know what happens."

"You're trying to sound tough."

"Touch the bike," I shrug, "and whatever happens, happens."

"You say that like it's a force of nature. Like a natural disaster. Like *you* wouldn't be responsible for whatever you tried to do to me."

After a long pause, he steps back, shoving his hands into his pants pockets.

"You'd pull your gun. I'm not interested in unfair fights."

I almost tell him, *My gun's in the room*, but it would be pointless to reveal that. Let him think whatever he wants to think.

"Why show yourself?" I say. "You could've popped me at the window."

"In a busy motel? Does that seem like an intelligent move?"

"So your employer doesn't want any heat."

He smiles thinly. "I've been given permission to offer you two million dollars cash. I have it at a nearby location. If you accept it, you'll have to disappear and start a new life. You could go anywhere, *be* anybody, with that kind of money. You've spent enough time as Ryan Lewis' lackey."

His lackey. Like this idiot could ever understand the deep bond Ryan and I have. He's been like a brother to me ever since my aunt left, and the MC took me in.

"Oh yeah? And what do you get in return?"

"What else? The girl. Ryan Lewis' sister."

"She's worth over two million," I growl.

“So we’re haggling. How much?”

I laugh darkly. Not for all the goddamn money in the world. My hands tighten into fists as I imagine crushing his neck.

“More than you can pay. It’s time for you to go, Randall.”

“The next time we meet, it won’t be so pleasant. You should seriously think about my offer.”

“I will think about it,” I say, looking at him meaningfully. “Don’t do anything stupid before we talk again.”

I toss that out there just in case he’s gullible enough to believe I’d give him Kay. He doesn’t know about the hunger inside me, the burning, roaring, never-ending need, but he *does* know that she’s my best friend’s sister. He knows she’s protected by Titan’s MC. He knows that any Titan worth his salt would never sacrifice the princess.

Randall grins and turns away. “I’ll be seeing you, Kai.”

I watch him go, standing near my bike, ready to duck behind it if the asshole suddenly pulls a piece. Many people are in the motel parking lot, a family checking in and a couple walking toward their vehicle. He knows better than to start anything here.

Once he’s climbed into his car, I turn and hurry into the motel room. I knock on the adjoining door.

When she opens it, I almost forget about the asshole and his threats. She’s wearing a baggy gray T-shirt and sweatpants. It’s not as though it’s some purposefully sexy outfit, but she’s not wearing a bra, her nipples poking through the material. My head is already a haze of violence. This adds another component. Pure heat. Pure possession.

“Is everything okay?” she asks, looking cutely up at me.

I swallow, trying to think of Ryan, trying to think of duty. “This place is a shithole,” I growl, not having to fake the anger. It’s aimed at myself for these feelings flurrying through me.

“Really?” she asks. “It seems okay to me.”

I shake my head, hating that I have to lie to her, but it's not as if there's anything new there. "There was a rat in my room, and I found mold. Ryan wouldn't forgive me if I let you stay here. We're moving."

"A rat?" she says, eyes widening.

It'd be so good to sweep her into a hug right now, kiss the top of her head, and inhale her scent. Then I'd tell her, "*Don't worry. I'll take care of you. Remember those stories? Remember how the prince always saved the princess? I can be that for you.*"

That's just so, so wrong. It's another reminder of our age gap, and how messed up I must be for wanting this so badly.

"Yeah," I say, purposefully not looking her in the eye.

"Oh, well, my room is okay. Where's the mold?"

"I'm tired," I grunt. "Let's not get into a debate about it. Get changed, pack up, then we're leaving."

She arches her back slightly. Oh, hell. Is she doing that on purpose? It draws attention to her nipples poking through her T-shirt, the shape of them causing my dick to push against the inside of my pants. "Why do I have to get changed?"

I swallow and clench my hands into fists. It would be effortless, so *right* to reach up and gently play with her nipples through her shirt. "It's a cool evening," I snap. "Put a jacket on, at least."

I *can't* tell her that if another man saw her nipples looking so full and needy, I wouldn't be able to control myself. I'd go full Titan on him. I'd beat him bloody, unable to stop, even if I knew it was wrong. Even if I knew he didn't deserve it. Hell, who could resist a look at this curvy, perfect woman? I'd still do it. She's mine. I'm howling in my mind, just like at the cemetery. She's *mine*.

Maybe she senses some of the fire in me. She nods and takes a step back. "Okay, Kai."

"Good," I grunt. "Hurry up."

"You don't have to be so rude," she snaps as I turn away.



She's right. I almost turn back and apologize, but it's better for both of us if I keep this shield of coldness up.

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"I honestly didn't mind the motel," Kay says, walking into the top-floor hotel room. "You know... apart from the rats and the mold. My room seemed okay."

It overlooks the Strip and is in an expensive, bustling part of the city. Nobody would be reckless enough to attack us here.

She turns in a slow circle, taking in the large bed, the silk sheets, the desk, and the tall, gleaming windows.

"This place is nice," she goes on. "I might have to use that desk later."

My savage mind activates as I study her curvy body obsessively, her ass begging me to grab her and make her moan just for me. She turns back to me, her eyebrows raised. That gorgeous flush has taken hold of her cheeks again.

"For writing," she goes on awkwardly, her hands clasped in front of her.

I take a second to work out what she's talking about. I'm too distracted by Randall, but mostly, it's her making it difficult to think. Every inch of her is designed for me.

*Mine.* She's not the girl I read bedtime stories to anymore. I've been trying to hold on to that connection, but I can't.

I'm panting, struggling to breathe. Did she think I would assume we'd use the desk to have sex? It's big enough for me to lay her down, strip her clothes off, stand beside it, and guide my dick to...

"Feel free to call room service for dinner," I tell her.

"We're not... eating together?"

"I'm tired," I reply.

I have to get out of here as quickly as I can. If I stay any longer, I won't be able to stop myself. In my mind, Ryan is

looking at me with that serious glint in his eyes. It's the look he's given me countless times when there's club business to attend to, when he has to be cold, effective, and, if needed, fierce. It's a look that says he'll do whatever's necessary.

I've got to do the same. Right now, what's necessary is keeping my distance from Kay.

"Oh, okay," she says after a long pause.

"Knock if you need me."

I push open the door to the adjoining room and close it behind me. In the room, I drop to the floor and do a hundred push-ups, give myself a brief rest, then do eighty more. I keep going until I can barely do ten, my arms and chest burning, my mind pulsing like a goddamn war signal.

I want to touch her so badly. Kiss her. Taste her. Own her.

I'll become a monster if Randall or anybody else tries to hurt her. I won't be able to control myself. I'll kill any bastard who ever dares to touch my Kay.

"*Your Kay?*" I imagine Ryan saying.

It must be the workout endorphins, my cloudy head. I can imagine him sitting on the edge of the bed vividly.

"*She's my sister. She doesn't belong to you. Jesus Christ, bro, you used to read her bedtime stories. You've known her since she was a toddler.*"

But she's not the same person.

"*She is. She's not a doppelganger.*"

I know that, but she doesn't seem like the same person.

"*Listen to yourself. You'll use any justification.*"

It's not like I'm some pervert creeping on a younger woman. I'm going to make an honest woman out of her. Marry her and have children with her. We're going to have a life together.

"*Over my dead body, Kai. Over. My. Dead. Body.*"

## CHAPTER SEVEN

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**K** ayla

At eleven fifty-seven p.m., I'm sitting at the desk, my notebook open and a pen in my hand.

Usually, Ryan and I would be at the spot right now, talking into the night, sharing stories about Dad. We'd talk about how he wriggled his eyebrows when I was young, making them dance and making me laugh like a crazy person. It would make Mom laugh, too, back before the bus crash, before the pain.

*Falling leaves have stopped their cascade,*

*And I am broken, without a path.*

*Without you, I am...*

I paw at my cheeks and slam the notebook shut. I don't even know what I'm trying to say, let alone *how* to say it. Too many thoughts of Dad lead to thoughts of Ryan and how we'd usually spend this anniversary together. He knew all this time and didn't even *defend* himself when I asked why he didn't tell me.

I've spent the evening in my room, doing nothing except eating a room-service dinner. Kai has kept to himself. I think I heard him working out a few hours ago. Other than that, he seems content to stay in there.

Oh, heck, here it comes. I'm annoyed at myself as the tears start to fall. It's like a trigger when the clock strikes midnight as if I'm reliving it all over again—the moment Dad collapsed and the realization hit that we would lose him, too.

I sit on the end of the bed and collapse into a pathetic heap of sobs. I always try to get myself under control when they come like this, wave upon wave of emotion, the grief twisting through me painfully.

Usually, on the anniversary, Ryan will hold me. Sometimes, he'll even shed a few tears of his own. Now, I'm alone. I keep crying. I need to get it together, and yet, I keep crying.

There's a knock at the door from the adjoining room.

"Kay?"

It's Kai, his voice low as if he's only getting involved reluctantly. I remember how he looked when he said, "*I'm tired,*" like he couldn't wait to get away from me quickly enough. He was supposedly tired and then spent the next couple of hours working out.

"Kay, I know you're awake."

I say nothing, desperately wanting him to come in here yet also for him to leave me alone. I want an impossible version of him who will hold me, kiss me, and take the pain away in other ways.

"*Kay.*"

"I'm fine," I snap when his tone gets urgent.

"Can I come in?"

"If you want."

He pushes the door open, wearing another tank, black this time. His arms look even bigger than usual, maybe from whatever workout he did, pumped up and tempting. Somehow, desire pierces the grief.

He walks to the bed, looks down as if he's going to sit next to me, then grabs the desk chair and turns it, sitting on that instead. He doesn't want to sit on the bed with me and give me

any wrong ideas. Or maybe it's because of Ryan. He's just being respectful.

"Are you okay?" he asks, his tone surprisingly gentle.

"I'm fine." I rub my cheeks. "I was just thinking about Dad, but yeah, I'm all good. You can go back to sleep."

"I wasn't sleeping."

"I thought you were tired."

He bites down and lets out a dark sigh. "I heard you crying."

"Sorry. I didn't realize I was being so loud."

I know I'm being argumentative as hell. I can't help it. I can't let myself get close to him when I know it can't go anywhere, ever.

He reaches over and touches my hand. Without the leather or clothes separating us, electricity sparks up my arm and throughout my body. It makes my heart beat faster, my soul throb, my world spin and spin and spin and...

He's leaning close. I can feel his breath on my face once we're at eye level, and he's staring at me hard. He's staring at me like he cares and wants me.

His hand tightens on mine. "We can talk about it if you want."

"I miss him, that's all," I whisper. "I miss how he'd always smile, no matter what happened. Even toward the end, he was always smiling."

"That sounds like Jacob," Kai says, smiling with a far-off look in his eyes.

"What are you thinking about? Tell me something about Dad."

"The first time I went to the boxing gym," Kai says, "I was thirteen. Your dad let me spar with him. He let me win. He let me beat the crap out of him to boost my confidence. You're right. He was smiling the whole time."

"He never stopped smiling."

Kai's hand is still on mine, holding tighter. He leans closer.

"He was a good man."

*We're just talking about my dad, nothing else.* I scream the words in my mind.

*This isn't intimate.*

We're not almost kissing, but he *still* gets closer.

"He was," I say, and then we're silent.

We keep staring into each other eyes as if we can't stop, as if something magical and extremely not okay is happening here.

"I don't want you to be in pain," he says huskily.

He's so close now that his warm breath tickles across my cheeks. I can smell the bodywash from where he must've showered after his workout. I can smell the leather clinging to him like it would survive a thousand showers: the oil and the bike metal.

"I feel better with you here," I whisper, forcing the words past my nerves, not hesitating.

"I wish I could fix this for you," he says, his voice getting deeper and more significant.

*And in this moment,*

*We exist forever.*

*Before the kiss,*

*Everything is perfect.*

*But after...*

The poetry composes itself in my head. There's no way to end it or know what happens if I'm not hallucinating and he's going to kiss me. If he crosses that line, I know I'll have to stop him. I'll have to remind him of Ryan, not that either of us should *need* reminding.

He touches me with his other hand. A pulse shimmers up my thigh, his palm warm against my knee through the fabric of my PJ bottoms. He's got this torn look on his face like he'd get when reading me a story for the fifth time when he wanted to tell me no but couldn't do it.

He should *definitely* say no now. Back away. Stop this before it gets out of hand.

Am I dreaming? Time moves in slow motion as he leans toward me, his mouth almost on mine, his eyes almost pained as they get bigger in my field of vision.

Soon, there's only his eyes, the brilliant, intense green.

"Kay," he says, almost desperately, as if begging me to make him stop.

"Kai," I whisper, begging, sure... but not for him to stop.

His hand smooths higher up my leg. His lips are almost... No, not almost. His lips are on mine, hot and addicting right away. The grief falls aside, and there's not even a flash of guilt, a surge of *I should think about Dad*.

There's nothing but his taste, the texture. He groans as our mouths open and our tongues connect as if he's as lost to this moment as I am. It's as though he can't stop, *couldn't* stop, not for all the money in the world.

His hand moves farther and farther up my leg. He pushes my thigh aside, opening my legs. I moan as tickling and teasing sensations stroke over my sex, my belly getting warm, and my heart beating so fast.

I can't think about anything else—not Dad, Ryan, the guilt, or the fallout. Just Kai. Just his deep, obsessed groan as he smooths his hand the rest of the way. I gasp, causing our teeth to click together, when he pushes down on my sex.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

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**K ai**

*“What are you doing, bro?”* I imagine Ryan saying.

Then I have to push that imagined voice down deep and stifle it. Starve it. His little sister tastes too damn good. Her kissing is nervous at first, but then she makes the hottest moaning noise, her hands tentatively clinging onto my shoulders.

I can feel the heat of her pussy through the light fabric of her PJs. Hot and tempting and already getting wet for me. I rub slowly at first as we keep kissing. Our tongues find each other compulsively, hungry for the contact, her moans pushing me on. She moans so sweetly as she takes breaks from the kissing, as if she can't get enough air to experience the pleasure fully.

My hand moves quicker when she squeezes onto my arms, digging her fingernails in. She's wordlessly telling me how good this feels for her.

*“Are you seriously going to cross that line?”* Ryan invades my mind again when I grab his little sister's PJ bottoms and start to take them off.

She whimpers, staring up at me, her lips red from the kissing. Her eyes are wide and shell-shocked. We stare at each other as though we're waiting for the other person to come to their senses. We both wait for something to break the spell, but nothing does. She leans back slightly when I pull on her pants, giving me a better vantage point.



“Not all the way,” she whispers, her flush getting deeper.

I kiss her again passionately. In between the flaring passion—my dick is aching so damn bad—I tell her, “You’re beautiful. Your body is perfect. You never have to be ashamed with me.”

Suddenly, I’m an inexperienced rider on a too-fast bike, speeding off when I should be in control. I shouldn’t use words like *never* with my woman, implying something long-term could happen here. Long-term would mean blowing up our lives.

I can’t stop. My balls are full, my cock is throbbing, and my tip is leaking so much precome my underwear is sticky with the need to claim her.

“Kai,” she whispers.

I get the message, pulling her pants down *just enough*.

I almost lose it when I see her pussy, her hole winking at me, her lips full of lust. Her clit looks needy as fuck. Her clit looks like it was made for me to lavish with attention, to obsess over.

“Perfect,” I growl, sliding my hand toward her sex.

She grabs my wrists and stares wide-eyed at me. She opens her mouth as if to tell me to stop, but then *she* leans forward. She brings her lips almost right to mine, then pauses as if she can’t be responsible for kissing me.

“*That makes her better than you,*” Ryan snaps in my head.

I push the voice down deep and ignore it, which is the last thing I should do. Instead, I kiss Kay again.

When I push my hand against her pussy, she whimpers through the kiss, a shaky, trembling series of breaths that almost have me exploding in my pants. I’m rock-fucking-solid for her. I can barely believe how hard I am. Every inch of my dick is hungry.

I rub her clit softly. She moans, leaning back. She can’t keep kissing when we do this. That’s the message.

“You’re going to come for me,” I snarl, rubbing a little faster now.

She twitches as I rub her needy nub, the adorable flush spreading from her cheeks down her neck, disappearing into her shirt. It makes me wonder if her nipples turn the same shade. Her pussy is so damn warm. I can't resist moving my hand down toward her entrance, circling it with my finger.

"Not that," she whispers. "Just...this... This isn't so..."

*Bad*, I mentally fill in, and then I get the point. She thinks if I don't go inside her and her pants don't come off, somehow, it makes this okay.

*"It's better than sex, at least,"* imaginary Ryan helpfully comments.

I groan, returning to her clit and rubbing fiercely. Rubbing her so she can feel the lust burning up in me, growling and thrumming like an engine. My dick pushes against my pants, my tip feeling so big and hard. The precome won't stop. It's like some primal part of me knows my length needs to be slick to fit inside my woman, to push all the way in, explode, and claim her.

Impregnate her. My best friend's sister. *Fuck*.

Her moans get breathy, her eyes opening and closing quickly as if she's on the edge. Her hips move in time with my hand. She's riding the pleasure instinctively, her young, excited instincts guiding her.

"Come for me," I growl.

*For me...* That's the important part.

"Yeah, yeah," she moans.

I rub the heel of my palm against her clit, applying more pressure, owning her pussy. She gasps, and her hips move even quicker. That's when I know there's no turning back. When her pussy gets all creamy for me, and her moans turn so breathy she's hardly making any noise anymore, I know this is the end.

My dick almost erupts with my come, which would be a mistake. Every drop belongs inside of her. I can't help but slide down to her entrance once the orgasm ends, feeling her

wetness. Her hole is *soaked*. She's drenched for me. Ready for me to spread her sappy lips and push deep, the tip of my cock going all the way inside of her, joining us. Bringing us as close as two people can get.

"I need your pussy," I snarl, standing up and reaching for my belt.

"No, Kai."

It's difficult to stop my hand from tearing off my belt. I almost do it anyway, listening to the savage instincts inside. Ryan's voice is so quiet now, distant, and easy to ignore.

"I need you," I snap. "Get your tits out. Now."

"We can't have sex."

"Now, Kay."

She sits up, her hands shaking as she reaches for her shirt. She's got a dreamy look in her eyes as she pulls her shirt over her head and then unclips her bra.

Oh. My. God. I'm almost howling with lust. I was right about her flush. It's spread down her neck, over her breasts, turning her creamy body a sweet shade of red.

"Grab my dick."

"Kai..."

"Now," I nearly roar. "I need you. Badly."

That's an understatement. I feel like I'll die if I don't go the rest of the way with her. She reaches out and wraps her hand around my shaft.

"You're so big," she whispers, "and hard."

"Hard for you. Only for you. Fuck, that feels..."

"Like this?" she moans, stroking her hand up and down my length, spreading precome all over my dick.

I stare down at her breasts, jiggling in time with the movement, so full, so curvy, so perfect. My shaft is on fire as she moves her hand faster. She looks up at me with wide eyes. They're still red from when she was crying before. I must be

an animal. Even the sight of her red eyes doesn't stop me. Nothing can, not when she starts moving her hand *even* faster.

"Is that good?" she asks nervously.

"Y-y-yeah," I manage to say.

It's not just the physical feeling. It's the *fact* of what we're doing, the fact this is Kay, the fact she belongs to me.

This is the first step to...

"Argh," I grunt when the seed rushes up my shaft.

My come explodes all over her breasts, showering her big, juicy tits and sliding down toward her nipples. She stares at me wide-eyed and excitable as hell with a pout on her lips. Her eyes narrow, though, concern invading the moment, poisoning it. She looks down at her chest as if surprised to find my seed there.

*Fuck.* Already, I'm getting hard again as I watch her tits gleam with my release. I almost tell her to rub her breasts and make them even shinier, but I have to use this chance while I can, still conscious and lucid enough to think clearly. Or *nearly* clear, anyway, close enough to penetrate the fog of my desire. For a little while. A few precious seconds.

Then any sense of clarity vanishes when *she* rubs the release over her tits. She doesn't do it on purpose. I think she's trying to clean it off, but I can't take it. My cock is already rock-solid again.

She makes the sexiest moaning noise as I reach down and start stroking my hard dick. Staring up at me, she whispers, "Again?"

My head is thumping. This is so bad and wrong, but I don't let myself think about that: just her body, her curviness, her breasts with her excited, needy nipples.

"I need to fuck your tits," I growl. "Push them together."

"Like... this?" she asks, still game and ready. When she pushes her breasts together, I know I won't be able to stop. Already, my shaft is full of seed as if my body will keep

supplying it until I explode in the only place that matters—her perfect young slit.

I groan, then guide my manhood between her breasts. I start pumping back and forth, slick with my previous release, my hands on her shoulders.

“Oh, fuck,” I growl when she begins to bounce with my movements.

“Yeah?” she moans, guiding her tits in time with my pumping.

“Keep... doing... that...”

I can hardly speak. It’s like she’s hypnotizing me with her fertile body. Her breasts sway with the movements. Her eyes are just as sexy as her body. She’s looking up at me with a gorgeous mixture of surprise and captivation. The more I snarl and moan, the more intently she stares up.

“Beg me to come,” I growl. “B-b-b...”

Words finally fail me. My woman shifts her big, juicy tits up and down even quicker. She has no clue how much power she has over me right now. I’m completely lost, entirely *hers*.

“Come for me,” she moans. “Again, Kai. Come for me again. Please, Kai. *Please*.”

I nod urgently. My neck muscles are straining, shutting down my ability to speak. I pump my hips one final time, and then it all erupts, spattering her upper chest and sliding down over her tits. I’m an animal, I realize with stunning clarity in the final few moments.

Ryan flashes across my mind as more and more seed rushes up my shaft, erupting over her plump, curvy tits. I’m a bad man. There’s no way around it. I’m a beast for doing this *twice* and for what I must do now—end this.

It’s my only choice. It makes me a real piece of dirt, a lowlife, using my woman *twice* and then closing myself down emotionally, but there’s no way around it. The alternative is to tell her the truth. Tell her how much she means to me. Tell her she’s *mine*.

“I...”

I trail off, almost telling her, *I want you again. I want you forever. I'm falling in love with you*, but I have to say something else, something cruel. I have to be cold. I have to be the man I was before I saw my Kay all grown up.

“We can't do this again,” I growl, pulling my pants up roughly. “We have to pretend it never happened. Do you understand me, Kay?”

She blinks, her eyes glistening. She looks like she could break down in tears at any moment. Guilt tries to coil around me, to convince me I'm the world's biggest monster. Somehow, I manage to turn away. Maybe it has something to do with Ryan staring at me in my thoughts, his eyes vicious. He's never looked at me like that in real life. It's the severe, murderous expression he aims at his enemies.

“You're right,” Kay says bitterly, the words directed at my back as I stride for the door that adjoins our rooms. I almost turn and roar at her, “*No, I'm not fucking right. I'm dead wrong. We belong together, and we always will.*”

Instead, I throw the door open, rush into my room, and slam the door behind me. I try not to let myself think about what we just did, but I can't stop reliving it and obsessing over it. Her pussy was so...

“*That's my sister you're thinking about,*” Ryan murmurs in my thoughts.

I sit on the bed, groaning, burying my face in my hands. What the hell have I done? I told Kay we need to forget it happened, but I don't think I can. I'll never be able to forget her.

