



Ringov's
FREEDOM

DESERT OUTLAWS MC **BOOK THREE**

BAILEE JAMES

ringer's freedom

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LILAH

Despite their age difference, Lilah's been in love with Ringer for as long as she can remember. Her dreams were shattered when he went to prison shortly after she turned 15. Over the course of his sentence, during which he refused to let her visit, Lilah grew up. She forced herself to get over her little crush on her father's friend. But when she lays eyes on him for the first time since his release, all the feelings from her past come rushing back. And to make matters worse, he's looking right back at her the way she's always wanted.

RINGER

The little club princess isn't so little anymore. She's his every temptation tied into a bite-size package as she comes walking towards him from across the bar. When one drunken bet in Vegas turns into the best night of his life, does he have to fight like hell to convince her they didn't make a mistake? Or is Lilah just as dedicated to the future as he is?

When strange things start happening around the club, can Ringer find his place among the ranks while keeping Lilah safe? Or will they both cave under the pressure of reality?

This one's for you, Papa.

one

Lilah

“WATCH ME, *take a good thing and fuck it up all in one night!*” I scream at the top of my lungs as I sing along with Machine Gun Kelly as he blares through the surround system in my kitchen.

I’m prepping the batter for a cake I need to have done for a wedding in two days when Sasha comes barging through the swinging door.

“*I think something’s fucking wrong with me!*” she belts out along with me and the song.

We both giggle as I click the pause button on the remote. “What’s up, Sash?”

“I’ve closed the front up for the day. Mikey’s cleaning up. Where do you need me to start?”

“If you wanna start prepping some roses for the tiers, it’ll help shorten tomorrow.”

Turning to the industrial mixer on the left wall, Sasha starts gathering the supplies to make fondant flowers. I smile while watching, thinking about how far she’s come.

Sasha came to my bakery two years ago with no experience. She’d never even boiled a pot of water. Now, two years later, she can decorate a cake *almost* as well as I can.

Emphasis on *almost*. She still has lots to learn.

Every day, we open the bakery at six in the morning. Our store front is open until one in the afternoon. When we close, we start prepping for the next day.

I switch the stereo back on before turning back to the red velvet cake batter and adding more flour to the mixture. Whenever Sasha and I are in the kitchen together, we always have a good time singing at the tops of our lungs, dancing around, and making an absolute mess.

I've always been a firm believer that you need to make the best out of life because you never know when your last day will be. The life I was born into has made that a point over and over again.

"I'm headed out ladies!" Mikey yells over the music through the small window that separates the storefront from the kitchen.

"Bye!" Sasha and I both call out in unison.

After I get the cake pans in the oven, I sidle up next to Sasha and work on rolling the fondant for flowers.

My bakery is my baby. Owning one has been my dream ever since my Nana taught me how to bake my first cake. When I went to the club with my idea of a bakery at the end of their strip mall, they jumped at the opportunity before I even finished pitching my idea.

The back door bells jingle as my dad walks in. His heavy boots stomp against the wooden floor. Sasha turns the music off as he walks over and hugs me from behind.

"How's my Lilah girl today?" he asks as he places a kiss on my hair, leans over, and pops a chocolate chip into his mouth.

"Hi, Daddy. Good, just trying to get this cake done in time for the Thomas' wedding on Saturday."

"Speaking of Saturday, Ringer is coming home. He gets out that morning. Think you could help us out and get some stuff to the clubhouse for the party?" He gives me his signature look