## CHAPTER NINE

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**K** ayla

*Staring at the ceiling,*

*Wondering if it's real.*

*This Kai Baxter feeling,*

*My heart, he's going to steal.*

I shake my head, scratching out the last line with my pen. He's not *going* to steal it. He already has. I'm at my desk, biting my lip, unable to sleep after what happened, after his hands were on me and his huge, hard dick was in my hand. It was unbelievable how big he was. Then, when I thought he was done, he took me again. It was so intimate, his manhood between my breasts, the absolute *obsession* in his eyes.

I kept thinking I would jolt awake to realize it had all been some sick dream—not sick because I didn't like it. I loved it. It made my body tingle and my head cloudy and warm. Only sick because I know what Ryan would say. I know how much he'd hate us.

With a sigh, I push away from my desk, walk quietly to the window, and look down at the Strip. The lights burst up toward me, twinkling, shining. There's so much light. It's just as difficult to believe as *the other thing*, as the lust that burned between us. Now, we have to forget. That's what he said. Pretend it never happened. How am I supposed to do that?

My heart pounds as I sneak over to the adjoining door and put my ear against it like when I eavesdropped on Kai and Ryan. I want to hear him on the other side of the door. Maybe he's listening for me, too. Maybe he *misses* me, but there are no sounds, not even his husky breathing.

Why did he do it? I always wondered if he could want me one day when I was ready. I always dreamed Kai would find me attractive, but I wasn't prepared for the unbridled passion. His hunger makes his body tense and swollen with muscle, his cock so massive, so rock-freaking-hard. It was so big my hand didn't even wrap around it.

My core tingles as I think about taking him, all of him. Nerves try to tell me it will be impossible, but he's my man. I'm up to the challenge. I can give him what he wants. I know I can. At least, I *hope* I can, but none of that matters. If Ryan...

Moving away from the door, I quietly get dressed. I can't stay in this room any longer. It's been several hours since the steaminess between Kai and me. I can't sit here and pretend it doesn't mean anything. I can't pretend that he didn't rework my entire world the moment he kissed me.

I can still taste his lips, still feel the moment the orgasm expanded inside of me, his finger rubbing my clit, the aching, the sweet release. My body's pulsing just at the thought of it, trying to make me do it again.

After getting dressed, I leave the hotel room and head to the elevator. My belly feels the drop of the elevator way more than it should like I'm on some fairground ride. It's the aftershocks of me and Kai, the hunger that won't quit.

He looked so *savage* when I had him in my hand. With each stroke, he became more of a Titan, veins pressing against his neck, his dark hair falling wildly across his forehead.

I saw how he looked at me when he exploded all over my breasts. I could tell he wanted more, even though he just came. If it weren't for my surname, we'd be doing more steamy stuff immediately.



Maybe he'd take it *all* the way, lie me on my back, and not care about the stuff he probably should care about. He likes my inexperience and the fact I probably won't be able to compete with his other women.

That phrase—*other women*—almost makes me punch the elevator walls. There can be no other women ever—just me.

The hotel is right on the Strip. The second I walk through the automatic doors, the night air washes over me, my vision adjusting to the ubiquitous lights of the Strip.

I walk through the busy crowds with no destination in mind. I didn't bring any cash, so I just wander, getting lost in the crowd and listening to snippets of conversations. One man is complaining about how much he lost on the blackjack table. A lady rants about her partner going to a strip club. Several groups laugh as an Elvis impersonator falls and springs back up. *Thank you very much.*

As I'm watching Elvis, a man walks up beside me. He's wearing a vest, probably to display his muscular arms. They're a little *too* freakishly muscular, in my opinion, but it's not my place to judge. Veins bulge all over his skin. His blond hair is pulled back in a tight ponytail.

"Enjoying the show?" he says, turning to me.

"Uh, yeah," I reply, caught a little off guard.

"Nobody beats the King, do they?" He grins. "The name's Randall."

"I'm... Samantha."

Why did I do that? I've never given a fake name before.

There's something about the man's eyes. My skin crawls as he looks me up and down. Maybe it's his swollen, puffy face combined with the beady eyes, but that's cruel. Plenty of people have judged *me* for my physical appearance before. It's not fair to do the same.

He's probably just a guy taking a trip alone, wanting some conversation. A crazy part of me whispers, *Flirt with him. Make Kai jealous*, but A, Kai isn't here, and B, I can't flirt

with anybody other than my man, my crush. Even if he's not *my* anything—he made that clear earlier—I can't fight the feelings.

"Traveling alone, *Samantha*?" he says after a pause, grinning widely like he knows a secret.

"Um, no," I tell him, glad we're surrounded by people.

"Pretty girl like you... surprised you're alone."

I take a small step back. His tone has become weird, low, and suggestive somehow.

"Uh, thanks," I murmur, the only thing I can think of to say. "I have to go. Sorry."

I'm not sure why I'm apologizing. A small part of me wonders if I'm overreacting. Maybe he's just trying to be nice, but there's something strange about how he stares, that grin spreading wider and wider across his face.

I stride through the crowd, trying to forget the interaction. Maybe I *was* overreacting. As I walk back toward the hotel, I look over my shoulder. The man is following me, clearly visible through the crowd since he's several feet taller than the average person. I move quicker, breathing fast. I turn a corner, then another one.

*If you ever feel in danger, Ryan told me once, get out of the situation as fast as possible. You can always feel silly about it afterward.*

I cling to that advice, repeating it to myself as I turn another corner, lights blinking around me. Am I lost? I thought the hotel was going to be right there.

"Samantha," the man calls from behind me.

I turn to find him standing at the end of the street. Several people have also turned at his yelling voice.

"Samantha, come on. Don't play games with me."

"Leave me alone!" I snap, then turn and run.

That's right. *Run*. Whatever this creep wants, I'm not interested, and I don't give a damn about feeling stupid or

paranoid. He's *definitely* following me.

Feeling like I'm in some horror flick, I keep running, but I can't run anymore.

I collide with somebody. They're solid muscle all the way through, and their arm is around me, squeezing, trapping. This is bad.

That's what my unhelpful mind throws up at a moment like this. *This is bad*, and now, when I should fight and scream, paralysis flows through me, terror freezing. It's ridiculous. I should *do* something. Finally, I scream, dart my hand out, and hit him in the chin.

## CHAPTER TEN

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**K ai**

Her hands fly up to cover her mouth, killing the scream. Those wild, innocent eyes get beautifully wide as she realizes she's just whacked me on the chin.

It was a decent strike. It's the sort of punch that makes me think she'll put up a fight if she ever needs to defend our kids, but it wouldn't have stopped me or any man intent on doing violence. Maybe I'll teach her when our children are young or before she gets pregnant—before I *make* her pregnant.

“Jesus, Kai, I'm sorry.”

I go for a cocky smirk, though my heart is thudding so hard.

“I've been looking for you,” I growl. “Why were you running?”

All around us, lights blink, twinkle, and blind. It's all annoying, honestly, but the number of people is a good thing. Nobody will start a gunfight here unless they want the full weight of the Feds crushing them into the dirt.

“There was a man...” She gestures down the street, her chest rising and falling, still in her denim overalls. It's so difficult not to kiss her again. “I think he was following me.”

My blood ices. “Describe him.”

She describes the man who called himself Randall, with swollen muscles and tall.

“I’m not making it up,” she says, staring at me with that sassy pout.

“Calm down, firecracker. I never said you were.”

“The last way to make somebody calm down is to tell them to calm down.”

“I’m taking you back to the room.”

I expect her to pull away when I grab her arm. Instead, she moves closer to me. It’s so damn hard not to wrap my arm around her shoulder, hold her close, and kiss her head to let her know everything will be okay.

“You shouldn’t have left without telling me,” I say, squeezing her arm.

She’s looking through the crowds, scanning faces. “Why not?”

“Because it’s my job to look after you. Ryan would never forgive me—”

“Yeah, yeah.”

She doesn’t want to hear about Ryan. I can tell, and I can’t blame her. She’d rather pretend Ryan doesn’t exist because then we don’t have to think about what we did. Her soaked pussy creaming for me, her body telling me she’s ready.

No Kai, focus. Randall, you fuck, you monster. Did you try to hurt my woman? I’ll break your nose ten goddamn times for even thinking about it. If you ever touched her—a single hair or *moment* of contact—I’d fill your skull with lead. I’d bury you. Nobody would ever find you. She’s my girl, my Kay, the future mother to my children.

“Kai, are you good?”

I’ve stopped, chest heaving. My hold on her arm is tighter than it should be. Somebody wanted to take my woman and hurt her. I can hardly breathe. I’m also scanning the crowd, looking for him, ready to charge and dismantle. Ready to kill.

“You don’t go anywhere without telling me first,” I snap. “I don’t care if I have to kidnap you to keep you safe.”

“Why? Are we in danger?”

I should tell her the truth, but that would mean, ha, goddamn, what a joke reality is. That would mean betraying Ryan, but I've already done that.

"You can never be too careful."

I guide her through the crowd, my shoulders wide, almost praying for Randall to reappear and make some move.

I squeeze my hand on her arm as we walk through the crowd, searching for any sign of danger. My senses aren't just alert for Randall but for anybody who would make a move on my woman. The idea of somebody hurting her has me in full war mode. If Randall appeared now... Screw the law. Screw the blowback on the club that would happen if a Titan got in trouble away from home. Screw it all. I'd hammer his face until it's a bloody, bony mess.

"Kai," my woman says from beside me. "You're hurting my arm."

With an effort, I release my hold just a little, just enough so she can tell I'm not trying to hurt her. It's the last thing I ever want to do. We pause on a busy street corner. My height allows me to look back and forth, scanning everybody, waiting, almost *praying* for somebody to try something.

"It's okay," she says, smoothing her hand up my arm and touching my shoulder.

I turn and look down at my Kay. It's so tempting to kiss her right here, to take things further like I did before, but I can't let myself go there again. Her eyes are still red from crying, and I used her perfect curvy body *twice*. I fucked her sweet tits. I...

No, stop it. Jesus. I try to summon Ryan's voice. "*You made a mistake. Bury it. Move on, bro.*"

"It's not okay," I say after a pause. "I'm supposed to protect you."

"Why?" She licks her lips, looking so captivating I almost snap again. "Because Ryan told you to?"

"Partly," I grunt.

"What's the other part, then?"

“Because...” *The second I saw you, I knew you were special. When I came home, I never expected the shy, dorky girl to have turned into the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen. Because you belong to me, that’s why.* “It’s the right thing to do.”

She sighs, letting her head drop. It’s like she wanted me to say much more and reveal all this intense possession inside me. Maybe she can see it on some level. It’s just that when I look at her, I think I can see glimpses of intense hunger—the same need growling in me like a bike with a bad attitude.

Taking her hand, I keep walking. “You’re scaring people,” she says after a minute or two.

“Yeah?” I grunt. “How’s that?”

“The way you walk and the look in your eyes. People scurry out of your way. It’s like you’re spoiling for a fight.”

“Maybe I am,” I growl. “Maybe I’m pissed.”

“Because I left without telling you?”

“Maybe,” I snap.

“Because you’re the boss of me?”

I glance at her. She’s got a sassy arch to her eyebrows, a challenge in her expression. I wonder if she knows how badly the word *boss* makes me want to repeat the steaminess. She’s right. I am her boss. I own her. She’s mine. She just doesn’t know it yet.

Hell, I was meant to be cold and in control. This is getting harder every goddamn second.

“What if I said I was?” I snap.

She keeps her feet planted and folds her arms, so sassy it’s like she wants me to touch her again. It’s as if she knows how insane she makes me. I’m like a bike with a broken throttle, stuttering and jolting around as I try to hold myself back. But when I finally let go, I’m aching just looking at her.

“I don’t care if I’m scaring anyone,” I growl, taking her arm.

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“You don’t have to do this,” she murmurs from the bed.

I’m lying on the floor, my arm tucked under my head, staring at the ceiling and listening for any noises in the hallway. There are so many ugly thoughts in my head, whispers of violence, hints at the terrible things that could happen to her.

“I’m doing it,” I tell her.

“No need for the asshat tone, either.”

I smirk. “Asshat?”

“Yes, you, with your tone.”

“My tone makes me sound like I’m wearing an ass like a hat, does it?”

“Stop being a smartass.”

“Never known how an ass could be smart,” I tell her.

“Ha, ha, ha,” she mutters with adorable sarcasm.

“Try to get some sleep. We’ll be riding again soon.”

“To deliver the mysterious package,” she says softly.

My stomach tightens. She’s been in the life long enough not to ask, though she knows that Ryan and I have never been into that druggy crap. It could be a firearm to another MC involved in a war, a hard drive containing cryptocurrency, or compromising videos to blackmail those who deserve it—stuff like that.

It’s none of those things. It’s another sign of what a good brother Ryan is, and here I am, fighting the urge to climb into bed with his kid sister, resisting the urge to touch her all over again.

“Are you sure you’re comfortable down there?”

“I’m not leaving you alone,” I tell her, “and my mattress won’t fit through the door.”

“Uh, okay.”



The pause when she says *uh* makes me wonder if she will suggest something. Maybe she's thinking of inviting me up there with her. Perhaps she wants to taste me again, just as badly as I want her.

We're silent for a while. Part of me hopes she's sleeping. I know I won't be able to. Not until I know she's safe. The hotel has security, but that can be circumvented—a bribe, a contact within the hotel, or a good alibi. If anybody kicks this door down, I'll have my gun in my hand in a couple of seconds. I'll kill...

She huffs and sighs. She's not asleep.

"Settle down."

She huffs again. "I can't sleep."

"Why? What are you thinking about?"

"Dad," she says softly. "And Ryan. And that man from earlier. And a poem I've been trying to write. And..."

I wait.

"That's the part where you ask me *what*, Kai," she says.

I smile. I can't help myself. I'm the one who told her we had to forget what we did, but with each comment, she draws me in. She makes me want to hold her, laugh with her, *be* with her.

"Isn't that enough?" I laugh. "I can barely fit one thought in my head at a time, let alone all that."

Her laugh is so sweet. It feels like I earned it, and it matters. Everything she gives me matters. A kiss, a laugh, her youthful body, her smile, her womb, her future.

"I was thinking about the thing we shouldn't have done," she whispers.

I sit up and lean against the wall. My neck aches from the earlier position, anyway. She sits up in bed, too, her arms wrapped around her knees, her outline visible in the darkness. Her features are shadowed. Somehow, from the tightness in her body, I feel her pain.

"I know you're right," she whispers. "It was wrong."

I swallow. “It was.”

“But...”

“I want to do it again,” I growl.

She shudders and nods.

I’m on my feet before I let myself think. Sitting on the bed, I draw her into my arms. She collapses against me almost desperately, like she’s been waiting far longer than a few hours for this moment. I kiss her on the lips, giving myself the pleasure of tasting her.

Then she pushes her hands against my chest, gasping, and leans back.

“Can you just hold me?” she says, with that same sense of desperation.

“I shouldn’t...”

“I know.”

We stay silent for a while. Then, without discussing it, I lie on the bed, and she rolls over. She wriggles against me, her back against my chest, my rock-hard dick against her ass. I can’t help that part. My dick isn’t going to be soft when I’m pressed against my woman. Her hormones are talking to me. Her body is so, so ready. I need to distract us.

“What’s your favorite memory of your dad?” I ask.

Somehow, I’m sure I feel her smile. She clutches my hand. “I liked when he’d sit on the porch and clean his pocket watch. You remember the one, right?”

I laugh with the taste of Kay’s lips on my mouth. “Yes.”

“What’s funny?”

“Nothing.”

She goes on after a pause. “Okay, well, he’d spend hours cleaning it. Sometimes, I miss that noise so badly. When I was little, I always heard it when I sat on his lap or hugged him. That ticking noise. He told me to think of it as his heartbeat, but I forgot about that at some point.”

I kiss the back of her head and smell her hair. “He was a good man.”

As I hold her, listening for threats, I know I won’t be able to end this. Ryan might hate me, but this isn’t about hate. It’s about something else.

Closing my eyes, I see Kay in a wedding dress, elegant and full-figured. Her cheeks are flushed with pure happiness, and her belly may be already a little swollen. She’s walking toward me, smiling wider, telling me it’s not a dream. It’s happening. We’re together forever, and nothing can ever break us apart.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

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### K ayla

Kai is acting shifty.

We're sitting on a picnic bench near a quiet lake in Utah. The surroundings are patchy, with a few collections of trees here and there, like a giant hand sprinkled them about. Kai sits up, the sun gleaming down, his black hair glistening, and his arms huge and hot as hell in his shirt.

We haven't talked about last night—the kissing, the steaminess, any of it. This morning, it was like it never happened, except we're touching each other much more. Just little moments, like I'll brush my hand against his, or he'll casually take my hips to slide past me, and neither of us acts like it's weird. It's like we're a couple already.

“Are you okay?” I ask.

“Hmm,” he says, nodding as he reaches for his sandwich.

“This is a nice place,” I mutter, looking around at the deserted landscape. “A little out of the way, though. There were five other lakes we could've gone to.”

“Maybe I wanted the privacy.”

“Don't want to be seen with me, huh?”

He reaches over and touches my face. This is the casual intimacy I was talking about. His palm is rough, but I like the feeling, especially the warmth tickling over my cheeks.

“If it wasn’t for...” I get it. *Ryan*. “I wouldn’t care,” he goes on.

I touch his hand. “Thanks.”

“You’re a beautiful woman, Kay. You’re so cute, too.”

My smile gets even wider. He’s flooding me with so many wonderful emotions that it almost hurts, like I’m over capacity. I never knew it was possible to feel this wanted.

“Cute?”

He grins. “Are you fishing for compliments?”

When he moves like he’s going to take his hand away and stop touching my cheek, I press my hand down on his, keeping him there. “Maybe I am. So what?”

His grin gets even wider. It’s nothing like the smiles he threw my way as a kid. I realize I was never much to him, just Ryan’s little sister, nothing else. He’d smile at me like... well, I was a child. Unimportant to him.

Now, he’s obsessed. Or maybe that’s me letting my desires gallop around way too enthusiastically. It *seems* that way when his eyes lock on me, drink me in, and his hand somehow gets warmer.

“Everything you do is cute,” he says. “Your shy smile and how your eyes get all wide and shocked. Your pout. When your cheeks get flushed. Everything, Kay.”

He trembles, then snatches his hand away. I wonder if it’s because he’s thinking about kissing me again. We haven’t done it yet today.

Natasha and I used to talk about dating. Growing up, she had a few boyfriends, and we’d discuss ways to keep them interested. Or signs they weren’t worth keeping around. Usual chat that never really applied to me because I was too crush-crazy. Nobody ever compared with Kai, but I can’t flirt with Kai. I can’t *try* to interest him because that would mean going out of my way to hurt Ryan. To make everything we’ve done even worse.

“It’s hard, isn’t it?” he says, watching me closely.

“What is?” I reply, making my tone all innocent.

He smirks, then nods. “Okay, Kay.”

We eat our sandwiches for a few minutes, making eye contact but not saying anything. He seems to think he’s got me all figured out. I’m waiting for him to speak first. Maybe that’s immature, but okay. Anyway, I lose.

“What’s hard, Kai?”

He grins. “I thought you were giving me the silent treatment for a while.”

“Were you devastated?”

He chuckles. It’s such a good feeling getting my man to laugh. It’s the sort of thing I never dreamed would happen back when this was just a crush.

“It’s hard...”

He pauses, some of the lightness leaving his expression.

*Darkness, falling...*

*And now he’s all grim.*

*Ready to end this,*

*Before it can...*

But it’s already begun. It’s happening. One day, we could look back on this as a seminal moment in our relationship, a core memory: he and I, the lake, and the light breeze disturbing the dusty landscape.

“Being here with you,” he says, “with nobody around.”

“What’s hard about that?”

He finishes his sandwich, then sighs. “You know why it’s hard. Don’t make me say it. If you do, I won’t be able to control myself. If I start talking about kissing you again, slipping my hand down your curvy body, grabbing those thick, gorgeous hips... If I talk about grabbing your ass and *claiming* it...”

“Claiming it?” I whisper, squeezing my legs together under the table.

Lust can't always feel like this, surely. My body is suddenly a prison to him. I'm aching just thinking about him doing it, core pulsing, clit feeling all weird and warm and ready. There's so much sensation all at once.

"You heard me," he growls, shaking all over.

"What does that mean?"

"You're playing with fire here. If you don't stop, I'll do more than claim that thick ass of yours."

"What..."

He leans forward, his shoulders like two boulders as he tenses. Veins push against his skin. It's not freaky and OTT like the guy who followed me, but more like casual evidence of his strength.

His eyes blaze. "I'll spank that ass if you keep going, Kay."

A shiver runs through me. *Spank* me? I've never even thought about getting spanked before, but now that he mentions it, a strange thrill touches me.

"Have you been spanked before?" he snaps as if the thought angers him.

As twisted as it may be, I *want* him to get angry if he thinks about me with somebody else.

"No," I whisper.

There's a *lot* I haven't done before, but I don't need to tell him that. Yet.

"Unless you want this to be your first time, we better change the subject."

"What? You don't want to talk about claiming my ass?"

He's right. I was playing with fire. He erupts from the chair and walks around the bench. He's shaking all over. His cock is so big and hard I can see the thick outline through his denim pants, like a taut muscle.

"Up, now," he growls, looking to the road, making sure we're alone.

“Kai...”

“Now, you naughty girl. I warned you.”

Oh, God, this is doing things to me I never imagined. When he calls me *naughty girl*, my clit gets all tight. My hole gets wet. I do what he says, climbing to my feet.

His eyes go wide, just like he says *mine* do. He’s shuddering like he can’t believe what’s happening. We both know it’s wrong, but when he softly takes my shoulders, spins me into position, and gently pushes so that I’m leaning over, any chance at fighting this dies. He steps up behind me, raising his hand.

“Your ass, your body. Fuck. My dick would look so perfect slipping between those big juicy cheeks into your young, tight pussy.”

“Oh, Kai,” I whisper, hardly able to form words.

“You have to tell me to do it,” he snarls as if he wants half the blame to be mine. “Tell me to spank your ass. Beg me, Kay.”

“Kai...”

“Beg. Me.”

“S-spank me,” I whimper. “Spank my ass.”

He brings his hand down on my ass. I’m wearing jeans, and he doesn’t hit me hard enough to hurt, but the *fact* of it has me shaking. My pussy is so hot and clammy. My underwear is getting sticky.

“Your ass is shaking for me,” he groans, then spanks me again.

I glance over my shoulder, looking at how he stares at *me*.

Grabbing my hips, he grinds his groin against my ass, shifting back and forth. “Feel how badly I need you. I could do it here, tear down those jeans, slide my dick into your tight hole. I’d fuck you hard, own your young body. I’d fucking *slam* my dick into you. I’d fucking spank your naked ass as I fucked you until you creamed down my cock. Until I knew you’d finished so I could fuck you even harder, drill into you so you’ll never have to wonder who owns your perfect body.”



I'm moaning, fixated on his words, as he pushes his dick up and down against my pussy. I shouldn't be able to feel much with all this denim between us, but the significance of it...

His cell phone rings. It's a heavy metal song I don't recognize. Right away, Kai steps away from me.

"What's wrong? Who is it?"

Kai *glares* at me as if it's my fault. I didn't have to ask who was calling. I understand now without having to wonder. It's Ryan. It must be a personal ringtone. For whatever reason, Kai wants to know when Ryan calls him. Kai almost runs to his bike and grabs his phone from his leather jacket, which is draped over it.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

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**K ai**

I walk away from the bike because I don't want Kay to overhear this. Being close to her feels wrong when I was so intent on claiming her—I lost control—while talking with her big brother, my best friend.

“Kai?”

“Is everything all right?” I say, my voice urgent.

“Whoa, yeah. You good? You sound amped, man.”

“I'm fine,” I say gruffly. “Just worried about you. I'm a Titan, aren't I?”

“Nobody would ever doubt that,” Ryan says, sounding confused.

I need to pump the brakes. I'm acting way too weird. It's so damn hard to go from almost dominating my woman one second, fucking her from behind so her ass shakes for me, to trying to be normal the next.

“Is everything going okay?” I ask.

“A few incidents. Nothing major.”

“I should be there.”

“This is more important,” Ryan says. “*Kay* is more important. How is she dealing with things? Is she pissed at me about the argument?”

“I’m not sure,” I reply, not wanting to talk about Kay. Then I’ll have to lie.

“I hope things aren’t too awkward,” he goes on. “I know it’s like the old days, lumbering you with baby sis. If she’s anything like she was then, she probably likes the attention.”

I grit my teeth. I refuse to turn, glance over, and see the woman whose ass I spanked. The woman I’m falling for hard. If it weren’t for Ryan, I’d start a life with her now, without looking back. Ride off into the sunset if that’s what she wanted. Maybe it will come to that. I hope it doesn’t.

“She used to love those bedtime stories,” he says, reminiscing.

“Yeah, she did.”

“I hope she’s not too mad at me. I didn’t want to lie, but what choice did I have?”

“She’s better off away from home. That’s what you said.”

Ryan sighs. I can imagine him just as he was when we were teenagers, with his skinny arms and mop of hair. He had that glint in his eyes like he was ready to take on the world. I remember when one idiot called Kay *fat*. It’s strange, but I forgot about that until now.

“Are you there? Kai?”

“Yeah, I’m here.”

“I said, *Funny how fast time goes*. What were you thinking about?”

“Is that why you called?”

“I was just checking in. Stop being so damn prickly.”

I almost groan, running a hand through my hair. He’s right. It’s not his fault that I only want to be with his sister... again. But go all the way this time, strip down her jeans, and reveal the round, creamy globes of her ass.

*Dammit*, I’m a monster more than a Titan. This is proof of my mind and how it won’t ever stop.

“So?” he says.

“The time that man called Kayla fat. Do you remember? We were at the club, and the drunk idiot heckled over. You were fifteen, and he was twice your size. He said...”

“*She’s going to grow up to be a tub of lard.* Yeah, I remember.”

“We all watched you kick that guy’s ass.”

“He was drunk.”

“Yeah, Ryan, but he was still twice your size.”

“That’s what big brothers do,” he says. “After, Dad gave me a big old bear hug. He had never done that before. He was so proud of me. Some people would say that’s messed up, being encouraged to fight, but when it comes to family, sometimes, it’s the only way.”

“Amen to that,” I say, thinking of my future children with Kay.

“Anyway, if you’re good, I’ll leave you to it.”

“If you need me home, you give the word.”

“There’s no one else I trust with this,” he replies. “It’s only you. You’re my brother as much as my friend.”

*No, I almost say. I’m not your goddamn brother. That would make Kay my sister.*

But I can’t say something as deranged as that.

“I...” He hesitates. “I care about you.”

“Are you sure you’re good?” I ask. “If you need me to come home—”

“Kay can’t be here. You know that.”

“Then stop talking like something bad’s going to happen,” I tell him. “I’ll see you in a few days, but for the record...” I swallow, feeling like a traitor, an *asshat*. “I care about you too, brother.”

We hang up, and I know I’ll never be able to forgive myself. Not that it makes any difference to what I’ve done. Feelings don’t erase actions. No amount of crying, whining, or anything else will fix what I’ve done—what I still *want* to do.

Hell, if I lose control again, I still might do it. I won't be able to resist the urge. I have to try, at least, not to snap, not spank her, or forget who I'm supposed to be.

Back at the bike, I find Kayla holding the package. She's already reached inside and taken it out, and now she stares, her eyes bloodshot, tears glistening. She looks so devastated that my instinct is to find whoever's responsible and seriously hurt them. Nobody gets to make my woman look like that. Ever.

In her other hand, she's holding her father's pocket watch.

"What the hell is this?" she whispers, dropping the brown paper bag.

It almost blows away in the wind, but then she steps on it, leans down, and picks it up. Even now, she doesn't want to litter and spoil this quiet, deserted place. She's just so damn perfect.

"Kai?" she snaps.

"It's your dad's—"

"I mean, why?" she almost yells. "Is this the package? *Don't* get mad at me for snooping, okay? I just... I don't know. I panicked from the guilt and all that crap. I just wanted to know if we could turn back or how important this trip really was. The stuff about Dad... Is it enough to justify what we're doing? Okay, so he lied, he lied, and..."

She starts crying, breaking down, but when I move toward her, she raises her hands and shakes her head. She doesn't want me anywhere near her. I know why. I know it's the same reason gnawing through me, the guilt and the pain of what we've done, of what I want to keep doing.

"Why *this*?"

"I promised Ryan I wouldn't tell you."

"You *have* to," she yells. "This was Dad's. It's an heirloom."

I groan, squeezing my cell phone tightly and making a fist. There's only so much lying I can do. I'm sorry, Ryan, for everything.

“Ryan was able to get a good trade for a different item. That watch sells at around a third of the price of the item he’s trading it for, but the buyer is so keen on getting *this* exact watch that he’s willing to do it. Ryan would be a fool to pass it up.”

This makes it worse. Her cheeks are soaked with tears now.

“He’s *selling* it because it’s a good *deal*? What’s he getting? A new bike? What, Kai?”

“A first edition of Poems by Emily Dickinson. I think that’s her name. It’s for you. He said...” This next part hurts me. “He wanted to give you something as a sign to start anew, the next chapter in your life. You can keep the book. Sell it. Whatever you want. He said he wanted some light to come from the darkness of your dad’s death.”

“He said that? Really?”

“Word for word.”

She slowly puts the pocket watch on the bike seat, sealed in its wrapping. Her hands tremble as she brushes her hair down and then looks at me for a long time. It’s like she’s trying to kill the part of herself that wants me.

“You were right before,” she says after a long pause, her expression changed now, distant. “We need to pretend this never happened. Let’s go home. It’ll be easier like that. I’ll tell Ryan I forgive him for the fight. Hell, it’s not like I can be angry with him now.”

I shake my head. “I told him I’d deliver the package. That’s what I’m doing.”

“You can take me home first.”

Gritting my teeth, I shake my head again. She’s right. It would be easier this way, with far less risk of us completely losing it. It would mean we could behave ourselves. Maybe—I don’t believe this for a second—we’d be able to forget how good it felt. How *right* it felt, being together.

“No,” I say. “We’re going to Illinois. Together.”

“You *know* it would be better to take me home first.” She glares. “Otherwise, we might...”

“We’ll just have to try harder. You’re coming with me.”

She opens her mouth as if to argue but then closes it. She stares at me like she suspects something.

Then she turns and walks toward the lake. I groan and follow her, my heart thudding hard when I think about her being alone. Anytime I think of her without me to back her up, I can’t take it. It *hurts*, honestly, trying to fit that into my head. To think there might be a day when Ryan asks me to handle business out of state or country again, and I’ll have to leave her.

No damn way. She’s not going anywhere without me. Maybe that makes me possessive as fuck. Do I care? Not right now. As she gets farther and farther away from me, I don’t. Breaking into a jog, I catch up to her and touch her shoulder.

“What, Kai?” she snaps, her eyes glistening like she could break down into sobs at any moment.

“Don’t *what* me,” I snarl. “Where the hell do you think you’re going?”

“I need some space. I need to think.”

“There’s nothing to think about,” I tell her. “We need to keep moving.”

“Unless you’re going to hogtie me to the bike, you should give me a few minutes.”

I grind my teeth. “I could do that, Kay, pretty damn easily. I’ve got rope, and I doubt you could stop me.”

She takes a step forward, glaring up at me. It makes me think of her as a mother, defending our children with that same fierceness in her expression. “If you do that, I’ll hate you forever. And when you drop your guard, I’ll use it to get as far away from you as possible. Just leave me *alone*.”

She spins, walks over to the lake, picks up a stone, and throws it angrily. I scan the landscape and then walk up beside her.

My chest is rising and falling way too fast. My head is full of hurt, thinking about her hating me forever.

She's being dramatic. She has to be. It's another sign of our age gap. A woman my age wouldn't behave in this way. Fuck. *No*. A woman my age... I can't think of any other woman, in any context, ever. Just the thought feels like a betrayal. No, it *is* one.

She sits on the ground by the lake, staring into the water. I stand nearby, head on a swivel as I wait for her. I'm not going to let anybody sneak up on us. I'm not going to let anybody hurt her. I'd take a bullet before I allowed that to happen.

Minutes pass, maybe twenty. Finally, she stands and looks at me like she's making good on her promise, as though she hates me. "I guess we should get going before you lose your patience and tie me up."

I'd like to tie her up. It's true, but not in this context. She's agreed to come, though. That's all that matters. We can deal with the emotions later. Or do what's best, which is to let them die.

Yeah, like that's ever going to happen.



## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

---

**K** ayla

“Are we allowed to camp here?” I say.

Kai has his back to me, setting up the tent in the Colorado National Park. The gray of his shirt has flecks of sweat from hard riding and the work he’s doing now, the muscles shifting against his back, his arms bulging with each movement. I don’t think the physical exertion makes him surge like that. I think it’s the fact of us and the tension. There’s something he’s not telling me. I think *he* knows I’ve guessed something.

“A little late for questions like that,” he grunts.

I sit on a rock, looking through the tall pine trees to a small body of glistening water. The sun begins to set. I close my eyes, trying to think of some poetry about this place, about anything—something to mark this experience and burn it into my mind forever.

When I asked Kai if he wanted help with the tent, he just grunted. He’s been doing that a lot since Utah when I snooped and found the watch. I was almost hoping to find drugs or something bad, something that would justify demanding him to take me home. Not the watch, not another reason to love my big brother even more.

Whispering under my breath, I recite some morbid Emily Dickinson lines, dragging my mood into the gutter so I don’t

get any silly ideas. My mind strays to home, to what's happening.

*There's a mystery in my man,*

*In his sharp emerald eyes.*

*When he looks my way,*

*We could live forever,*

*Or die.*

Once he finishes, he sits on a rock opposite, wiping his face with a flannel. I go to the bike and bring him a bottle of water.

"Thanks," he says, taking it quickly, almost snatching it, not looking at me.

His wild hair has swept down his forehead, close to his eyes. Standing over him, I almost reach down and smooth it back into place, but I manage to stop myself. It would be easier if he didn't always look so hot, his biceps gleaming when he reaches up, brushing his hair.

"Are you going to tell me what's really going on?" I ask.

He stops drinking the water and replaces the cap.

"Well?" I say. "The fact you didn't just say *nothing's going on* or ask what I meant tells me I'm right. It's not like I'd have to be a rocket scientist to figure it out."

"Hmm," he grunts.

"Hmm?" I snap. "*Hmm?* What does that even mean?"

"You've got a bad habit of putting me in awkward positions," he says. "Are you hungry? We'll have to eat a cold dinner."

"Can't start a fire," I say as he stands and walks toward his bike, "since we're probably not supposed to be here."

He had to push the Harley most of the way, churning up mud in places and splattering the gleaming material with dirt. There's no way a biker does that by choice, just for the *sake* of it. Earlier, when I asked, he said he wanted a change of pace.

"Hungry?" he asks, returning with the cooler bag.

After the picnic, we loaded up on meat and bread for the evening.

I nod. "Sure."

We don't say anything for a while, which is sort of becoming our thing. Lots of talking and then nothing. Silence as we wait for the other person to do the right thing. One of us should get angry, say something we can never take back, or do something unforgivable to sabotage this relationship.

Is *that* what this is? A relationship? I wish. No, I don't. I can't.

"Did you hear me before?" I ask once I've prepared some sandwiches.

He takes his. "Thank you, Kay."

"You're ignoring me." I sit down, taking a bite from my sandwich. After washing it down with some bottled water, I say, "I think it's because you don't want to lie to me. Something's up. Why did we suddenly change motels in Vegas? Why the secret lake in Utah? Why *here*?"

"Just leave it alone," he snaps. "Accept it. You're coming with me. That's it. End of story."

"Are we in danger?"

"Goddamn. You ask more questions now than when you were a kid."

"I didn't need to ask you anything then. I had everything I wanted."

He looks at me sharply, eyes narrowed. Okay, message received. He doesn't like any hint of the crush talk. I guess he doesn't want to think of me as a little girl anymore, considering what we've done.

"I deserve to know," I go on. "Does it have something to do with that guy in Vegas?"

He stands abruptly. "Will you just leave it the hell alone?"

He marches over to the forest like he's going to walk off. Then he stops, turns, and returns to his seat. It's strange. He moves almost like a robot when returning to the log.

“What was that?” I say.

He smirks, but it’s somehow fierce, somehow pissed. “Another question.”

“I think you were going to storm off, but then you remembered you can’t do that because something’s up. So you came back. That’s my theory.”

He clenches his fists and unclenches them.

“What? Are you going to hit me?”

His mouth falls open. He stares, looking boyish and hurt. Immediately, I hate myself. What a terrible thing to say.

“Never say anything like that to me again,” he says, not even angry. “I mean it.”

“I’m sorry. I won’t.”

“I’d never do that. I’d never hurt you. I’d die before I hurt you.”

I bite my lip, heart thudding hard, remembering what he said as he spanked me. He spoke of owning me and claiming me. This has vibes like that, except more emotional, not just our bodies—our souls, too.

“I know you wouldn’t hit a woman,” I tell him. “I never should’ve said that.”

“It’s just... I promised Ryan, okay? You have to be okay with that.”

“You don’t want to break two promises in one day?”

“No.”

“I get that. I *am* sorry, but if I’m in danger, shouldn’t I know? Shouldn’t I be prepared? I’d rather know what’s coming after us. Something is, Kai. Somebody is. You can’t deny that.”

“Why can’t you just leave it alone?”

“Do you think telling me the truth is worse than what we did?” I yell, hearing myself and hating my tone, hating the crack in my voice.

I feel I'm being dramatic, but I can't help it. There's just too much emotion: the anniversary of Dad's death, the fight, the closeness, the pain of the package, all of it. Now I *am* crying.

I rub my cheeks angrily. "We've already crossed the worst lines. We've already done *that*. There's nothing you can tell me that will be worse than that. We *kissed*. We've done o-o-o..."

*Other things*, I try to say, but dammit, the tears keep coming. They're so over the top. I wish I could step outside and slap myself across the face for being so emotional, but it hurts. That's the truth. It cuts.

He stands and reaches out like he's going to touch me. That's the last thing he should do, and it's what I want most in the world. I want to feel his powerful hands squeezing my arms, holding me tight, and willing me to believe there's a way out of this that doesn't break Ryan's world.

Then Kai stops himself and lowers his hands. "You're coming with me. You're going to have to be okay with that."

"What if I leave and go home, huh? What then?"

He clenches his jaw. His green eyes glint like he's tired of me. "You're acting like a brat."

"Maybe that's just what I am," I say, my tone vicious, not liking how I sound. It's as if I'm not in control. The anger is. The regret. "Just Ryan's bratty little sister. Just an inconvenience for you to read bedtime stories to. The tagalong, right?"

"Just calm dow—"

I was right before. When somebody says *calm down*, it's the last thing I want to do.

"I heard you and Ryan before we left!" I interrupt. "You didn't want to take me on this trip. You wanted nothing to do with me."

"That's because..." He trails off, shaking his head. "Just sit down."

"Because what?"

“Please, just sit down.”

I turn and walk into the forest. It’s not a smart thing to do, but I do it anyway. I need space, just a few minutes. Then I’m jogging, and I realize I don’t need space. I need to escape. I’ve got to keep going and get as far away from Kai as possible.

“Kay, stop,” he calls after me. “I’m not chasing you. This isn’t some movie. Just stop it and get back here.”

I keep going.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

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**K ai**

For too long, I almost just let her storm off into the forest. I don't want to go after her. I might end up telling her what I almost did. Not just the truth about what's going on, but the truth about how I feel, too. The truth of everything she means to me and what it would do to me if something happened to her.

When she doesn't stop, I break into a jog. It doesn't take long for me to catch up to her. Taking her arm lightly, I turn her toward me, holding her in place. If she were struggling, I'd be forced to let her go. I'm not going to hold her against her will. When she stares up at me, I almost break at the sight of her tear-streaked cheeks.

"Tell me I'm being a brat again," she says, rubbing her cheeks aggressively like she's angry at herself for crying. "I *know* I am, but it's all too much."

"I know it is," I say softly.

She flinches as if she didn't expect me to agree with her. I wrap my arms around her and hug her tightly, hoping she can feel how much she means to me, hoping I don't have to say it. I can never say it. It would mean the end of everything.

Leaning down, I kiss her for the first time since last night. Even when I spanked her full ass, our lips didn't touch. She

presses her hands against my chest, fingernails clawing through my shirt like she's going to push me away.

Then she moans through the press of our lips, squeezing with her fingernails, digging them into my chest. She pushes herself closer to me, moaning with more passion, more...

There it is again, that desperation. She's as desperate for me as I am for her. That word has a bad reputation, but I'm desperate like a wild, starving wolf is, hungry for meat to provide for its pack, its family.

"Kissing you can't feel this good," she whispers, our faces close.

Her tears are making my cheeks wet, too. She takes my face in her hands and looks me firmly in the eye. I've never seen so much fire and passion bursting out of someone. I imagine her looking this way when she tells me she's pregnant.

*We've got a little poet on the way.*

"Please, Kai. Are we in danger?"

I try to look away, to think of Ryan, but she holds my face in place. I let her. I don't want to look away from her, ever. She's the only woman who's ever come close to having this effect on me. The warped part is she's right. If she's in danger, she should know. Then she won't do things like wander alone in the middle of the night.

"I know you might've told Ryan you can't tell me the truth, but I'm tired of being lied to. I can't take it anymore. Ryan lied to me about Dad. I want to know I can trust you, and I get it. I'm not some kickass, badass chick or whatever."

"Ass really is your favorite word."

She laughs, despite everything, squeezing onto me tighter, with more sense of hunger. She slides her hands around my body, from my chest to back, clawing her fingers across my broad back and clutching firmly.

"You can't joke your way out of this."

"Nobody's funny enough to joke their way out of this one, Kay."



She sighs and lays her cheek against my chest. I remember what she said about her dad's pocket watch, the ticking, and I wonder if time's running out. If the threats will catch up to us, Randall and the ones who sent him.

"You shouldn't be so hard on your brother," I say after a pause. "He did what he did for you."

"He lied about Dad's illness for me?"

"He didn't know," I snap, stepping away.

She takes a step back, too, falling under the shadow of a tree. The entire forest is becoming a shadow now. The stars and the moon are not bright enough yet. The sun is already mostly gone. Her feet crunch on pines as she steps forward again.

"He didn't... Wait, he *lied*. Not about Dad, but he lied about lying?"

I'm doing everything wrong. It's not like my other jobs, where I could execute my task coldly. It was so much easier to shut my emotions off before. To mentally bring that angry, quiet kid back into my personality, to let the demons rule me, but with Kay, I can't. There are too many feelings to lock away.

"He wanted me to be angry with him," she murmurs a moment later, "because... why? Why would he... Because he wanted me to agree to this trip, right?"

I close my eyes and let out a long breath. Too much is out there for me to back out now. Or is that another excuse to add to the long list?

"He knew you'd never leave on your dad's anniversary unless you were mad. So yeah, he lied. He lied to protect you. He needed you away from town. *I* should be back there. I should be defending my goddamn brothers, but I'm here with you, keeping you safe."

She softens, walking closer to me.

"Why does he want me gone, Kai?"

I clench my fist and clench my jaw. It feels like I clench my damn soul. I wrestled with Ryan all those times, dreaming of

being a Titan. All those times we rode together, and I still can't stop.

"The Titans have been having a few skirmishes with a new club, the Bribones, out of Mexico. They're trying to bring shit into our county. It was manageable, Ryan said, and then things got worse. They're bringing more men in, more drugs. We've got word they're going to try to take one of our warehouses. That's why Ryan needed you gone."

"In case they attacked us," she whispers.

I nod. "He'd never let anything happen to you."

She turns, rushing toward the campsite. I follow her quickly.

"We have to go back," she says breathlessly. "We can't let anything happen to him. We've got to go back and convince him to come with us. How could you *leave* him there?"

"He's never begged me for anything," I growl. "Never, not once. Not until recently. I told him I wanted to stay, to fight with him, but he begged, Kay, for me to take you away and keep you safe."

"So that man *was* after me."

"Yeah, I ran into him before. The prick tried to buy you."

"So he could use me against Ryan." She walks over to me and reaches for my pocket, passionate and erratic as hell. "Where are your keys? We have to go right now. We have to get back to him."

I grab her wrist, guiding her hand away. "I promised Ryan I'd keep you safe. I've already broken enough promises. I've already betrayed him so bad he'll probably never forgive me, but I'm not breaking *this* promise, firecracker. Even if it means kidnapping you, you're coming with me."

She takes a step back, shuddering all over. She's looking at me as though I'm some animal. Fine then. Screw it. That's what I'll be if it means keeping her safe.

---

I hold her in the tent, the night quiet around us, an owl hooting in the distance. She wriggles against me, reminding me why I'm still wearing my jeans. I'd lose it if I felt her ass against my underwear-covered dick.

"Are you going to wait for me to sleep to ensure I don't steal your keys?"

Somehow, I smirk. I almost laugh, but I stop myself. This isn't supposed to be a time for laughing and joking.

"You're not stealing anything. I'd wake up."

She shifts closer to me. "Are we safe here?"

"We weren't followed, but men like Randall—if that's his name—have a way of finding people. The right questions, the right law enforcement contacts... He might know we're in the general area, but don't worry. I'm not letting anything happen to you."

"We should sleep in shifts," she says, "just to be safe."

I don't tell her how good that sounds. I planned on staying awake, which would've been a bad idea. I don't want to scare my woman more than I need to or make her feel like she has to be paranoid, even if she should be.

"Don't you think?" she presses.

"Are you willing to do that?"

"If we're going to do this, we have to be a team, right?"

I hug her closer to me, savoring her warmth. "Yeah, we're a team."

I tell myself I'm not going to fall asleep. I'll lie here and listen for sounds of danger, but holding my woman in my arms is way too comfortable. It gets me thinking of the future—holding her like this without any danger hanging over our heads and knowing I never have to worry about letting her go. It's like a warm blanket wraps around me—a blanket of love. Hell, maybe some of my Kay's poetry is rubbing off on me.

I must be sleeping, but when I open my eyes, it feels so real. It doesn't feel like a dream. Ryan is young, with a cheeky smile

on his face as we circle each other with the boxing gloves on. We're in the front yard, and his dad is watching us, and from the upstairs window, so is Kayla—little Kayla, the girl she was.

Suddenly, I'm in her bedroom, reading her a story. She's looking up at me with a goofy grin, and her lips spread wide like she's never had so much fun in her life. I try to turn and run away. I don't want to think of her like this.

“Do you think we'll be together one day?” she says, but her voice isn't her own. It's dark, wicked. Horns are sprouting from her skin. I writhe, desperately trying to wake up. “Kai? Do you? Will you be my boyfriend one day?”

*No*, I try to say, but it's the same as the movement. I'm stuck, paralyzed, locked in place. There's nothing for me to do but watch as this wicked version of young Kayla begins to grow, her horns getting bigger, her eyes becoming wide black circles of pure hate.

“*Will you?*” she roars, the whole room trembling, the entire dream shaking. “*Will you be mine?*”

Eventually, I'm able to turn, duck, and run. Somehow, I end up in a small stone cell. Ryan turns and faces me. He's wearing overalls splattered with red. He's got a knife in his hand. I look down to see... to see *me*, bleeding red all over my Titan's MC jacket.

“What did you expect?” Ryan says sadly. “She's my baby sister, bro...”

He starts to move toward me with the blade. I'm locked in place again. Ryan smiles in a way I've never seen in real life, sadistic glee glinting in his eyes as he leans forward and brings the knife to my throat. It's a dream. I *know* it's a dream. Yet I can still feel the cool kiss of the metal. I can still feel the fear twisting through me.

“I'm sorry,” I say.

“Sorry?” Ryan laughs. “Does that mean you're going to stop? Does that mean you'll let her go?”

Even in the dream, I can't lie. “No.”

“That’s what I thought.”

As Ryan slices with the blade, my eyes snap open. I suck in a trembling breath, feeling like I just almost drowned. I’m covered in sweat. It takes me far too long to realize that Kay is gone.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

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### K ayla

I sneaked out of the tent as Kai slept, using my phone as a flashlight to find my notebook. Sitting on the log where we ate our cold dinner, I read over the lines, the desperation, the silly girl who believed her crush would notice her, want her. Those happily-ever-afters in the bedtime stories—she thought—weren't just for her characters. I read what I wrote the other night, too. I'm unsure why I even added to it after all these years.

I try to tear out the pages, but they seem special. They seem to justify this somehow if I let my mind dance in that direction. Surely, that means something if I knew I wanted him since before he could ever want me. Surely, it has some significance. Or maybe I'm just clawing for reasons.

Ryan's at home, involved in a biker war. The last one was before I was born, and I remember the stories about the lives lost. I remember the faraway and deadly look Dad got in his eyes the rare times it was mentioned in his presence.

There's nothing I can do, no way home unless I steal Kai's keys or a car. Or find somewhere with enough civilization to have a car rental place. Then what? Drive home, fight the war, or convince Ryan to leave? He'd never leave the club.

"Kay," Kai calls out softly from the tent.

"I'm okay. I'm out here."

“Get in the tent.” He sighs as if tired of bossing me around.  
“Please.”

“I’m coming.”

Quickly replacing the notebook, I return to the tent.

---

Apart from anything else, this trip has shown me how beautiful the country is. We’ve gone from the dusty landscape of Cali to yellow grass prairies in Nebraska, miles and miles of them all around us, gleaming golden in the sun.

I wrap my arms tightly around Kai, knowing we’re going in the wrong direction. We should turn around and start speeding home. Instead, we’re going to collect the most beautiful gift anybody has ever thought to give me.

I can feel Kai’s passion burning through his jacket, his muscles pressing through the leather. I know I can’t, but I’m almost convinced of it each time we go over a bump in the road. He’s tense as hell and has been all morning.

We didn’t speak much as we ate a light breakfast of crackers. We *did* kiss, wordlessly moving closer together, captivated with each other as we sunk into the pleasure. We gave ourselves to it completely for a few minutes, with me rocking on top of him. Then he groaned, grabbed my hips, and lifted me as though I weighed nothing.

I yell when the animal darts from the tall grasslands. Some grass is over four feet tall, and the animal appears from the shadows. It looks like some kind of fox. It runs straight in front of Kai’s wheel like it has a death wish.

“Fuck,” he grunts, adjusting and rolling straight into a large stone that bucks at the momentum. We judder up and down and speed toward the edge of the road. “Relax, Kay. I’m not going to crash.”

He adjusts again, jerking the bike, his casual tone entirely at odds with the high-speed driving he’s performing. Once he’s leveled out, he slowly stops the bike.

“It’s like some animals want to die,” he says, pulling up at the side of the road.

“I know. That was crazy.”

“I’m going to give the bike a once-over.”

We step off the bike, taking off our helmets. The fox—if that’s what it was—is gone. This time, I can’t resist the urge to reach up and brush his wild hair from his forehead. He acknowledges it with a brief smile, and I wonder what a romance this would be.

*A lifetime made of tiny moments,*

*Rarely acknowledged but brighter.*

*Each time they go unspoken,*

*And blinding the few times they reach our lips.*

“Storage opened when I was jostling us around,” Kai says, nodding down the road.

He starts walking before I spot it. It *looks* like the pink cover of the notebook, but I hope I’m wrong because he already has it in his hand when my slow mind catches up to what’s happening. It’s already fallen open to the page it always falls to—the one I’ve read the most over the years, the declarations.

He carries it to the edge of the empty road, staring down. His entire body has become even more tense than before. I keep expecting him to tear the notebook clean down the middle, his hands trembling.

When he returns to me, his eyes are blazing like green wildfire. “What the hell is this? When did you write this?”

I almost snatch the notebook away, but what would the point be? It’s out there now, and I’m almost relieved he knows. I don’t have to protect this secret anymore. Maybe that’s why the fox came, to give me a chance to be honest. Or perhaps that’s just plain nuts.

“Years ago,” I whisper, “before you left for Europe when I was a kid.”



He shakes his head slowly, staring down at the lines. “You had a crush on me.”

He says *crush* as if it’s a small thing. It seems so tiny with the blue sky open behind him, with the deep yellow of the prairie all around us. A crush, but it was my whole world once.

“Is this why you’ve... is this why we’ve...” He trails off, dropping the notebook, his jaw tight like he’s on the edge of an explosion. “Is this all about your goddamn childish crush?”

“No, I want you for you,” I tell him.

“But you *did* have a crush.”

“Yes,” I say, unable to hold eye contact with him. “When I was a kid, I—”

“I don’t want to hear about when you were a *kid*,” he growls. “I don’t give a damn how you felt then.”

“You asked—”

“Because I have to know if we’re in this for the real thing or if this is some silly childish thing for you. Some... Fuck, I can’t speak. This is too strange.”

He marches over to the bike, picking up a few items here and there, residue from the storage compartment. I pick up some plastic water bottles and follow him. We say nothing, like a married couple during a brief armistice.

“When did this crush start?” he asks after a pause.

“If I answer, will you snap at me again?”

He smiles tightly and answers with a side-to-side of his eyes.

“I’m not sure exactly how long.”

“Since the stories?” he asks.

“Around that time, yeah, but it’s not like I knew what it meant back then. It was just a silly childhood thing. Then, when I got older, I crushed on you, but I knew nothing could ever happen.”

“But you wanted it to.”

“I still want it to,” I whisper.

His chest seems to swell in the leather jacket, his shoulders getting broader. “You have to be sure this isn’t some childhood crush. It isn’t *just* that. I don’t care how you felt when you were a girl. You’re a woman now, and you have to decide. You have to be dead certain.”

Suddenly, he rushes over to me. His hands are on my hips. He squeezes with far more passion than he has yet. I feel so sensitive to everything he does as if I can judge something like that, the layers and levels of his desire, but I can. It blazes through me as fiercely as his eyes burn, holding me in place. It’s like I’m the only thing in the universe for him.

“Is your little crush going to wear off?”

“Don’t belittle it. It meant a lot to me.”

He leans down, his breath hot and savage. It’s like he’s going to combust.

“What about now? Is this all part of your crush?”

“It stopped being that the second we kissed,” I whisper. “It’s...”

I almost say *everything*. However, I know I can’t tell him about the aching in my womb, the thoughts beckoning to the future, to children, laughter, and a thousand other impossible moments.

“Way more than that,” I say weakly.

“I read something else in that notebook of yours,” he says, his voice getting huskier. “It was in a different color than the rest. The ink looked newer. I need to know if this is true because if it is, Kay, I won’t be able to stop. I won’t even be able to try.”

I swallow, knowing what he’s talking about right away. I wrote the question, *Will I lose my virginity to him?*

“It’s true,” I whisper.

“When did you write it?” he says, his tone weighty, like he’s placing much importance on this.

It’s almost like he wants me, honestly and hungrily wants me, and has to make sure it’s not just the past fueling my need.

That would mean this goes much deeper than I could ever have imagined.

“In Vegas. It was silly. I didn’t even think. I just scribbled it down.”

He leans down, his breath hot on my face, warming up other parts of me, every part. “Is it true? Are you a virgin?”

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

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**K** ai

She nods, pouting in that beautiful, adorable way. She's not doing it on purpose. There's nothing designed or forced about it. It's just her expression when she's revealing the truth—the truth that has me pulsing all over.

I should stop and give myself time to understand this. There's no way I should say what I'm about to say.

“You're my woman,” I growl, then kiss her.

She whimpers through the kiss as if caught off guard, but then she sinks into it, clinging onto my neck and standing on her tiptoes, moaning as she leans against me. I grab her hips and pull her closer, letting her feel my desire, my thick, hard dick pushing through the denim.

“*Your* woman?” she gasps between kisses.

“Here's the dirty little secret, Kay,” I say passionately. “I've wanted you ever since I came home to the States. Obviously, I didn't notice you before I left. Yet I did the second I rode up and saw you on the horizon. When you stopped shimmering, and I could really make you out, I noticed two things. First, you were—are—the most beautiful woman I've ever seen. Second, I need you. I *own* you.”

She blinks in disbelief, her beautiful eyes getting gorgeously wide.

“Then, I *really* looked. I saw who you were. You were all grown up, and it took me by surprise. I knew I couldn’t listen to the first feeling. *That’s* why I didn’t want to bring you on this trip. I knew I couldn’t resist you, and I was right.”

“You... own me?” she whispers.

I kiss her again, fiercer this time, indulging in her full hips. I could listen to her moans change rhythm and shape all day, especially when I slide one hand to her ass, massaging and savoring every moment.

“Every. Single. Part.” I keep my lips close to hers. “You’re going to be my wife one day. You’re going to give me children. We’re going to have a...”

“Happily ever after,” she whispers as if awestruck.

“Don’t get all wide-eyed on me. You’ll give me ideas.”

“We can’t... *here*, can we?”

I hear the nerves in her voice. The truth is, my primal instincts would lead me to bend her over the bike and grind into her hot, young pussy over and over. I’d thrust into her hard until she gasped, moaned, and creamed for me.

“You deserve better for your first time,” I tell her honestly, “but that doesn’t mean I can’t taste your perfect pussy. That doesn’t mean I can’t own you right here.”

“Do you mean it?” she moans as I move away.

“Yes,” I growl, grabbing my bike and pushing it into the grasslands.

“What are you doing?”

“Giving us some cover. I need you right now. I’ll die if I don’t taste your virgin slit. This proves what I felt the second I saw you. You’re mine. I’m the only man you’ll ever feel. I’m the only... fucking... one.”

The bike flattens some grass, but more springs up around it, obscuring it. I take off my leather jacket, lay it on the seat, and then return to my woman, wrapping my arms around her waist.

“The only one,” she moans softly.

I take her hands in mine, imagining we’re at the altar. Neither of us has mentioned him, but I imagine Ryan there as my best man, with a big smile, no doubts about what we’re doing, and no second guesses. In the fantasy, he supports us. In the dream, he’d never tell us to stop.

“You have to be sure,” I snarl, then kiss her again.

“I am.” She shifts against me, speaking in quick breaths between kisses. “I don’t want anybody else. I never have.”

She moans adorably when I bring my hand down on her ass in a spank.

“What was *that* for?”

“*Never*, you said. I don’t care about before. Only now.”

She trails her hands up and down my chest. “I get it’s weird for you.”

“That’s an understatement.”

“Okay.” She stands on her tiptoes, an excitable, sweet smile on her face. “Then let’s focus on the now.”

There’s something so hot about when she initiates it, leaning up and pushing her lips on mine. I squeeze her against me, grinning through the kiss when I lift her off her feet, and she squeals in delight. Carrying her to the bike, I place her on my leather jacket, then kneel in the grass and slide my hands up her body, shuddering all over as I think about her pussy.

“I need to taste you so damn bad,” I snarl. “If anybody else ever saw you, I’d kill them. I wouldn’t be able to stop myself. Nobody else ever gets to see you like this.”

“Only you,” she moans, nodding, urging.

“I’ll have to listen for any cars.”

“I’ll watch too.”

After a moment, she shudders and adds, “You know... if I don’t lose control. Can I tell you something else?”

As she asks the question, I slowly pull her pants down. She shifts from side to side with the movement, leaning back slightly. It's like when I made her young virgin slit cream for me. Her body knows what to do. It's fueled by her *crush*.

That almost jolts me out of the moment more than Ryan's imagined voice did the last time we got steamy. It almost makes me stop. Then I see her naked thighs in the sunlight, her thick creamy legs drawing my mind to how sappy her slit will be, her lips swollen with lust, her eager clit. I'm shuddering as I pull her jeans down to her knees.

"Tell me," I groan.

"I've never done *anything* before. I was..."

"What?" I say, carefully pulling her jeans so they don't snag on her boots.

My body is primed for hunger. Every sinew, every nerve aimed at seeing her sweet, soaked pussy. My balls are tight at the thought, shaft hard, precome bursting from my tip.

"Say it," I snap.

"You won't like it. It's about the c-crush."

I pull one leg free, then work on the other.

"It turns you on, though," I growl.

"How do you know that?"

I smirk, looking up at her. Grass blows around her legs. She smiles down at me with a cheeky, passionate look.

"You can tell when I'm turned on, huh?"

"It's like your body is..." I almost stop myself, but I've already told her she's mine and I want children with her. She knows how crazy I am, and she's here anyway. "Talking to me. Telling me you're ready to take every last drop of my come."

"I want that." She squeezes her legs together as if the sensation in her pretty pussy is too much. "B-badly."

"We're going to do it together."

Finally, I get her other leg free. Then I take her underwear, pausing momentarily to study the wetness on the white material, a horny blemish that lets me see her hole. Her lips are big and swollen with lust, calling to the beast in me, growling like a bike, like a Titan.

Her underwear is easier to get over her boots, and then I push her legs apart, sinking my knees into the soft bed of the grass and bringing my mouth toward her pussy. Her smell washes around my face and nose, tangy and welcoming. Her skin goose-pimples under my touch. She shivers the closer I get to her hole.

“Your breath’s tickling me,” she whispers.

“Nobody’s ever licked your little pussy before?”

“N-no. Only you, Kai.”

“And I’m the only one who ever will,” I growl.

*“So you’ve made that decision without asking me first, best bud?”*

I lean back, pushing the voice away. I can’t think of him, the betrayal, of how wrong this is. It’s bad enough we’re in public. It’s bad enough somebody could theoretically see. If I start thinking about him, my best friend...

“Kai?” Kay says, looking down at me.

The flush in her cheeks does it—the vivacious need to give me a child blushing through her full, beautiful cheeks. It wrenches any guilt or doubt away.

“Nobody else ever touches this pussy.” I rub her clit softly, keeping my eyes locked on her. “Don’t look away, Kay.”

She blinks, her eyes watery with lust as I rub her clit a little faster. The whole time, I’m watching her, feathering her sweet pussy like I’d rev a bike’s engine. She purrs for me sweeter than any bike ever could, her legs twitching.

Her eyes are too damn sexy, the way they shift depending on how much pressure I apply to her receptive, soaked virgin pussy. I drive my palm against her clit, fingering her hole,



moving in circles around her entrance as I keep the pressure on her pleasure point. She starts gasping, clawing at her legs.

“Fuck, keep doing that,” I demand.

I stare as her fingers sink into her thick thighs. There’s so much of my woman, a fullness that never stops. Her size has me almost exploding in my hands, her small hands buried in her big legs.

“This?” she moans, squeezing tighter.

I’m the one who told *her* not to look away. Now, as I move my finger closer and closer to her wet hole, I stare at her fingers, digging into her legs. Then I can’t take her scent anymore. Instead of fingering her eager slit, I kiss up her thigh and bring my mouth to her pussy. Propping one hand against the foot peg, I lean forward to give myself the right angle.

The *perfect* angle to push my face right against her pussy. I make my tongue hard and then press it against her entrance, growling and shaking as her taste fills me up, tangy and needy and *mine*. She gasps, almost slipping off the bike. I snarl and hold her in place, not wanting her to chafe her skin on the metal. She stays on the leather, and I hold her tight, squeezing her hips in a big greedy handful as I tongue-fuck her hole.

She’s so damn tight, her hole closing around my tongue, squeezing. It’s a preview of what she’ll feel like wrapped around my dick when I stuff myself inside her and fill her up.

Another sweet gasp when I take my tongue out, focusing on her clit again. I slide my finger into her, flicking my tongue back and forth. Her clit is even more swollen and lust-filled than before. I only pause to listen and ensure nobody’s sneaking up on us.

“We’re good,” she whimpers, looking down. “Don’t...”

“Say it,” I snap when she stops herself.

“Hmm.”

I squeeze her legs and tongue her eager bud. “Say what you were going to say.”

“Don’t stop,” she moans, her legs trembling, jiggling in the sunlight in the sexiest way.

“Fuck. You’re so hot when you jiggle like that.”

“J-jiggle?” she moans.

I stand up slowly, resting one hand on her leg, staring down so she can see the raging inferno she provokes in me. My full balls are roaring out for a release, roaring at me to go complete animal, strip her naked, and fuck her ruthlessly so her whole body shimmers for me.

“You heard,” I growl.

“Is jiggle a good thing?”

“With you, it’s the best thing. It shows how curvy you are. How full-figured and sexy. How fucking *mine*. Ah, it’s primal. It makes me want to...”

She moans when I bite her thigh softly, licking her skin, tasting her sweat, and spreading her juices over her leg. I love biting her thick leg, feeling how big she is.

When I lean back again, she looks down at her leg, her mouth open in a shocked smile. “How does everything with you feel good?”

“I need to watch you jiggle some more.”

I reach over, turn on the engine, and start the bike. She squeals and starts shaking around on the seat, making me fully and instantly obsessed. Her legs shake, and even her pussy lips shift for me, every part of her full and perfect.

“How does that feel?” I say, kneeling again.

“It’s g-good,” she whispers.

I attack her sweet pussy with my tongue again, addicted to her taste, lapping up from her hole to her clit and up and down her lips. The bike rumbles, and when my woman starts whining, I grab the throttle. With one hand, I palm her pussy quickly. I make the bike roar and vibrate against her eager body with the other.

She's screaming by the end, the veins on her neck standing up, her juices squirting out of her hole like they only ever will for me—nobody else, just me. She reaches a screaming orgasm as I almost bust the bike. In the end, I stare, hypnotized by her legs, the shimmering thickness, and the way they keep shaking for me. Sitting up, she gestures to me. I lean down, and she throws her arms around her shoulders.

“Taste yourself,” I groan, bringing my lips to hers. “Then you can see how perfect you are. Even your pussy tastes good.”

She moans when I kiss her, my hand naturally resting on her leg. “Does that taste good to you?” she says teasingly.

“Everything about you is perfect,” I growl. “I need your pussy so badly. I need...”

*“Go on,” Ryan taunts in my mind. “Say it. Say you need to tell her you love her before you remember me, your old buddy. Tell her nothing else matters, just your relationship, your lust, or whatever you think this is. Say it, Kai.”*

“You,” I finish weakly, the guilt resurging. It doesn't do much to stop the lust from rising in me, making my dick ache, my shaft burn, and everything in me willing me to claim her.

I look around the rolling golden landscape as she puts her trousers on. This is the last good moment before everything turns to hell. Her phone starts to ring.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

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**K**ayla

“What do you mean, a *shootout*?”

I’m screaming down the phone louder than I screamed when Kai turned on the bike and drove me to an orgasm. It seems twistedly unfair that this phone call has to happen now, so soon after I learned he wants me, too.

I can still taste myself on my lips and remember how obsessed he looked while watching my legs... *jiggle*. That word made me think he was mocking me at first, but when I saw him staring, I knew he was serious about it. I knew I was driving him wild, but now it’s all fading to crap.

“Natasha?” I yell down the phone.

“Yeah, sorry. I’m on the phone with my cousin, too. There was a shootout on Main Street. It literally just happened. He thinks he saw Ryan. Oh, God, I’m sorry.”

“Say it,” I snap, then raise my voice when she doesn’t respond immediately. “Natasha!”

“They think he got shot,” Natasha says. “I’m so sorry. You should call one of the guys.”

“Kai’s doing it now,” I reply. “He’s on the phone to them. A shootout? And Ryan shot?”

I repeat it as if it will disappear and stop the ugly reality. It’s too damn painful thinking about Ryan with blood all over

his... Oh, Jesus. I'm hyperventilating or almost. I take a few slow breaths.

The kiss, the steaminess, the lies, Emily Dickinson...

"I've betrayed him," I whisper, tears sliding down my cheeks.

Kai's on the phone a few feet away, his eyes bloodshot, looking like a man who's just returned from war and is ready to go back again. His tatted arm bulges, veins pressing against his skin, the Titan inflating.

"With Kai?" Natasha asks softly.

"Y-yeah."

"Don't think about that now. One step at a time."

"You're right. Thank you."

"I'm here if you need me."

"Thank you."

I hang up and walk through the prairie, back onto the side of the deserted road. Kai is pacing, looking like a different man from the one I was with recently. He's got an extra fierce aura as he hangs his cell up, stuffing it in his pocket.

"The Bribones hit them on fucking *Main Street*," Kai roars, pulling his hand back like he's about to throw his phone. Then he remembers he might need it and hammers his hand against his chest instead. "Those fucking mongrels."

"What about Ryan?"

When I touch Kai's hands, he pulls them away. I try not to let myself look wounded and try not to think about what it says about me as a sister, still willing to touch Kai now. Then Kai softens and takes my hands. He squeezes gently. "He was shot in the stomach. They're taking him to the hospital. They might have to operate. Two Bribones are dead, and the police are questioning a couple of our men. *Fuck.*"

I stumble away, shaking all over, thinking of Ryan in a hospital bed with a gun wound where his belly should be. It doesn't seem like it fits. I was arguing with him recently, but nothing crazy, nothing life-changing.

“Kay.”

Kai walks over to me, his hands raised. He takes my shoulders and pulls me into an embrace, holding me there as the sobs start shuddering and erupting. There are so many of them. Wave upon wave of agony smashes through me.

“We have to go back,” I weep. “I have to be with him. The hospital will be guarded, right?”

“Of course it will.”

“Then take me there. Let me be with my brother. Please.”

“He’d want me to keep you as far away from there as possible,” Kai says. “Especially now.”

I grab Kai’s chest and push away to look into his eyes. He needs to see how serious I am. I’m as serious as every sentence I ever wrote in my notebook, as every declaration of belonging. I’ve never been more serious about anything.

“If you don’t take us back, I’ll do it myself. I’ll escape. I’ll get a car. I’m going home, Kai. The only question is, are we going together, or am I making my own way?”

He lets out a sigh, then smiles almost sadly. It’s like a piece of him wishes he didn’t say what he says next, but he can’t stop himself.

“You’re going to make an incredible mother, Kay.”

Even if a huge piece of *me* knows I shouldn’t, I glow under the force of the compliment anyway. Warmth whelms in me, promises of the future that seem so distant from my brother, a hospital bed, and the agony of letting him go.

“We’ll have to tell him when he recovers,” Kai says fiercely.

“I know,” I whisper, “but not until he’s completely better, okay?”

Neither of us says the obvious. He might never recover from a bullet wound to the stomach. He might already be dead. We’re hundreds of miles away, and there’s nothing we can do but get home as quickly as possible and hope and pray.

“We need to find an airport,” I tell him.

“No, we can’t fly. If this is as bad as it seems, we need to be mobile. It’s rumored that this other club could have ties to the cartels. We can’t risk being trapped on a plane with a cartel goon with nothing to lose. We have to be mobile.”

“Just in case you have to stop me? Is that it? From being with Ryan?”

He swallows and nods.

“I’m risking a lot by taking you home. Let me do it my way. Or, I swear to God, I’ll stop you, Kay. Even if you hate me for it.”

*I could never hate you*, I almost reply, but instead, I shrug and walk to the bike.

We’re becoming broken records, both of us, when we mention the need to stay apart. No matter what we do, we end up together, somehow, like two bikes without riders that miraculously follow the same path. We want, need, desire, hunger for, and own the same thing—our future, all the love and joy we will share.

But if Ryan dies, will there be any of that? Will we ever be able to let ourselves feel it? Will we even be able to look at each other if, before Ryan dies, we don’t tell him the truth and give him a chance to hate us?

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

---

**K ai**

I race down the road, trying not to think too often about what Kay and I shared on the prairie. It's not just the lust or the taste of her body, but what we shared about the future, our desire for a family—all of it.

All I can think about is Ryan. I barely see the landscape or register anything. I can only think of my best friend lying in a hospital bed, unconscious, as the doctors try to stop his blood from poisoning him or his body from failing. He's connected to machines. That bullet tore through him and gutted almost enough blood to leave a man drained.

His sister clings tightly to me as we ride, with even more urgency than usual. She holds me like she never wants to let go. Maybe it's because she knows she'll have to when we reach our destination. We'll have to pretend nothing happened until we can spring the news on Ryan.

Ryan... Fire rages in me, spitting and hissing and roaring, flames that tell me my only job is to get home and hurt the men who hurt my friend. To hurt them badly, kill the fuckers if necessary. I'm already rehearsing what I'll do the second I reach home, the orders I'll give, the places we'll scout. The fires we'll set. The bullets we'll shoot.

On the edge of the state, we stop for a bathroom break. I lean against the bike, scanning the road, a little busier than the nowhere land we were before. Part of me hopes I see Randall



or another hitman, somebody I could aim this rage at, apart from myself. That's who deserves it—me. I should've fought these feelings until I could talk to Ryan about them. Now, I may never get the chance.

“Oh, I'm sorry.”

I look up at the sound of Kay's voice. She's standing in front of a tall, skinny man, his shoulders jutting through his pale green shirt.

“Just watch where you're fucking going,” the man snaps.

I don't see him. I don't see anything except a sheet of red. Red like the bandages wrapped around my best friend's gut, red like the dressing barely keeping his insides in place. When the red in my vision clears, I'm standing over the man. He thought he could be tough because he assumed she was alone. He thought he could talk down to a young woman, bully her, and get away with it.

“Is there a problem?” I snarl.

The man stares up at me, slowly shaking his head.

“Move.”

He turns and runs toward the parking lot.

“It's my fault,” Kay murmurs as we return to the bike. “I wasn't looking where I was going.”

“Nobody gets to speak to you like that,” I tell her. “Nobody.”

We share a look that, before, might've turned into a kiss, but neither of us is in the mood for that.

It's early afternoon. We're losing time. Pulling on our helmets, we climb onto the bike. We ride together. With each passing mile, more and more memories of Ryan come to me. When we were in the gym, Ryan held the pads as I hit them heavily, and after, he asked, “*Why are you so angry, Kai?*”

Then I told him what happened to me as a kid before the club took me in. He's the only person I've ever told. That connection should mean something, but clearly, it didn't mean a goddamn thing. It didn't stop me from spanking his little

sister, didn't stop me from wanting to kiss her, love her, protect her, or betray *him*. I'm a beast, just like they tried to tell me.

Nothing but a fuckup. An animal. Nothing but the feral kid. Throw him some scraps. Don't worry about how he feels. He doesn't have feelings. *It* doesn't have feelings. That's me, right down to my skin, cells, and DNA.

When I finally find a place to belong, when I finally find a brother, what do I do? What sort of dumbass choices do I make? I growl inside my helmet, and the bike growls louder beneath me as I pick up the speed and blaze across the asphalt. It would be better if I could hate myself for this, but that would mean regretting what we did. It would mean regretting every single moment. Still, I go faster.

"Kai," I hear her yelling, the only voice that could pierce this fog. I'm growling and grunting like a crazy person, shaking all over, wishing I could just keep riding until the wheels fall off or I do. "Kai, *Kai*."

With my woman on the bike, too, I slow down. I can't risk her life. I bring the bike to a stop at the side of the road, take off my helmet, and throw it on the ground. I'm embarrassing myself, but the anger takes over as I cave in the helmet with my boot. I keep hitting it, over and over, until it's crushed. I'm panting and sitting in the dirt.

"Kai," Kay whispers, her voice shaking as if afraid of me.

I sit with my fists resting on my knees, staring off at nothing, trying not to think about the past and all those countless moments. The time Ryan threw a baseball so hard, it smashed a neighbor's window, and I said I did it, and then he bought me a pair of boxing gloves to say thanks. Or all those shooting sessions in the dusty wild together, honing our skills—him laughing and me laughing—and everything was good.

Kay leans down, gently placing her hand on my shoulder. "It's okay."

I clench my teeth so hard I wonder how I don't shatter them. I almost want to let them explode, let all the tension erupt out of

me. Instead, I reach up and touch Kay's hand.

"I'm sorry," I tell her. "This isn't about me. I need to get my act together."

"You're allowed to have feelings."

I almost tell her, *Look where our feelings have led us*. We're sitting in the dirt, Ryan betrayed and half-dead, but she's not in the dirt. It's just me. I stand, trying to stop myself from trembling, the ruin of my helmet staring up at me like a distorted grimace.

Kay touches my arms and squeezes them gently. "It's going to be okay. I know it is. Ryan's so tough. He can fight anything. He *will* fight anything. You'll see."

I'm supposed to be the tough one, but here she is, comforting me. "You're right. I don't know what came over me. It's just..."

"What?" she says, with almost a note of desperation in her voice. "Kai?"

"It doesn't matter." Leaning down, I pick up my helmet. It was expensive and sturdy, and now it's a wreck. "We need to get moving."

"It *does* matter."

She takes my hand and spins me around. We're surrounded by what feels like our natural setting—dusty miles, the sun already setting, and the dust turning orange. The remaining light shines in my woman's eyes as she steps forward, gazing up at me. For a second, a paranoid part of me thinks about Ryan watching us. Then I remember the shootout. He's not watching anything.

"We need to—"

"You can talk to me about anything. This is all moving so fast." She holds my eye contact stubbornly. "That doesn't mean you can't share your pain with me. That's why I'm here. I hope you know if we ever could be..."

*Together*. She can't say it, and I don't blame her. It's agony to acknowledge things like that while thinking of Ryan.

*“If you’re that concerned for me,”* he taunts in my mind, *“why are you just standing here?”*

“You’d talk to me,” Kay says, “about anything. That’s what I’m here for.”

“It’s nothing. Just about before, when I was a kid. A memory.”

She smooths her hand to my shoulder, threatening to melt me with her delicate features and kind eyes. “What memory?”

“It’s—”

“If you say *it’s nothing* one more time, we’re going to have a problem. I don’t care how big your muscles are.”

We both laugh, somehow, through the pain. Her eyes gleam playfully when she looks at me, but then she gets serious again.

“It’s about before I came to live with my aunt and found the club. I told nobody what happened except for Ryan.”

She swallows, moving closer to me. A car passes on the road, and I scan it, thinking of the rival club and the threat of violence. The never-ending need to keep my woman safe, no matter what happens or threatens us.

“They treated me like an animal and forced me to fight other kids in a muddy pit in the woods, a bunch of drunks and druggies laughing, cackling, watching. Looking back, it doesn’t seem real, but I once met one of the other kids. We went at it pretty hard on my ninth birthday. He remembers it all the same, too.”

I’m speaking distantly, not letting myself feel the emotions, not letting the sounds and the smells return to me.

“Remembered, I should say. He took his life a few years after I spoke to him.”

Kay shudders, moving somehow closer. With my arm wrapped around her, we’re as intimate as two people can be. Yet each time she moves, I know she’s offering more comfort, more warmth. I kiss her head, holding her as tightly as possible.

“That’s awful. No, that doesn’t even come close. It’s evil. I’m so sorry. I can’t believe that happened to you. I mean, I know it did. I believe *you*. I’m just so, so sorry.”

I sigh darkly. “Me too. It was a bad time, but then I met your brother and your dad. I made a new family.”

She stiffens slightly in my embrace. I get why, I think. I can’t refer to Ryan as family because that would mean that Kay is, too, and we can never go there. It’s a strange notion, letting the idea of Ryan as my *brother* go. It’s either that or end things with Kay right now, definitively, with no doubts or backtracking.

“I don’t like to think of those years,” I go on, “but Ryan deserved to know. We were together so much growing up. He could always sense when one of those bullshit moods took me.”

“Why do you talk about it like that?”

“Because that’s what it is. Letting some stuff that happened years ago dictate how I feel now.”

“No, Kai. If you don’t let it out, it’ll eat you up. That’s why we’ve got each other.”

Tears appear in her eyes, beading and then sliding down her cheeks. She knows she shouldn’t be saying this, knows we shouldn’t be *thinking* about it, but we can’t stop. Even now. What does that say about us?

“We really should get going,” I tell her.

“Thank you for talking to me. I’m so sorry that happened. I’m so sorry the world is so messed up sometimes.”

I lean down and kiss her, breaking another rule. We never mean it when we say we will stay away from each other. We never believe, even for a second, that we can stop ourselves.

“Let’s go,” I tell her.

“What about your helmet?” she asks.

“I’ll have to go without. We can’t waste any more time.”

We head to the bike together. It's odd, but I feel lighter somehow. Not just from the lack of a helmet and the wind rushing against my face as we ride. It's like I'm leaving the past behind. Just for a little while, long enough to let me focus and forget about everything I've done wrong. Instead, I feel the road beneath me, the bike rumbling, my woman's arms wrapped reassuringly around my waist.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

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**K**ayla

“You need to eat,” he tells me as I remove my helmet. He must be able to see the guilty look on my face. Or maybe it’s not even a *look* thing. Perhaps he can sense the guilt radiating from me.

“Sure,” I mutter, “but Ryan—”

“He’s safe. He’s recovering. He’s not in serious danger.” Each word that comes from Kai gets gruffer and gruffer. When he looks at me, his intense eyes seem to burn. I wonder if he resents me for what we’ve done, the heat we’ve shared, now that Ryan is at risk.

“So you’re saying we shouldn’t hurry home?”

Kai shakes his head and then gestures toward the truck stop. “Don’t put words in my mouth. I’m saying that stopping for ten minutes won’t change anything.”

“You said we can’t waste time,” I remind him.

He walks right up to me. I can feel his heat. My body responds immediately. Guilty, charged energy pulses through me in waves. Even now, knowing that Ryan is in a hospital bed, knowing that the entire reason for this trip was a trick, I want my Kai. I want to drag my hands down his body, feel his strength, and pretend the rest of the world—oh, God, my own *brother*—doesn’t exist.

“Eating isn’t wasting time,” he grunts. “Taking ten minutes to get ready for more hard riding isn’t wasting time. You really think, if we didn’t need this stop, I wouldn’t keep pushing?”

I reach up and place my hand on his chest. His heart is pounding so hard. It’s like a series of bomb detonations, pulsing, roaring. “I’m sorry,” I murmur. “I know you’re right. I guess I feel like a bad sister lately.”

He laughs darkly. “Yeah, I know the feeling.”

I try to smile. It’s difficult, considering the current circumstances. “You feel like a bad sister, do you?”

Miraculously, he laughs. It brings my thoughts back to when this started before I ever would’ve dreamed he’d want anything to do with me, back when I was just the kid sister and nothing more. “What are you in the mood for?” he asks, walking toward the vending machine.

He rolls his arms and rotates his neck. It’s like he’s getting ready for a fight. There’s this *aura* radiating from him, too. Usually, I’d say that’s way too mystical to entertain. I can’t really see his *aura*, can I? But it feels like I can. Waves of violence are pulsing from him. It’s almost like he wants things to turn bloody.

He rests his arm against the wall at the vending machine, looking over the selections. Everything he does is so cool and calm, even with the violent intentions pulsing from him. Maybe this is what it’s like, learning to read another human being, the poetry of their personality.

“I’m getting jerky,” he says. “Several servings and one of those godforsaken energy drinks.” He pushes in some coins. “I feel like a kid ordering that. What do you want, Kay?”

He’s called me Kay so many times, yet every time he says *Kay*, it still sends a shiver of warm disbelief through me. “Some chips,” I tell him, “and a water’s fine. I need to use the restroom.”

I turn away, but then he grabs my hand. He squeezes hard so I can feel the fire scorching through him. Turning back, I find him staring down at me in that nothing-else-exists way—that



nothing-else-*matters* way. He leans close. “Wait until I’m done here. I’ll come with you.”

“To the ladies’ room?”

He looks around at the empty truck stop. We’re in the middle of nowhere. We’re literally the only people here. A car drives past on the road, just one, but otherwise, it’s just us.

“Just wait,” he says gruffly.

“Kai, I’ll be—”

“You’re waiting,” he snaps. “I can’t let you go alone. If something happened to you, I’d never be able to forgive myself.”

So much emotion enters his voice, fear and protection. He squeezes my hand tighter. He’s not holding me with as much strength as he could. I know that, yet even this small amount is a terrifying preview of the power he can generate.

“Okay,” I whisper. “I’ll wait.”

He lets me go after a pause, pushing more change into the vending machine. Once he’s done, he follows me to the bathroom. I go inside and handle my business, taking longer than I technically need to. As I wash my hands, I think about what will happen when or *if* Ryan learns the truth about his best friend and me.

Is there a chance that Ryan will give us his blessing? Is there a chance he’ll understand how badly we need each other? More likely, he’ll hate me and Kai. It’ll tear the club apart.

“Are you okay?” he asks when I’m done.

“Yeah... fine.”

“Let’s eat,” he says.

We walk over to a small bench a few feet from the parked bike. Another car drives past on the road, but then everything is quiet again. Kai bites into his food forcefully like he’s angry with it. I munch my chips.

“We’ll take another road trip one day,” he says, cracking his can open and sipping the bright orange energy drink. “This

stuff is poison, but at least it'll keep me alert.”

“Another road trip, hmm?” I ask.

He smirks. He can't hide the seriousness in his eyes. He can't hide that dark *aura*, but the twitch in his lips feels significant. He's making an effort when he has every reason to keep his distance. He shared the most vulnerable parts of himself with me, his most vicious memories, and he's *not* closing off. It feels like a privilege.

“When the war's done,” Kai says. “When we don't have to look over our shoulders, I'll take you someplace. Maybe somewhere we've already been before. Maybe somewhere new.”

“Why would you want to go somewhere we've already been?”

I get the sense there's so much he wants to say. He leans over and gently brushes the hair from my face. It sends sizzling desire all through my body. “Because when we go there the second time,” he says, “we'll be different people. The war will be over. Ryan—” He cuts himself off. He can't bring himself to say Ryan will approve of us. He can't even hint at it, the thing we both want so badly. “All of this will seem like a bad dream.”

“I hope so,” I whisper.

We eat without talking for a while. It gives me time to wonder if he was referring to something specific when he said he wanted to visit someplace we've been before.

*Deep in my heart,*

*In a place I cannot let myself see,*

*A vivid piece of art,*

*Shows my man on one knee, looking up at me.*

*I know one question,*

*Is all it takes,*

*To put our love in its rightful place.*

Is *that* what he's referring to? A proposal?

“You look so beautiful when you zone out like that,” he says.

I can't stop myself from smiling. Guilt tries to throttle me and end the smile, but I don't let it. Soon, whatever we're building here could turn to ash. We might as well enjoy it while we can.

“So I'm ugly when I'm zoned in, huh?”

He grins. “You're even beautiful when you're fishing for compliments.”

Soon, it's time to leave again. When Kai stands, his demeanor changes, becoming all business. He takes our wrappers to the trashcan and then gestures toward the bike. As I climb on, part of me wishes we could stay in this pocket of nowhere, pretending the rest of the world was just a dream.

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Hours later, we stop at a gas station. Kai pumps and then turns to me. The closer we get to home, the more serious he's become. Now, he looks ready to fling himself into violence at a moment's notice.

“Come inside with me,” he says, reaching out and then letting his hand drop. It's like he doesn't want to touch me when somebody we know could see us.

I will myself to reach out and touch his hand, but what if a Titan happens to be out this way? What if he sees us and tells Ryan before I have a chance to do it myself? I'd never stop feeling like the world's worst sister.

We walk into the gas station together, standing so close our shoulders almost touch. I plan to head over to the magazines and browse while Kai settles the gas bill. I remember our gas station games. I doubt we'll be having any laughs this time.

Before I can walk over to the stall, Kai says something in an urgent tone of voice. “Kay, get behind me.”

I freeze when I hear Kai's tone change. We're standing in a gas station in the middle of the night, with nothing around us

but darkness and the lights of the road leading into the distance. We're in the desert, almost back home.

My legs carry me behind Kai's back before I can think about what's happening. I don't think about why as I do what he says, instincts guiding me, the Titan on his jacket staring. When I turn, I see the reason. The gas station attendant makes a moaning noise of terror. She's an elderly woman whose voice cracks in a specific way as if she's witnessed men fight before and doesn't want to see the brutality again.

It's the man from Vegas, the one who was following me. He wears a leather vest to show off his inflated arms purposefully. His blond hair is loose around his face, as though framing it, framing *him*. He looks angrier than the last time I saw him. He strides right up to Kai until Kai raises his hand.

"Close enough, Randall."

"My old friend."

Randall smiles, thin lips spreading across his face. Or maybe his lips seem thin because he's got such puffy features. I'm not judging, but heck, he's freaking me out big time.

"If you don't let me get the women clear," Kai says, "things are going to end very fucking bad for you. If you force me to fight while knowing Kayla or this innocent lady might get injured, it will end in death. I don't give a damn anymore. My brother is bleeding out in the hospital."

His voice shakes on *my brother*, and something stabs into my heart. It's a vicious and unfair instinct, the reflex to tell him he and Ryan aren't brothers, just best friends. Even as a figure of speech, it grosses me out, but this isn't the time or place.

Randall waves a hand, shakes his head, and laughs coldly. "The old bitch can go. The fat bitch stays."

I turn to the elderly lady. "Run, ma'am. Run right now."

"L-let her come with me," the old lady says, staring bravely at Randall.

Randall reaches into his pocket and takes out a pistol. In a flash, Kai has done the same. The men aim their guns at each

other.

“Kay, take the lady and leave.”

Randall smirks and laughs again. He sounds unhinged.  
“You’re both coming with me.”

“You’re an idiot, Randall. Showing yourself like this. If you really wanted to get us...”

Kai trails off. Randall’s laugh becomes even more crazed.

“What is it?” I whisper.

“There’s someone else.”

Suddenly, somebody sprints at me from behind the counter. They must’ve been crouched there ever since Randall walked in. Maybe they came through the back. They shove the old lady out of the way and then leap at me. I see a flash of denim. *A denim shirt, nearly blood-stained, the world ending,* my poetic, pointless mind pulses. Then, a solid arm coils around my middle, crushing across my chest. I shift against the person, registering the situation way too slowly.

Randall takes a few steps forward. The man with his arm around me is panting, his breath hot against my ear, but nothing like Kai’s when *he* breathes over my skin.

Kai walks off to the side, keeping his gun trained on Randall but looking at me. Pain streaks through him. His green eyes are grim and focused, his chest rising and falling calmly.

I can’t see the man holding me, but I can feel the sharp object pointed against my back. It’s a cold, hard edge jabbing me and making me feel useless. The door whines open and closed as the elderly lady pushes into the night.

“She’s going to call the cops,” I say, struggling to keep my voice steady.

“Maybe,” Randall says, “but we’ll be long gone by then. Get the bitch in the car.”

“Nobody has to die here,” Kai says, keeping his gun firmly trained on Randall’s head even when the man paces back and forth. There’s something like desperation in Kai’s voice. “I

don't think either of you are good men. You wouldn't be doing this if you were, but I don't want to kill you. I've killed men before, but I've never wanted to do it, never enjoyed it. Don't make me do it again."

Kai's voice cracks, and I think about the kid in the forest, the feral kid they forced to fight, and all the hell he had to endure.

"Don't be stupid," Randall says. "We've got you beat."

"You've insulted my woman. I was going to beat you badly for that. I wasn't going to kill you, but now this—putting her life in danger. I can't let that stand. Last chance."

"*Your* woman?" Randall says, sneering. "You know this is Ryan's little sister, right? I'm just checking. A second ago, you said you were his brother."

Kai stares bleakly.

"Enough games," Randall goes on. "The cops might be here soon. If you don't move, I'll have to ask my friend here to motivate you. That motivation might involve certain things being done to a certain fatty you might not like."

I ignore his words, telling myself they don't matter. I've rarely been bullied for my size. Being Ryan's sister has that advantage. Over the years, people have thrown those comments my way, and I've always just shrugged them off and told myself they don't matter. With Kai, I don't have to dismiss them. I can silently laugh at them. I know how much he wants me, how obsessed he gets. I know there's a connection between us that nobody else can understand.

"Last chance," Kai says.

Randall smirks. "You already said that."

Kai looks at the man holding me. "Let her go."

"No way. Not letting a prized piggy like this go. We've got a delivery to make. The best part is, we can have some fun with her first."

"Do you think you *could*?" Randall says, laughing darkly.

More hurtful words, and I push them all down, trying to think how we will get out of this. I know Kai is threatening them, but surely that's bluffing. There's nothing he can do, not when the man is holding me so close and hinting at all the bad things he will do, the knife pressing suggestively against me.

"Don't judge me. It's been a while. Anyway, that's what pills are for."

"Have you assaulted women before?" Kai says, his voice taking on an eerie calm tone, almost like he's mentally detaching from whatever's about to happen.

My frantic mind leaps around composing. It's how it's worked since I was a kid, ever since I first fell in love with words from the stories Kai would read me. He was a giant back then and somehow even more of a giant now.

*Blood is in the air,*

*Taunting, trying to*

*Burst into this ugly world.*

I don't even have time to think about if that's good or care because Randall is saying ugly things. He's talking about a woman he and the man holding me assaulted. I can barely listen as he talks about her age and the noises she made. All the while, he's grinning as if he's proud.

"Thank you for telling me that," Kai says when he's done.

"Yeah, yeah," Randall says, annoyed with Kai's lack of reaction.

"It's good to know I don't have to feel bad about what I'm about to do."

Randall gestures with his gun. "Get moving now, and stop pointing that damn thing at me."

"Close your eyes, Kay."

There's something urgent in his tone. My eyelids fall shut before I consciously tell them to. There's no way I could ignore him when he sounds so ready.

And then... an explosion. I'm screaming. There's something wet and warm dripping down my face.



## CHAPTER TWENTY

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**K** ai

“Keep your eyes closed,” I tell her, ignoring the slumped-over mess of the dead bodies. Adrenaline still pumps through me from the suddenness of the shooting. It all happened in a second, maybe two, but it felt much longer. It felt like slow motion.

“O-okay,” she whispers, shuddering all over.

I lean down—she slumped to the floor soon after the gunshot—gently take her by the hips and lift her up. “Don’t open your eyes,” I say as Randall’s body twitches, as bodies sometimes do when their owners are no longer here.

“Are they gone?” she says, her voice so full of tragedy and pain I want to roar at the unfairness of it. She doesn’t deserve this.

“Yeah,” I tell her. “They’re not going to hurt you. Nobody is going to hurt you, ever. *Ever.*”

I lift her into my arms, smoothing my hand to the back of her head and gently guiding her face to my chest. She doesn’t have to see the brutal side of the world. She doesn’t have to know how nasty things can get. I don’t want her ever to have to experience this.

Slowly, I carry her out of the gas station, pushing the door open with my shoe. I can hear sirens in the air. That’s good.

The attendant called the cops. Carrying my woman across the street, I place her on the grass.

She slumps again. It's not her fault. I help lower her to the ground so she doesn't fall. Her limbs feel like Jell-O. Her instincts are trying to tell her that, any second, more dangerous men will appear.

"Can I open my eyes now?" she asks.

"I might have blood on me," I tell her.

She laughs humorlessly, more like she's pushing the pain aside as best she can. "I'd be a hypocrite if I judged you for that."

She opens her eyes, smiles up at me, and then the smile disintegrates into a pained sob. She seems pissed at herself for letting out the tears, looking like she's trying to fight them.

I kneel down. "It's okay," I whisper, reaching out and smoothing my hand over her back. I want to pull her into a proper hug, but I have to keep some of my attention on my surroundings. What if there's a third man?

As my woman cries like her heart is shattering, I gently stroke her back, scanning the road and the gas station, the sirens getting louder. Kay finally rubs her cheeks and sniffles, battling the sobs.

"Thank you," she says. "You saved my life."

"You don't have to thank me for that," I growl. "Saving you and protecting you is my job. No, more than that. It's my purpose, Kay."

She takes one of my hands in both of hers, holds it tightly, leans forward, and kisses me. I lean down and press my lips against her forehead, letting her feel all the love flowing through me.

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"That's open and shut self-defense," Jimmy says, folding his arms in his leather jacket and staring at the cop. "Look at the

security tapes. He was trying to kidnap him and Kayla. He had every right to end those bastards.”

The cop nods, taking notes. He’s a young, serious man who’s had dealings with Titans before. He knows we could make this charge go away if needed... if there *is* a charge. Then one of his colleagues emerges from the back and gives a subtle nod. Every non-biker looks at me as if I might spring into action again.

It was a quick draw, pulling my second pistol, aiming, firing, and not letting my feelings get in the way. I had to become like that kid in the forest, not thinking, not allowing myself to imagine everything going wrong. I couldn’t think about the idea that, possibly, I’d miss and hit my woman.

They’re taking her to the same hospital as Ryan so that she can process the shock. It cut my heart deeply when I heard her scream and the blood shower her face. There was no way I would have let these fuckers take my woman or do what they said they would do.

“Is there audio on the tape?” I ask the cop.

“Yes.”

“Did you hear what Randall and his friend said?”

The man swallows. “They bragged about assaulting several women.”

“I believed they were telling the truth.”

We speak in the corner of the gas station, mess everywhere. It shocks most people when they realize how much blood and guts a person has.

“The club will pay for the cleanup, of course,” Jimmy says.

He’s around fifty, a friend of Ryan and Kayla’s father. He’s always felt like something of an uncle to me. He’s got a shaved head and a giant gray goatee, bushy and wild, giving him a savage Viking look.

I wish I could be with Kayla, holding her close to me, whispering any reassuring words I could think of. However, there’s no place for me there, not now that we’re back with the

club. Our relationship has already split into two parts: the road trip era, where we could pretend the club and nothing else existed, and now, back into our regular world, with Titans watching us. We have to be far, far more careful.

“This war better be over soon,” the cop grunts, closing his notebook.

“What war?” Jimmy says sarcastically.

The cop rolls his eyes. “If this shit carries on, they’ll send the Feds. You’ll never see my face again, and *they* won’t be so damn friendly with you.”

“Don’t forget everything we do for the county,” Jimmy says good-naturedly, as though two men aren’t dead mere feet away.

---

“How bad are things?” I ask Jimmy before we climb onto our bikes.

The sun has set now. My soul feels numb from what I’ve done. It was necessary. I’d kill a thousand men if they threatened my woman, but it doesn’t make me feel good.

Jimmy sighs, stroking his goatee. “They’re pushing us hard, kid. I told Ryan we needed you here. I think this proves it. Fucking monsters, shooting him on Main Street. Could’ve hit a civilian.”

“Ryan wanted me to protect his sister. That was his choice, and I would’ve continued doing it until this war was over if that’s what I had to do.”

“She’s going to be safe with the club surrounded by men. That’s the best place for her, leaving you free to help us. We need the help, kid. I wouldn’t speak so frankly with anybody else, but we need that dog in you.”

I clench my teeth and grip my hands around the handles of my bike. It’s still got mud flecked on it from when I took us into the forest. So many memories of the trip return to me,

strangely shimmering, as if they're from a long time ago. It's as if years have passed, not days. The eras feel separate.

"We're going to push these bastards from our town," I tell him. "We're going to travel to every location we've got and clear them the fuck out. We'll burn all their shit to the ground. We'll kill people if we have to. We'll do whatever it takes. You don't get to hospitalize a Titan and get away with it."

"A-fucking-men," Jimmy says, clapping me on the shoulder.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

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**K** ayla

I sit at Ryan's bedside, holding his hand as gently as possible, waiting for him to wake up. He's been in and out of sleep for the past two days, never able to say more than a few words, just telling me he's happy I'm here. He tells me he loves me and looks at me through bleary, terrified eyes, looking much younger than he is.

It's been two days since Kai shot those men in the gas station. I had my eyes closed, but I know he must've moved lightning-fast to do that. He must've pulled his second gun free so quickly, with far more vicious intent than anybody would guess for a man his size. Other than when he visits Ryan, I haven't seen Kai, but we're never alone. Other Titans are there. We can only steal glances at each other.

The late afternoon sun bleeds through the curtains behind Ryan. The machines beep quietly. I sometimes wish they were louder so I could hold on to the *beep beep beep* noise and tell myself his body is strong. He'll make it. Then slowly, he peels his eyes open. Even slower, a smile spreads across his lips. He looks so young as his eyes go wide.

"Hello, sis. Still here?"

I try to return his smile, but my heart is breaking, shattering right down the middle as I think about the first time I kissed his best friend. More than kissed him. The steaminess, the declaration of forever.

“I’m not going anywhere.”

“Is that why you stink so bad, huh?”

I laugh, prodding him playfully and softly. “You’re one to talk.”

“Bullet, gut. Bad combination.”

“You seem more lucid than last time.”

He nods shortly. “Can I get some water?”

“Of course. Sorry. What am I thinking?”

I go to the corner of the room, grab a bottle of water, and bring it to him.

“Don’t be so hard on yourself,” he says as I unscrew the cap.

When I motion to help him drink it, he groans, shaking his head. He reaches up, takes the bottle, and carefully brings it to his lips. Some drips down his chin, but not much. This is usually where he’d fall back asleep, but he seems stronger now. He lays the bottle down and sits up, wincing, eyes open.

“You can yell at me now if you want,” he says with a grin. “I know I shouldn’t have lied.”

“I’m not going to yell. I understand why you did it. You were protecting me, and you were right. I never would’ve left on Dad’s anniversary if we didn’t have that fight.”

“Who told you?” Ryan asks, and I realize my mistake.

He doesn’t officially know that *I* know about the lie. When he said I could yell at him, he could’ve been talking about the lie that he knew Dad was sick. I can’t do anything except tell him the truth. The guilt has been doggedly chewing at my sense that I’m a good person, a great sister, somebody who can look in the mirror proudly, without shame.

“Kai. Randall—that man, the hitman, whatever he was—was following us.”

“Kai saved your life,” Ryan says, his smile getting sleepy as his head falls back. “I’m not mad he told you. He did the right

thing. He always does the right thing. He's the most capable man I've ever known."

"He is," I whisper, my voice cracking. "He's the best."

Ryan tilts his head and raises his eyebrow. "Are you okay?"

I rub my cheeks. "I'm fine. Happy you're awake."

"Is that all?" he asks, staring at me.

"Why are you looking at me like that?"

"Like what?"

"Like you're trying to read my mind."

He chuckles, but it sounds labored. "It's just this tone you get when you talk about Kai. I think they're pumping me full of drugs. I shouldn't be saying any of this."

It feels like I'm on a tightrope, hands held to my sides as I attempt not to fall.

"Do you still have a crush on him?" Ryan asks, and I fall.

I collapse backward in my chair, wringing my hands, trying to laugh and pretend it's all a big joke. Panic rises, and bad poetry flows endlessly, a busted fountain in my mind.

"It's okay," Ryan says dreamily. "You don't have to be ashamed."

"How did you know?"

"I could just tell."

"Did *he* ever know?"

"No," Ryan says. "He was clueless. He saw you as my kid sister, nothing else, but I always knew you had a thing for him."

"Weren't you mad?"

"Why would I be?"

"He's your best friend."

"It's not my decision who you fall for. Anyway, girls get crushes all the time. It's not a big deal."



I swallow, massaging my forehead, knowing I shouldn't say this without Kai here. I can't keep listening to those beeping machines—reminders of what Ryan suffered—and lie to him.

“What if it wasn't just a crush?” I ask. “What if it was more than that? What if we wanted to be together?”

---

I leave the hospital room with a pit in my belly, Ryan's words bouncing around my mind. Ryan said he wanted to be alone after our conversation. “*I need to rest.*” That was his excuse, but I could tell that the real reason was he didn't want to look at me anymore.

He did his best to hide it, but I can't ignore the fact I've betrayed him. We both have. Me and his best friend. Oh, God, and now... I can't even think about the next bit.

Natasha springs to her feet when I enter the waiting room.

“You're home?” I gasp, rushing forward and pulling her into my arms.

She squeezes me tightly. “I couldn't let you go through this alone.”

I almost break down in sobs again, like after the gas station showdown. Despite showering since then, I can still feel the gore, the mess. We sit together in the corner of the waiting room, away from the Titans who are keeping watch over the hospital, over *me*.

“How's he doing?” Natasha asks.

“Physically, he's doing better,” I reply, “but mentally... Well, it's not like I'm helping him.”

“What?” Natasha gives my hand another squeeze. “Seeing his little sister has given him a boost. I'd bet on that.”

“I don't know,” I sigh. “I told you I betrayed Ryan but didn't tell you all the details.” I lower my voice, though the closest Titan isn't close enough to hear. “If I did, you might feel differently.”

“Lay it on me, then,” Natasha replies. “Don’t hold anything back.”

It’s like the emotions are trying to restrict my speech. Like after the gas station, when I tried to smile, and the sobs broke through anyway. After a steadying breath, I lean close to Natasha, telling her in frantic whispers about the kisses, the steam, and the fact he called me *his* woman. I tell her about him finding the notebook—all of it. Finally, I tell her what happened with Ryan and our plan.

“What if Kai doesn’t answer the way Ryan wants?” Natasha says quietly.

“I don’t know,” I reply, my belly getting tighter, all the nerves conspiring to twist me up inside. “I guess I just have to hope and pray because, honestly, I don’t think I can let him go now. Yet I can’t imagine a life without Ryan in it either.”

“You won’t have to choose,” Natasha says, but she doesn’t sound convinced.

How could she be? I’ve broken one of the unwritten rules of life, a rule everybody should know. A sister doesn’t go after her brother’s best friend. It doesn’t matter if she’s crushed on him for years and thinks she loves him. All that matters is loyalty, but I *am* loyal. To my man. To our future. To the poetry of our connection.

“I hope so,” I whisper. “Kai has to come back in one piece first. It’s not like this war is over.”

“Everybody’s saying now that Kai’s home, there’s no way the Bribones stand a chance.”

“I hope so,” I say again. “If something happened to him...” I bite down. I can’t finish the thought.

If I told Natasha how I’d really feel if Kai got hurt, she’d think I was melodramatic. If I told her my atoms would pull apart, my future would fracture, and my soul would implode... Yeah, even for a poet, she’d think I was over the top.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

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### Kai

I crouch behind a rock, looking at the warehouse, my body pumping with fire, adrenaline, and readiness. Before a job, I used to think about nothing. I'd empty my mind just like I did as a kid, not letting myself think at all, thoughts and fears and everything else slipping from my mind.

However, now, I think of my woman. I think about the future. Instead of crippling me, it makes me even more determined and focused. Anybody who thinks they'll steal that from me is goddamn deluded.

"Are we clear on the plan?" I ask as Jimmy crawls up next to me, wincing slightly as he keeps his posture low. More Titans are getting ready for the battle about twenty yards behind us.

Jimmy swallows. "Yeah, Kai. You want us to set it on fire *before* you go in?"

"It needs to be chaotic," I tell him. "That's where I work best. If the place is burning, they'll make mistakes. They'll rush outside where you and the others can pick them off."

"But what about you?" Jimmy asks.

"I'll be fine," I snap. "I've got a..."

*A reason to live now*, I almost say, but I don't let myself finish that thought. It's time to let the other men see the cold Kai, the

animalistic Kai, the operator who will do any damn thing to keep this club, this town, and my family safe.

“What if one of those bastards gets lucky?” Jimmy asks.

“They won’t,” I snap. “A fight is all about small moments, Jimmy. Half seconds of hesitation. Hell, less than that. That’s where fights, guns or fists, are won and lost. I learned that lesson hard and early. The flames won’t completely distract them, but it’ll be enough to confuse them for a second, and that’s all I need.”

Maybe it’s the same with love. It happens in the small moments when a person forgets to hesitate and forgets to doubt. Perhaps that’s how it slips away, too. A hesitation leads to doubt, leading to a man never doing what he knows he *should*.

I close my eyes for a moment, almost laughing at myself. So, I *should* have thrown myself at my best friend’s sister the first time I knew how badly I wanted her? Is that what I’m thinking?

“Kai,” Jimmy says uncertainly. “Are you good?”

I open my eyes, grit my teeth, and nod. “I’m ready. These bastards will regret the day they ever stepped foot into *our* fucking county.”

---

“Wh-who are you?” the biker whines, crawling across the burning warehouse, searching for his gun. “What are you?”

I ignore the flames hissing all around me. The heat burns against my face and cheeks as the flames consume the floor, walls, and furniture, heating the metal machinery. Soon, the fire will reach the drugs stacked in the corner and reek for miles and miles into the desert.

I catch up with the biker, grab him by the scruff of his jacket, and haul him to his feet. Dragging him out of the warehouse, I toss him into the dust with the other Bribones, five of them cuffed and seated in the dust.

“You shouldn’t have shot my friend,” I growl, laying my pistol against the Bribone’s knee. “This is a warning. We’re taking a kneecap from each of you. That’ll teach you to stay the fuck away from our town. If you come back, it won’t just be a kneecap next time.”

The man gazes up at me, terror flooding his eyes. He’s got a face covered in gang tattoos, but he doesn’t look dangerous as I shove the gun up against his knee.

“I’ve got it on got authority that you men have done some terrible things to people who don’t deserve it. You should count yourselves lucky.”

The first man screams, the gun vibrating in my hand. Jimmy and the other Titans stare impassively as I make my way down the line, the warehouse making a *whooshing* noise as the flames consume more and more of it.

Jimmy said I didn’t have to be the one to do this, but he was wrong. Each shot obliterates more of the guilt I feel, more of the regret. Calling it *regret* is a lie because I can’t fully wish away what I did with Kay. I can’t even partly wish it away, honestly.

So, instead, I go down the line. I shoot these rapists and murderers and monsters in the knee. Deep down, part of me hopes they return and send more men. They’ll force me to become even more of a monster—anything to make me forget Kay’s lips, her touch, her love.

I pull the trigger.

---

Ryan seems healthier, sitting up in the hospital bed with more color in his cheeks. I find it difficult to look at him for too long. I constantly question myself. Every action, reaction, and moment that would’ve been completely normal before.

“I’ve got word they’re retreating,” Ryan says. “They want a truce. They’re demanding one hundred grand.”

“They were going to make a hundred times that pushing their crap,” I say, staring down at my hands, my knuckles bloodied and cut from two days of fierce fighting.

“It’s a consolation,” Ryan replies. “If they leave without nothing...”

“It wounds their pride. I get it. Fine. Pay them, but if they ever come back—”

“They won’t,” Ryan says. “My contact wouldn’t come outright and say it, but you’ve put the fear of God in them, Kai. They’ve started talking about you almost like you’re some mythical figure.”

“I did what had to be done,” I grunt, the hospital quiet, the window dark, a few stars visible. “This club saved me. It’s only right I returned the favor.”

“You’ve been going at it like a demon.”

“Maybe a demon’s what it takes,” I growl. “Look what they did to you. Shot you in front of civilians and put innocent people in danger. Nobody would say they don’t deserve it.”

“I agree with that.” Ryan leans forward, seeming more like his old self. “But *you*, how are you doing? It can’t be easy. You once told me God played a trick on you, making you so good at violence because you’ve never enjoyed it. Even during boxing, you’d get that look in your eye, the rage. Not just rage at what happened to you, but hell, man, rage at the fact you had to throw another punch. Now you’ve had to handle this alone.”

“I’ve had Jimmy and the others.”

“But the burden of doing what had to be done. Making the hard choices.”

He’s looking at me in a way that makes me suspicious. I’m not sure of what exactly, but the feeling is there. It’s as if he’s peering deep into my soul, seeing memories from the road trip a week ago, not even, and yet it feels like an age. It feels like I’ve lived ten goddamn lifetimes since then. That’s what happens when I don’t touch and taste my woman. Hold her.

“We couldn’t let them take our town, our county,” I snarl. “They *put you in the hospital*. They’re lucky that all I took was kneecaps.”

“I’m not talking about that. I’m thinking of a different hard choice.”

Ryan leans forward, his shoulders tight in the hospital gown. He’s always been a fierce bastard but looks downright demonic now. That’s what he called me, a demon, but it applies to him even more.

“I’m going to ask you something, and I need the truth, Kai. We don’t lie to each other. That’s not something we do. It’s not something we’ve ever done.”

I swallow, sitting upright. I’ve got to face this like a man, look it bravely in the face, and know that whatever happens, I’ll have to accept the consequences, even if it means letting Kay go.

*No, no, no.*

A thousand bikes roar in my mind, far fiercer than the bike she sat on in that prairie before everything shattered. Just the shining golden grasslands surrounded us, pleasure between us, hunger, and certainty.

“Ask me,” I tell him.

“If you had to choose between your relationship with Kayla and your friendship with me, which would you choose?”

Suddenly, I stand up. I don’t even mean to. The question is too blunt, too violent. It’s like he’s just punched me in the mouth with it. I walk to the window, then turn when I hear the door open behind me.

“Have you asked him yet?” Kay says with tears in her eyes.

I almost melt at the sight of her. She’s wearing those damn denim overalls, just like when this started, her hair tied up with a few messy strands here and there. Her cheeks are flushed, but not with lust, with pain.

“You told him,” I say.

“I had to.” She rubs a tear from her cheek in classic Kay fashion, like she’s pissed at herself for the emotion. “I couldn’t lie to him anymore.”

“I told her to wait, Kai,” Ryan says. “I knew you had to focus on this mess. She wanted to tell you I knew.”

“And this is your question,” I growl. I clench my hands into fists, feeling the fire and the rage from the past couple of days come back, licking at me like flames in a drug-filled warehouse. “You’re going to make me choose.”

“I have to know,” Ryan says. “You’ve never lied to me, not before this. Do you want to know what I mean when I say choose?”

I return to the bedside and force myself to sit. My body is trying to burst into action as if it thinks there’s another battle to fight. “Sure.”

Kay sits on the opposite side of the bed. It takes everything I have not to reach over and touch her, wrap my hand around hers. Kiss her, taste her again, the only thing that makes all this violence worth it. The only person I ever want. Goddamn, I’m longing for those grasslands.

“If you choose me, you agree to never touch or look at Kayla again. We’ll pretend the road trip never happened. You’ll swear that you’ll let the relationship go.”

I swallow, thinking of the practicalities of seeing her around town. Maybe seeing her find another man, settle down, and have kids. She says I’m the only one for her, but she deserves love. She deserves a family. Could I stand by and watch as she did that with somebody else? I might end up killing the man.

“And if I choose her?” I say.

Ryan stares at me coldly. It’s the same way he looked when he told me about his dad, the same pain in his eyes. “You and Kayla leave town and never come back. You find somewhere to start a family together. You try to be happy and never tell your kids about me.”

“So they’ll never meet their uncle?” I roar, jolting to my feet again.



I can't help it. I know I'm being too loud, letting the fury lead me too much. But the thought of our children never meeting Ryan, never having their uncle in their lives...

"Our children deserve to know you, Ryan. They deserve to have you in their lives."

"So it's true? You want kids?"

Kayla opens her mouth as if to talk, but Ryan glances at her. She closes her mouth. I catch the quick exchange. She agreed to let him do the talking, but I can see the urge to speak bubbling up in her.

"Yes," I tell Ryan. "I never planned on any of this, but without a doubt. I want as many children with Kay as she'll give me. I know how insane that sounds."

"It's stranger coming from you than from you, Kayla," he says, turning to his sister.

"Why?" I ask.

Ryan shrugs. "I always knew Kayla had a crush on you."

"You did?"

"It was obvious. You never noticed because you just saw her as my kid sister."

"Of course I did," I snarl. "What else would she be? Do you know how stunned I was when I saw her when I returned? I didn't even think she was Kayla at first. I thought I was imagining it. I can't explain it."

"You've never really dated. You've never had girlfriends. You've never been in love."

Kayla gasps. "Ryan!"

"It's the truth," I say calmly. "Before you, I didn't think I'd ever settle down. I stopped even trying to date years ago."

"But you risked everything for Kayla," Ryan says. "Our friendship. Your place in the club."

"Yes."

“So choose, Kai,” he says fiercely. “Kayla or me. I deserve that much. You’ve been intimate with my little sister. You’re the best friend I’ve ever had. I deserve an honest choice.”

I walk around the bed, standing near Kay, near the door. I’m ready to punch a hole in the wall. It’s my instinct. Those forest fights... I was never allowed to cry or show anything except teeth and blood, the will to keep going, and the will to hurt and silently suffer. Then Kay came along and cracked open my heart, my hope.

“An honest choice,” I say quietly.

Ryan nods.

*Don’t make me*, I almost say, but he’s right. He deserves better than that. He deserves the truth.

“Kayla,” I tell him, but I can’t wait for his reaction. Turning, I push the door open and stride into the hallway. I can’t believe I just did it. I ended the best friendship I’ve ever had. There’s no going back now. There’s nowhere to run and nothing to do except ride and get away. Too many fucking demons chasing me—demons chasing demons.

“Kai, where you heading?” Jimmy calls over.

I climb onto my bike, start the engine, speed out of the lot, and down the road, kicking up dust. I don’t know where I’m heading, except it has to be away from here. It has to be away from what I just did.

As I pick up the speed, I shout into the wind. I shout like I think my voice will crack the road down the middle and open a pit. Let me fall in. Let me forget. I want a life with Kay. I hunger for it more than anything, and I meant my choice. I choose *her*, but I’ve never imagined my life without Ryan. It hurts. It hurts badly.

I keep riding, not even thinking about where I’m going. Maybe the bottom of a goddamned ditch. That’s where I belong for doing this. It’s the only place that will stop me from doing it again. Kay belongs to me. Nobody, not even her blood or my best friend, can change my mind, but the pain is brutal.

So maybe that's the only way. I pick up speed, surging down the long, lonely roads of our little piece of America. The wind rushes against my face. I'm not wearing my helmet. On the side of the road, hell, it's like the phantoms of the old man and Ryan are looking at me. The old man who watched us fight and taught us, and now I'm here wanting his baby girl so badly I know only a bullet could stop me.

Faster, I push the gas, outrunning Ryan, but he appears ahead of me. I'm not losing it. I can't *really* see him. It's just all this agony inside, twisting me up. I blink, and he's still there, but he's a teenager now. He's got that cocky smirk on his face. People said we could've been brothers. We had the same smile.

*"I knew you'd betray me, Kai. I knew you'd grow up to be a bad guy."*

I push even harder, wishing there were more Bribones in the town so I could let out some of the rage. I'd take more than kneecaps this time. I'd take the pain out on them. Maybe I should keep going. Push past one-twenty, one-forty. Keep on and on until I hit something, and that cocky smirk gets wiped off my face.

Then another phantom appears. This is a feeling, not a vision, not madness. It's the sensation of my woman's arms wrapped around my waist, just like she has been the whole trip. I imagine her pushing herself against me. I remember each sweet moment we've ever shared, from the banter at the gas station to that golden field in Nebraska. With Kay in my thoughts, I slow down and bring the bike to a stop at the side of the road.

I'm panting hard, and there are tears in my eyes.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

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### R yan

“You’re probably wondering why I’ve gathered you all here today,” I say, looking across the main function room of the clubhouse. All the top-level men are here. Jimmy stands off to the side, leaning against the wall, watching me closely. *Gathered here today...* It sounds like a wedding already.

“Maybe you’ve heard the rumors,” I go on, “or maybe you haven’t, but I’ll set the record straight regardless. It’s true. Kai is with my sister, Kayla.”

I wait for that news to settle in. Dad always used to talk about never rushing ahead too fast as a leader. Before he passed, he gave me a lot of lessons, enough to set me up with what I’d need to lead this club into the future. The whole time he was dying, he kept it to himself. Man, life’s a bitch.

“We all know I could take this news very poorly,” I go on. “The only high-level Titan who isn’t here is Kai. He has plans with Kayla and doesn’t need to be here for this. I can make the message clear without him. Blood has been spilled over less. The most fucked-up shit imaginable has been done to people when it comes to family and...”

*Love*, I almost say, but this room is filled with hard men. It’s better to keep the talk practical. “Relationships,” I go on. “But you all need to understand something. Without Kai...” I wince as my wounds try to make me sit down, but I won’t let them. Pain meds pump through me. “Many of us wouldn’t be here

today. We all know Kai's got a dog in him. We all know that, without him, those bastards might've taken more of us. Don't get me wrong, fellas, we would've won either way..."

Some of them nod at this. Personally, I'm not sure it's true. They might've overwhelmed us if Kai hadn't come home and led the final charge against the Bribones,

"But Kai ended things quickly," I growl. "He's a good man. He's like a brother to me."

Jimmy picks this up right on cue. Dad taught me something else. *"A good leader doesn't gather his men unless he's almost certain how the meeting will go."*

"Doesn't that make it worse?" Jimmy says, like we planned. "He's your righthand man, and he went behind your back."

"But he didn't go behind my back," I growl. It's a lie, but it's necessary. "Before anything happened between him and Kayla, Kai did the right thing and asked for my blessing. He offered up his own life. He said to put a bullet in his head if I felt he'd betrayed me."

Respect gleams in the men's eyes. Part of me wonders if Kai should've done this and asked me upfront, but I know more about their relationship now. It was sudden and intense. The need was immediate. Kai told me it was like being struck by lightning. He tried to fight it, but he couldn't. He told me he loves her way too much for that. It's genuine *love*, and Kayla feels the same.

I wish I could tell the men simply this: *"I've never seen either of them happier. I've never seen Kai smile in such a carefree way, even when we were kids."*

"Maybe some of you, especially those with sisters, think I should've taken him up on his offer," I go on, "but this is Kai. He's saved all of our asses more times than we can count. He's a good man. He's loyal, and he made something clear. He intends to marry Kayla and make an honest woman of her, and Kayla feels the same. *That...*"

I slam my hand on the table, ignoring the agony it sends twisting through me.

“Means that, one day soon, Kai and I are going to be family. He’s going to be my brother-in-law. This makes the club stronger, fellas, not weaker. Kai is a good man who will do his best by Kayla. I’ve given him my blessing. When they return...” I don’t mention where they’re going, but I have to say the purpose. “It’s very likely they’ll be engaged to be married. If any of you have a problem with this, I want to hear it now.”

I take a step forward, looking over at the men. Thankfully, none of them seem like they’re going to cause a problem. In fact, a few of them are smiling.

“Nobody?” I say. “Because, injured or not, I’m still ready to draw a circle about this.”

That gets a few laughs from the more experienced members. It’s a callback to the days when my old man ran the club. If two members had a problem, they’d draw a circle with chalk and swing knuckles until one of them quit and left the circle. It’s been years since anything like that went down.

When it’s clear nobody will cause problems, I gesture to the door. “All right, good. Get back to work.”

I wait until everybody but Jimmy is gone and sit at the table, letting out a long, shaky breath.

“You okay, boss?” Jimmy says, sitting opposite me.

“Painkillers are a joke,” I tell him, “but I’ll be good. Just need a couple of weeks.”

Jimmy nods. “I don’t doubt it, but I meant... about Kai and Kayla. Are you really good with that?”

I look at him closely. “Earlier, you said you were happy for them.”

“I am,” he replies. “Kai deserves some joy in his life, and so does Kayla, especially after your dad passed, but I have to be sure you mean it for the club’s sake. There’s going to be no fallout over this?”

I get it. Jimmy’s on the older side. He doesn’t want any more war.

“I meant it,” I say passionately. “I *mean* it. When Kayla first told me, sure, I was shocked. It was like a punch in the gut, but that was before she told me *exactly* how she felt. That was before her eyes started to water when she talked about the children she and Kai want to have together.”

Jimmy sighs, finally letting a smile spread across his face. “Your nieces and nephews will have Kai as their dad—your best friend. That’s something special in my book. That’s a bond most men will never experience.”

“You’re right,” I reply, the same broad smile on my face. As I think of the future and all the laughter and love, it’s enough to force a lot of the physical pain to drift away. “As far as wanting the best for Kayla, who will look after her better? Who will protect her more fiercely than him? Who will fight harder if anybody ever tried to hurt her or their family?”

“Nobody,” Jimmy says with a sense of certainty. “Kai’s always had that animal in him, that darkness, but lately, he seems different.”

“He could still bring that darkness out,” I say.

“He’ll always have that, but now he has another side to him, too. It’s like yin and yang, you know? Kai and Kay? Looking at them, they’re like two halves of a whole.”

I smile even wider, with even more happiness. “You’re right, Jimmy. I couldn’t say this before in front of the others. It’d make me look weak. You know what the life is like. The truth is, the more I think about it, the more certain I am they were made for each other.”

“There was a time you would’ve been called crazy for that.”

“You’re right, and if somebody brought up this sort of business in a bar, hell, I’d probably think the same. A brother shouldn’t let his best friend take his sister, but it’s Kai. It’s just different. He’s a good person. Somehow, he is. He shouldn’t be. You’ve seen that look in his eyes.”

Jimmy takes out a cigarette. “Got that dog in him.”

“Always has,” I reply, “and now, if anybody ever tries to hurt Kay...”

Jimmy grins. “They’ll get bitten. Real bad.”

“Exactly.”

I head into my office when I hear the cell phone ringing. There’s a photo of me and Kai and Dad on my desk, me and Kai grinning on the fishing boat, Dad staring stoically, like always. It’s Kay.

“Afternoon, my lovely sister,” I say, trying to hide the pain in my voice. That speech took way too much out of me.

“I wanted to let you know that Kai says he’s planned another trip,” she says. “So we’ll be gone for a couple of days.”

I have to make a new effort now not to let her know *I* know anything. “Oh, right?”

“Why don’t you sound surprised, huh, Ryan?”

Her voice is full of suspicion. It’s the fun sort of suspicion she used to get as a kid when she and Mom would run around the house doing one of their *investigations*. Kayla went through a detective phase, which she doesn’t even remember, but I do. She’d have that big grin expanded in her magnifying glass.

“I am,” I tell her.

“Hmm... something tells me you already knew.”

Of course, I already knew. Kai’s a good man. He asked me if he could propose to my baby sister. He was sitting beside my hospital bed, wringing his hands, looking at the floor. Then, once he’d said the words, he looked up. Like Jimmy said, he’s a demon, a dog to everybody else, but I see the boy when I look at him. “*We’ll be brothers, Ryan,*” he said.

“*Is that why you’re doing this?*” I asked.

“*No. Hell no. I’d marry her no matter who her family was, but I’m not going to complain. Family.*”

I repeated the word—*family*. There’s no such thing as too much.

“Ryan?” Kay says, drawing me back to the present.

“I’m here,” I reply. “Have fun on the trip, and be safe.”



“I’m with Kai,” she says. “I’m always safe, and trust me. I *know* something’s going on, but I won’t even think or say it just in case I’m wrong. Am I... wrong?”

I laugh. “You haven’t even said what you think it is!”

She laughs, too. “Okay, maybe it’s... No, I don’t want to say it. Hang up on me, Ryan. Please.”

“Okay, but only because you forced me. Love you.”

“Love you too. Wait, what is—”

I hang up. A moment later, she texts me. *Thanks xx*

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

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**K**ayla

“You shouldn’t have been so tough with him,” I snap. “You didn’t have to phrase it like that.”

“I needed the truth,” Ryan says.

I rub my cheeks, standing at the window, watching the cloud of dust Kai kicks up settle. It feels like it’s been years since he wrapped his arms around me, since I felt his lips on mine, the reassuring beat of his heart.

“I’m going to go to his house and tell him.”

“What if he’s not there?”

“I’ll wait for him.”

Ryan sighs. “Fair enough, Kay, but I’m sending some Titans with you just in case he’s not there. They’ll wait with you.”

“Won’t that be obvious?”

Ryan laughs gruffly. “Do you think we can keep this a secret now? You heard him. He made his choice. I’ve never seen him like that before.”

“Really?”

“I never knew he could care about a person that much. Don’t get me wrong. He loves Dad and me and the club, but how he looked at you seemed real, Kay. It was like you said.”

“We belong to each other,” I whisper, more tears trying to swell and slide down my cheeks. “I know it must be so weird for you, but it’s true.”

“What if you’re wrong? What if it’s not forever?”

“It is.”

“If you break up...”

“It’s forever,” I say firmly. “What we have goes beyond words. It goes beyond common sense. It goes beyond any of that. It’s not even something we feel. It’s something we *know*.”

“And it’s not just a crush?”

*It was never just a crush*, I almost say, but that would be taking it too far. That would up the awkward factor for Ryan, but it’s the truth. It’s always felt like destiny, like something that, when it happened, was *meant* to happen.

“It’s real,” I tell Ryan. “I wish you hadn’t gone at him so aggressively, with all that stuff about moving away.”

“I had to know his honest choice. I wasn’t lying about that. I had to know that he was serious about you. How else could I judge?”

“Fine, I get that, but now you’ve upset him.”

“That’s the thing, Kayla. Before you, before this relationship, I’d never seen him upset. Angry, maybe. Pissed. Ready to take on the world, but not like that. I think he had tears in his eyes when I made him choose.”

“I think so, too,” I whisper, “but I doubt he knew. I’m going after him. I love you.”

Ryan and I hug, and then I go outside and try to call Kai. Predictably, there’s no response, so I hop in my car and drive to the outskirts of town, to Kai’s house, as four Titans follow me on motorcycles. I’ve only ever been to Kai’s house a few times, a simple one-story that sits on its own at the end of a long road, with few people around to disturb him and his memories. When I get there, I wait in the car, looking at the dark windows and the lack of plants or decorations.

One day, we will have so much light, joy, and happiness. Children will run everywhere with big grins on their faces, with hints of Kai in their green eyes and traces of me in their hair color.

I turn at the knock on the window. It's Jimmy or Uncle Jimmy, as I used to call him, though we're not related. He's been a fixture in my life for as long as I can remember.

"He was in a hell of a mood when he tore out of that hospital," Jimmy comments.

I climb from the car and sit on the hood. Jimmy stuffs his hands in his pockets and stares at the house. When he frowns, his big gray beard shifts around. Behind us, I can hear the other Titans talking quietly.

"Did he and Ryan have a fight?" Jimmy asks, looking at me closely. "Or did something happen on that road trip?"

I feel the heat of a flush against my cheeks, not from shame, regret, or anything like that. It's from the club thinking I'm a terrible sister, a monster who would betray her own brother.

"Why do you ask that?"

Jimmy sighs. "Kai's had the devil in him. He does his duty when we've had to fight in the past. He's the best soldier we've ever had. He's also one hell of a leader when it's time, but lately, this is different. It's like he has a purpose. He's fighting like a man who..."

Jimmy stops himself, glancing behind us at the other Titans. Somewhere in the dark surroundings, an animal wails.

"It's okay. You can say it."

Jimmy moves closer, lowering his voice. "Did something happen out there... between you two?"

"What if it did?" I reply. "What if we're planning on being together? What if Ryan gave his blessing? How would the club feel about that?"

"If Ryan gave his blessing? I think everybody would stand by you both. Kai's loved. That's the truth. Everybody loves him. He's a man many look up to. He's loyal. He's smart. He's a

good person, despite this life, despite the fighting. He's a good man."

I let myself smile, then turn when I hear a motorcycle. It's Kai, his body seeming huge in the leather jacket, his eyes narrowed and fierce, and his hair messy from the ride without a helmet. I let out a shuddering noise the second I see him, my resolve almost cracking.

"You can leave us now, right?" I ask Jimmy.

"Aye," he says. "You're safe with Kai."

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Kai stands at the entrance to his small, plantless garden, more a patch of dirt than anything. He's watching the Titans ride away, his hands trembling slightly at his sides.

I stand beside him, sneaking glances at his fierce features in profile. He stares and stares, and then, when they're gone, he turns to me. I expect him to be angry, but suddenly, his hands are on my hips. He pulls me right up against him, letting me feel his heat, his fire, all the passion between us.

*Dormant for an age,*

*But now we're together.*

*Out of the cage,*

*It feels even better.*

I'm kissing my man, our tongues connecting in a collision of bliss. His hands sink deeper into my hips.

"I meant it," he says passionately. "I choose you. I hate myself for it. I hate that I'll never see Ryan again."

"Wait," I gasp, squeezing my hands against his chest. "That was a test. I told him not to do it. I *told* him, Kai, but he said I had to do what he asked. He said I owed him that, and he was right. I did. After what we did together, but it was a—"

"Wait, slow down." He takes my hand, squeezing it warmly. "Let's go inside. You can explain."

We go into his small kitchen, which looks into the town, a few lights blinking in the night. Kai pours us both a glass of water, and then we sit together at the table, his hand resting possessively on my leg.

“A test,” Kai says.

“When I told him about us, about what we said, our connection.”

“Our connection is the most real thing I’ve ever felt,” Kai growls. “We belong together. We’re going to have a family together. I don’t give a damn if I sound like a stuck record. It’s the truth.”

“I know that. I told him,” I say, “but he wanted to be sure. He said if you chose me while thinking the choice was real, you meant it because you always say your friendship with him is the most important thing.”

“It was,” he says gruffly.

“*Was?*”

Kai turns and leans down. Our lips touch, and then we’re lost in the kiss. He slides my hand up his leg, then shudders, moving away slightly. He places his hands on the table.

Miraculously, there’s a smirk on his lips. “If I keep touching you before we finish talking, there won’t be any talking.”

I smile, feeling lit up for the first time in days, like there’s a fireworks show inside me. It’s the bright joy of being with my man again, of knowing we never have to be apart.

“So Ryan doesn’t want us to leave?” Kai asks.

“No,” I reply. “He said he’s never seen you like this before. He sounded *happy* for us, and Jimmy guessed something was up. He said, with Ryan’s blessing, the club would support us. I think... I think we might be able to be together, Kai. I think it’s possible.”

He stands up, then grabs my chair and turns me. When he leans down to pick me up, I feel weightless, soaring in his arms and wrapping my legs around him. I squeal in delight at his calm strength. He places me down on the kitchen counter,

kissing me passionately. Pushing his body against mine, I feel the lust in his body, his length grinding against my core.

“We’re wearing too many clothes,” I whisper between kisses, even as nerves try to stifle my words.

“Be careful what you say,” Kai growls, his fingers sinking into my hips. “I won’t be able to stop myself from claiming your perfect, hot pussy if I strip you naked. I’ll take your cherry and fill you with my come.”

I stroke my fingers down his face, locking eyes with him. “And start a family, right?”

“We could conceive our first child today,” he growls. “This could be it, Kay. The beginning of the rest of our lives.”

“The beginning was on the road when I heard your bike’s engine behind me.”

“When I saw you as a silhouette in the sun. Yeah, you’re right, firecracker, that was the beginning.”

I hold his face softly, feeling the heat thrumming through him. “What if I’m not a firecracker in bed?” I murmur. “Will you still want me?”

“You don’t have to *be* anything except who you are,” he says, claiming my hips with more force. “This isn’t a performance. You’re not trying to prove anything to me. Just being you, Kay, that’s enough. It’s more than enough. You’re the only woman I ever want. Ever need.”

“Forever?” I whisper.

He smiles, leaning in for another kiss. “Forever.”

We’re all over each other again. As we sink passionately into the kiss, he lifts me up, his hands propped on my ass and my legs wrapped around him. My thighs ache, but it’s worth it to feel his length crushing through the denim, previewing his hardness, his urgency. He carries me up the stairs, kicks open the bedroom door, and lays me on the bed.

Standing at the end, clothed in darkness, he looks ready for anything. Slowly, he walks across the room, switching on the

light. His bedroom is simple, like a barracks, with a few photos of him and Ryan, Dad, and other Titans on the wall.

“This place could use a lady’s touch,” I say when he returns to the bed.

He smirks, leaning down. “That’s exactly what I was thinking.”



## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

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**K ai**

I pull her overalls down her curvy body, revealing her hips since her white shirt is riding up. She has a few marks on her gorgeous hips as if previewing how her perfect body will respond when pregnant. It makes me even harder, somehow, my rock-hard dick leaking hot precome.

Once I've got her overalls completely off, I shudder, standing at the edge of the bed and looking down at her naked legs. She still has her socks on, her thick calves taking shape as she points her toes. It's like nerves and lust are warring inside of her. I groan when I see a spot of wetness on her panties.

"Everything off," I growl.

"That's funny," she says, with a cute, sassy head tilt. "I was just about to say the same thing."

I smirk as I remove my jacket and pull my shirt over my head. She gets all excited. Her eyes open wide when she sees my bare torso. It's a hot-as-fuck look that tells me how eager and ready her youthful body is.

My woman, my princess, my queen, my ride-or-die. I can't refer to her as *bitch*, even in my thoughts. She's my ride-or-die soulmate.

I strip naked, my cock springing free, precome glistening on the end. I only notice that because I follow her gaze. Her mouth opens, her chest rising and falling as she unclips her

bra. A groan escapes me when her tits spill free, thick veins moving through them. I growl and leap onto the bed, taking one breast in my hand and sucking her nipple. I swirl my tongue around it, tasting her, as I bring my hand to her underwear with my other hand. She gasps when I roughly pull them down.

“I need your fucking pussy,” I snarl, then suck her eager nipple again.

I guide my hand to her sopping virgin entrance, rub her wetness from her hole to her clit and all over her swollen, eager lips. She’s talking to me wordlessly. Each moan and twitch in her hips tells me to keep going and give it to her with more passion. Pausing, I bring my hand to her mouth, leaning up to look properly at her. Her hair falls across the sheets, so messy and sexy, free from her ponytail.

“Suck,” I tell her. “Get me good and wet for your innocent little slit.”

“I won’t be innocent for long,” she whispers, then leans forward, sucking on my finger.

Seed burns up my shaft as I watch her bobbing her head up and down. I feel her soft lips on my finger.

“Good girl,” I growl, finally letting go of the darkness, the pain, the war.

There’s only my woman’s wet, needy hole and how she twitches and moans as I push my finger inside her. I lean back, giving me the perfect vantage point as she writhes from side to side, her hands clawing at the sheets.

“Rub those big tits instead,” I snarl. “But when you’re going to cream for me, you let them go. I want to watch them jiggle for me. Fuck, you’re so *thick*.”

I snap, losing control, leaning down and sucking her nipples almost aggressively. I massage and own and claim her tits, sucking her ripe fertile nipples, squeezing them gently so they get hard and excited for me. At the same time, I fuck her tight hole with my finger. I move faster and faster. In gunfights, sometimes, time loses all meaning. A split-second decision

becomes years. I've never experienced that anywhere else except with my woman.

She gasps and moans as I own her nipples and her pussy at the same time. Finally, I lean back again. I can feel her walls quivering around my finger like they're driving her closer and closer to the edge. I can see it in her fluttering eyelids, her mouth open as she gasps and whimpers.

"Keep your hands off your tits," I tell her, staring at the way they shake, shimmering for me, her fleshy body, her perfect fullness.

I gasp as hot precome leaks out of me, a wave of it. For a second, I think I've come, wasting my seed, but I'm still rock-solid.

She moans as the orgasm squirts out of her eager hole. She soaks my finger, turning the gray sheets darker as wave after wave of lust spills out of her. She vibrates like a bike in overdrive, whimpering. Then she sits up and stares at me with her mouth wide open.

"I don't... I've never done that before," she whispers.

"It's so fucking sexy," I snarl.

"Is it?"

In answer, I go down between her legs and indulge myself in her pussy. I lick her all over. She's so wet that my tongue slips from her lips to her clit, her hole, and inside her soaked entrance. This must be destiny giving her the wettest orgasm of her life because it's time. We're going to make a baby together.

I tongue her hole, then climb up the bed, planting my fists on either side of her body. She reaches up and claws onto my arms, staring into my eyes, nodding as she bites her lip.

"That better mean you're ready." My voice thrums like a bike. "I'm taking that tight virgin hole. I'm fucking you however I like. I own your body. Every inch. Forever. Say it, Kay. Say it now."

“You own me,” she gasps adorably. “Every inch. Forever. I promise.”

Reaching down, I grab my shaft. I know I’m close to losing it when I feel how the seed rushes around the place I touch, warm on the surface. I guide myself to her, pressing myself against her slick wetness. My tip slides up to her clit. She whimpers in that way I love so damn much. It’s like every moment of pleasure is a surprise, a treat.

“Do you think you could come again?” I groan. “From this?”

She digs her fingernails into my arms with more pressure the quicker I rub myself against her clit. She nods, gasping louder. I keep going, obsessed with getting her youthful pussy as wet as possible, captivated by her moans. Each one is a gift. She starts to shake when I slip down and accidentally slide into her just an inch.

“Oh, *fuck*,” I growl, knowing I can’t return to her clit now, knowing I’ve got to stay here, where I belong.

Her walls close tightly around my tip. I’m tingling like crazy already, right at the end of my cock, as if my come just wants to explode this second. She’s not gasping anymore. She makes a grunting noise. I clear my vision and look at her face. She’s biting down.

“Are you...”

“Keep going,” she moans. “It’s big. Oh, it’s so big.”

When she says, *keep going*, my feral instincts guide me to push deeper into her. I stare down at my dick disappearing beneath her sexy-as-hell belly. I’m claiming her, inch by inch, as she whimpers, gasps, and gives me more perfect moans.

She slides her hands up my arms to my shoulders, clinging on as I push even more inside her. I’m so big that I must be filling her up. Her hole finally grips my base tightly, properly squeezing on. Her body is trying to keep me there and make me come inside her right now.

“You’re h-huge,” she whispers.

“You can take it,” I growl.

She has to. She has to take every inch until I've exploded inside her.

"It's... Oh, do that again."

I pull out of her a bit, then slide in as slowly as possible. She probably doesn't realize how difficult it is for me not to give in to the savage inside, to savage *her* body. If I fully gave into the hunger inside of me, I wouldn't be able to stop myself from pulling out and then slamming into her slit until she's whimpering, creaming, and soaking the fucking sheets.

But it's her first time. I listen to her body. I slide out, then slip in. She moans and shifts against me, nodding.

"Like that, firecracker?" I growl.

"Y-yeah," she moans. "Oh, Kai."

I almost lose it when she moans my name like that. We rock together, with me slipping a little more out with each thrust. We do this until the rhythm takes me almost all the way out, my dick kissing her hole, my tip burning with all the come trying to explode from me.

Then I drive back into her harder than I have yet. Her gasp tells me she likes it. So does her smile, her eyebrows raised, almost as if she's shocked by how good it feels. I slide out and push in again, her pussy flowering for me, just enough to start drilling her hole, but she still feels so damn tight.

She rocks on the end of my dick, bouncing up and down in time with me. All the while, she's got that pretty, astonished look on her face, her mouth open as her moans take shape. They go from slightly nervous to fully immersed in the pleasure, and when I look down, I think I see why. Evidence of her virginity spills out. She sees and winces.

"Kai..."

"Don't be ashamed," I tell her. "You're giving yourself to me."

"Forever," she whimpers, reaching up and touching my face. "Yeah?"

"Forever," I growl, grinding into her. "For. Ev. Er."

With each syllable, I slam into her harder. I end up collapsing against her as she wraps her arms around me, and we bounce together, lost in the feeling, my cock owning her pussy over and over.

“Ah, ah.” Her fingers claw against my back, cutting repeatedly, but I don’t give a damn. The marks will be a reminder of her first time, evidence of her passion. “Yes, yes, yes.”

I try to lean back, but she holds me tighter. “No, Kai. Please.”

“I want to watch you cream for me.”

“Stay here with me.”

I turn my face, kiss her cheek, and find her mouth. We slow our pace as we kiss passionately, lost in each other. Her hips twitch, and then I feel her orgasm seeping down my cock, her hot wetness spreading. Kissing becomes impossible when she starts moaning. I lean back just enough to watch the blush spreading across her cheeks and down her chest. Her body shakes and shivers and, fuck yeah, *jiggles* for me. She’s trembling all over.

At the end, I lean back, watching her as she bounces up and down. Hell, she knows what she’s doing. As her orgasm nears its end, she grabs her tits, pushes them together, and squeezes so her breasts flush like her cheeks.

“Come...” She pauses for a moment as if nervous. Then she says it, and she almost finishes me. “In me. Come in me, Kai. Please come in me.”

“Fuck, fuck,” I roar, my head cloudy, my heart slamming so hard. “Keep saying that.”

“Come in me,” she moans. “Oh, yeah. Come in me. We can start a family. Together.”

“Together...”

I collapse atop her, drilling her so hard now. She pulses against me. Seed rushes up my shaft. It bulges in my length, and then it explodes. All the pleasure fixates on the tip of my cock, a single searing point, my mind bright with a thousand visions

of my woman. Right at the end, she's wearing a wedding dress. She's smiling and gesturing to me, to the future.

"Jesus," I say, drawing in a shaky breath as I roll aside.

I pull her into my arm and stroke my fingers through her hair.

"That was the best first time anybody has ever had in the history of first times."

I laugh, feeling more carefree than I can ever remember. I let the laughter take me, not caring if I sound crazy. She laughs in the same crazy way, both of us caught up in it, lost to each other.

I love her. I love her so damn much. I almost say it, but I need to speak to Ryan first. I need to show him how much his support means to me and how serious I am, but it's the truth. I love her so damn much.

"I mean it," she says, giggling. "How can you deny that, huh?"

"I'm not arguing."

"What were you thinking about just then?" She trails her fingertip up my chest. "You got this dreamy look in your eyes."

"I did?"

*I love you. I love you. I love my best friend's little sister.*

"Yeah," she says, "and now you're getting all awkward about it."

I smirk and kiss the top of her head. "Maybe I want my lady to give me time. Maybe I need to make some arrangements. Maybe, if you're getting the hint, you'll understand."

"I'm getting it. I think I am." She sounds giddy. "But I don't want to say it. What if I'm wrong?"

"It involves rings and—"

"No, don't spoil the surprise."

I laugh and kiss her again, feeling intoxicated. "It can't be a surprise. I knew the second I saw you on that road that you

were the woman for me. I didn't have to think about it. Now, I'm more certain than I've ever been about anything."

"What? Because we had sex, and I was, frankly, a ten out of ten?"

"You're a ten out of ten, all right," I say passionately, "but just for me."

"Of course. Always. Whenever I say stuff like that, I only mean for you."

"I like reminding you," I smirk, squeezing her shoulder. "I like you knowing that you're my lady. Just mine."

"If I'm right about what I was thinking..."

"I think you are."

She tightens her hand against my chest. "Then my answer would be—"

"Don't say it," I tell her. "Don't spoil the surprise."

She laughs softly. "Do you really think there's going to be a surprise?"

"Every day with you is a surprise," I tell her. "Every smile. Hell, every moment. Everything we do, it's a surprise. How perfect it is. How perfect *you* are."

*"Thanks for being so nice to her, man,"* imaginary Ryan says. *"Thanks for taking care of her."*

Silently, I reply that I always will, and soon, I'll tell him in person.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

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### K ayla

We ride across Nebraska together, the yellow prairies stretching around us, reminding me of the first time we came here. It's been two weeks since the road trip, since the war, and since Ryan gave us his blessing.

That's two weeks of Kai and me being together openly, without Ryan, the club, or anybody judging. It's been the brightest two weeks of my life, waking in my man's arms, sometimes in the morning so we can start the day together. Or in the middle of the night, when I can listen to his heartbeat.

The war's over. We won. The town is returning to normal—the Titans watching over, keeping the peace, and nobody more than my Kai.

Ryan is slowly getting better. He's walking with a cane now. The injury is healing, and there's no sign of infection. Every time he sees me and Kai together, he smiles. The other day, I heard him and Kai talking in the kitchen. I wasn't eavesdropping, exactly. All the doors were open, and I was upstairs. Anyway, it's stuff Ryan has said to me before.

“It was weird at first, seeing you kiss her, but the weirdest part, Kai, is how *not weird* it seems. I look at you, and I see two people in love. I see a couple. Nobody would question that you belong together. That's the part that freaks me out.”

“How *not* freaky it is?” Kai said, and I could hear the smile in his voice.

He’s been smiling far more than he used to ever since he had his talk with Ryan.

Now, we’re returning from Illinois. Parting with Dad’s watch was painful, but I know why Ryan wanted to do it. The Emily Dickinson book is worth a lot of money, enough to make a real contribution to our family. Kai wanted to go sooner, but I said I had to stay behind until Ryan was healthier.

Kai comes to a slow stop at the side of the road.

“Why have we stopped?” I ask as butterflies dance in my belly.

After our first time, he hinted about a proposal. I’m almost certain that’s what he was talking about. Since then, he’s given no sign that was it, and I haven’t pushed him. It’s been simply enough being together, but now, those feelings return, flurrying through me.

We step off the bike. Kai removes his helmet, his messy hair bobbing around his head. He’s been working out a lot lately, sometimes after we have sex. He does naked pushups as I watch him. It’s making him fill out his leather jacket even more, everything bulging, swelling.

I take off my helmet and toss my hair out.

“K-Kai?”

“I think this is the exact spot,” he says, a warm smile on his lips.

I’m already close to tears. Please, let me be right.

“I think it might be.”

“The place we told each other,” he says passionately. “The place we learned, hell, we’re both crazy.”

“You’re damn right we are,” I say, smiling widely, my cheeks aching with all the love bursting out.

“Here,” he says. I almost scream when he reaches into his pocket, expecting the ring box, but it’s a small package. “Open

it.”

I peel away the brown paper. My heart shudders. It’s Dad’s pocket watch.

“But I’ve got the book in my bag,” I whisper. “I thought we traded.”

“I paid for the book. You’re my lady, and you deserve to have something to remember your dad by. I’ve been living cheap for years. I own that old house. I’ve got money saved. I’ll take care of you and support you in whatever you choose. I love you, Kay.”

The pocket watch *tick, tick, ticks* like a heartbeat, and I wonder if I’ve heard him correctly.

“I love you so much,” he continues, and I know I’m hearing him right. “I wanted to wait until today. *The* day. You were such a good little sister, waiting for Ryan to get better.”

“I love you too,” I say, moving closer to him.

He raises his hand, trembling, his smile twitching. “If I kiss you now, I won’t be able to stop. First, I must tell you that you’re the most beautiful, kindest, strongest woman I’ve ever met—the best person I’ve ever met. After what happened at the gas station, you recovered. You focused on your brother. On *us*.”

My thoughts flash back to the sudden violence. “You’re strong, Kai. After what they forced you to do...”

I don’t know all the details of the days following the standoff, only that the other men look at Kai like he’s some kind of god. There’s an aura around him, dark and broody, that tells the entire world he’s not a man to be messed with.

“It’s behind us now,” he says, reaching into his pocket again. “I only care about the future.”

He lowers himself to one knee, making me scream, with nobody around to hear. I cover my mouth with my hands, leaping up and down.

“Kayla Lewis...” He opens the ring box, showing a large, glittering rock and a sparkling white gold band. “Will you

marry me?”

“Yes,” I yell. “Oh my God, yes, a million times... *yes, yes, yes.*”

He laughs, smiling, looking almost boyish as he takes the ring from the box and guides it toward my finger.

All around us, the landscape glistens, bright golden. Yet it's pale compared to the love shining inside me, whelming until nothing else exists. There's only this moment, the cold metal of the ring against my finger, his lips as we kiss, embracing like...

*We never want to let go,*

*Alone together always.*

*Because we are one, just us,*

*Existing as the world stands still.*

I'm crying as we kiss, holding him tighter, knowing I'll relive this moment a thousand times.

# EPILOGUE

ONE MONTH LATER

**K ai**

“Is that all you got?” Ryan says, laughing as I jab the heavy bag.

He’s standing behind it, steadying it. He’s far healthier than he was just one month ago. The world seems different from before the road trip, brighter somehow, though summer’s nearing its end. There’s this light inside me, making laughter come easier.

The memories of the forest, all that hell, the bloodshed, and the violence. It all fades away as I chuckle and toss Ryan a wink. It’s sheer joy just being here with my best friend as my fiancée checks on the lasagna inside the house. It feels so perfect, especially with the sun setting.

“Take it easy,” I tell Ryan.

He grins, walking around the bag and leaning against my garden fence. It’s freshly painted, and I’ve arranged some flowerpots around the edge. Since my woman moved in, I’ve got much more motivation to make the place look good.

“I feel fine,” he says. “Healthier than a horse.”

“That’s because you’re not human,” I tease. “That shot would’ve killed most men.”

“No, Kai,” he says, shaking his head.

“It would have. Trust me.”

“No, you’re right, but I didn’t survive because I’m tough. That’s not how injuries work, and you know it. I was lucky. I’m here. I get to witness this.”

“You sound drunk.”

Ryan grins, taking his beer from the ground and waving a casual toast before sipping. “Maybe a little,” he chuckles, “but I mean it. Every time I come here, I’m so happy you found each other.”

“It’s so surreal hearing you say that,” I reply, shaking my head like I always do.

I keep expecting to wake up back at the gas station. It turns out I didn’t take out Randall and his criminal goon. I didn’t save my woman. Instead, I’m bleeding. My soul’s trying to keep me going by feeding me my perfect life, but it’s real. Ryan’s smile is real.

“It’s the truth,” he says. “I never thought I’d say it, but it is...”

He trails off, looking over my shoulder. I see my fiancée standing with an object in her hand, shaking all over, tears in her eyes. I rush to her, thinking about war and violence. Then I get closer and see the big smile on her gorgeous lips. A happy flush spreads across her face, her eyes sparkling, joy beaming from every inch of her.

“Tell me,” I say, taking her hand, the one not holding the test.

“It’s positive,” she says, voice cracking. “We’re going to be parents. Ryan, Ryan, you’re going to be an uncle.”

Ryan rushes over, then stops, looking at me as if I’ll resent him being part of this moment. I wrap my arm around him and pull him into a hug. The three of us embrace. Kay’s crying softly, my eyes stinging as I think about our son or daughter. The start to the life I wanted the first time I saw her on that dusty road, framed by sunlight.

# EPILOGUE



SIX YEARS LATER

## **B**aby Fletcher

“I’m not a baby anymore, Uncle Ryan.”

I wrap my arms around Uncle Ryan’s big, strong body. He’s so big and sturdy and carries me around pretty good. We’re going to the best place ever, the garage. My little sister is sleeping, not my *first* little sister, Jasmin. She’s the new one, the crying one, baby Lola.

Lola is very cute and cries and eats a lot. Mommy and Daddy say I was like Lola, but I tried to get in her crib once, and it didn’t work very good.

“Okay, big man Fletcher, then. How does that sound?”

I laugh at Uncle Ryan’s funny voice. We’re walking past the park, and lots of people stop to say hello and tell me I’m cute. They also say hello to Uncle Ryan and talk about motorbikes and stuff like that. I like the sunshine and the clouds, so I look at them, but not right at the sun. That’s a baby move, and I’m big man Fletcher now.

“Uncle Ryan, do you like me or Lola or... or *Jasmin* more?”

My sister’s name was really hard to say once, but it isn’t so bad now.

Uncle Ryan laughs. It’s so cool to get him to laugh like that.

“Still trying to get me on this question, eh, kid?”

“Big man Fletcher!” I remind him.

“Sorry, sorry. Big man Fletcher.”

“Is it ’cause Lola is the smallest and cutest and cries a lot?”

“All of you are miracles, Fletch. That’s the thing. I look at you, and I see my dad’s eyes. I see Kai in you, too. I see my little sister. It’s the same with all of you, little pieces of our family.”

“But why m-m-m...”

“Miracles?”

“Yeah!”

“When you’re older, you’ll learn about how your mom and dad met. You’ll learn things that make you wonder how they ended up together. You’ll see why I think it’s a miracle. They had every reason to fail, but look at them now, Fletch.”

We walk around the corner. The garage is just right there! Uncle Ryan is still talking, but I’m mostly looking at the cool, shiny bikes and how big the wheels are. There are all these cool big men with their beards and arms all inky with the needle that Daddy used on his arm ink, too.

Uncle Ryan says, “Little sis is earning money as a poet. Do you have any idea how hard that is? And ever since he proposed, Kai’s been a fiend for the business side of the club. He’s franchised our brand to garages all over the state, let alone the county. He’s making us all rich without... ah, the other stuff.”

My smile is getting bigger and bigger and bigger and, yep, bigger when we walk into the main garage, the stinky area with the oil and the metal. It’s like I’m inside a big, giant metal monster machine.

“All while raising a family,” Uncle Ryan says, putting me down. He ruffles my hair and grins. “You didn’t hear a word I said, did you?”

I put a big, *big* smile on my face. “Yeah, Uncle Ryan, I did.”

“Oh, so you know I asked you what bike you want to sit on first, huh?”

I'm getting all bubbly inside. That's what Mommy says. You feel bubbles when something really cool is going to happen, but you have to, uh, stay... calm. Stay calm so the bubbles don't pop, and you can have all the fun.

"Yes, Uncle Ryan."

He chuckles, scooping me into his arms.

# EPILOGUE

SIX YEARS LATER

## K ayla

Fletcher paces up and down in front of my tall French windows.

Since having six kids, we've moved into the growing suburbs one town over. We're still within riding distance, meaning the kids always see their uncle, aunt, and cousins.

I smile as I watch Fletcher pacing. He seems like he's becoming a young man now, with his thoughtfully knitted eyebrows and wavy black hair reminding me of his dad's. However, Kai's is turning more deliciously silver by the year.

When we told Fletcher he didn't have to choose between bikes and poetry, it was like a spark lit in him. *"I'm going to be like one of those warrior poets, Mom. You'll see. Tough and smart and sensitive. Can a man be all those things?"*

Just then, his dad walked in. The old Kai might've said no, might've said a man has to seal parts of himself away, but Kai is tough and sensitive in equal measure.

He can bring the beast out in him, the Titan, especially in the bedroom. When he spanks me and tells me I'm naughty for my crush, I feel the savage. When he holds me gently or quietly climbs out of bed when our youngest, Kayleigh, starts to cry, I feel the soft, comforting warmth.

"What if I can't think of an opening line?" Fletcher says, running a hand through his hair. "What, Mom?"

I grin. “You remind me of your dad when you do that.”

Fletcher goes to the window and sticks his head out. Kai is in the pool with the kids. We’ll join them in a few minutes after I’ve helped Fletcher with his homework. “Dad, Mom said I’m more handsome than you!”

“She said *what?*” I hear Kai roar in the pretend monster voice our youngest kids love. Then I hear their beautiful, precious giggling, their laughter that brings with it a thousand moments of motherhood.

“Speak from the heart,” I tell Fletcher once he’s turned back to me, a mischievous smile on his face.

Fletcher runs his hand through his hair again. “I’m like a... uh, lonely bike, always riding. Then I met you, and my heart, it stopped hiding. I’ve got a passenger now and, uh, its name is... love. Mom?”

“Keep going,” I whisper.

“Its name is love. There’s no brighter light than us. Mom, you’re crying.”

“It’s just... How did I make *you*? It’s brilliant, Fletch. Really.”

He walks over to me, leaning down—already so tall—and wraps his arms around me. “I love you, Mom.”

“I love you too.”

THE END

Want more? Check out my latest release *Kidnapped By My Mom’s Ex* [here](#), or subscribe to my newsletter [here](#) to get a free, new, original story and stay up to date.

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KIDNAPPED BY MY MOM'S EX



## CHAPTER ONE

### **Lena**

I sit on the couch, the note in my hands, the note that basically tells me they're going to kill my mom. They don't come right out and say it, whoever these assholes are, but I get the message.

*We need your daddy's wallet, or you can say goodbye to Mommy. We will send a courier tomorrow at six p.m. to collect the wallet.*

The message is written in jagged, almost angry handwriting. They're talking to me like I'm a kid, some scared twenty-one-year-old coward who will bend the second I see this, but I don't even know what they mean. I run my thumb over the words *daddy's wallet*.

I look around at the middle-class living room. The window looks out onto the suburbs. It's a Saturday morning, and a few children are riding their bikes on the street, making that part of me ache, the one that always longs for a family. But I can't think about that now.

This place, the expensive coffee table, the fancy wallpaper, it's all new. We moved in two years ago, five years after Dad died in a plane crash. The crash has been turned into a Netflix show since then. It was a huge tragedy for the world, but it obliterated Mom. She cried all day and night. In our neighborhood, we had to find a way to make money, not just to pay rent but because we were robbed, too.

I stepped up. I worked illegally, cash-in-hand jobs. I tied my hair up in a cap and wore overalls to the warehouse and hoped none of them noticed or cared I was a girl, a *teenage* girl. I had to grow up fast. Then, just like that, we were in a new world—this suburban paradise. I'd always assumed Mom's ex had given her the money. Just before we moved, she'd had a brief month-long relationship with a rich kingpin-type guy, Jamie King. I get the sense this type of cash is nothing to him.

With his dark hair, his strong jaw, those sharp blue eyes, and that smirk on his lips when he glanced my way as if he liked what he saw... No, I can't think about him, either. Although, I might have to call him. The cops were reluctant to register my mom as a missing person. Mom had a girls' trip to Vegas but was supposed to return the day before last. They probably assumed she was on a bender. This note would change their mind, but what if the kidnappers somehow find out?

I stand and grit my teeth. I have to know if Jamie's the one who gave Mom the cash for us to live here. My skin shivers just thinking about him, which is distracting and *not* what I should be doing.

I remember walking into the warehouse, the man laughing at me when I asked for a job and giving me one almost as a joke. Then, the look in his eyes months later when I worked hard and never missed a shift. Not that I liked the work, but I proved myself.

I don't know who's taken my mom. I don't know what they mean by my dad's *wallet*, but I've got a theory. If Jamie didn't pay for this place, then something to do with dad's *wallet* did, whatever that ultimately means. That's why people do things. I learned that the first time somebody broke into our house and took my battered old MP3 player. People are driven by money.

Walking into the foyer, I flip through Mom's address book. She was weirdly proud when she bought this chic table and the leather-bound address book, though she had a cell and had never used an address book before. It was just nice to see her smile. When she told me a barefaced lie about some distant uncle leaving her the money—she actually said this—I turned

off the critical part of my mind. I just accepted it to see her smile. Maybe that was a mistake.

When I find Jamie's number, a tight feeling grips me. I almost feel my legs getting weak. It was so hard not to stare at him the few times he and Mom were around the house together or when he came to pick her up in that ominous black car with the tinted windows.

He was always wearing a sharp suit, his dark hair combed back, old-fashioned, with streaks of silver in it. He had an expensive, shiny watch on his wrist, wearing it casually as he leaned against the car as if nothing mattered. I wanted to run out there and touch the top of his chest, where he'd left a couple of buttons undone.

But nope. My hands are shaking. I'm sitting on the bottom step, I realize. I've stumbled over here. Dammit, this is stupid. I'm on the verge of tears. Mom's missing, and here I am, thinking about her ex.

I take a few moments to gather myself, breathing slowly. Returning to the book, I pick it up, typing Jamie's number into my cell. I don't press *call* right away. I'm terrified I will say something I don't mean to. We never spoke much, literally just *hey* and *hello*.

No, it's time to get it together. Mom could be anywhere, held by anyone. I need to check this clue off the list.

[>One-click Professor Ink<](#)

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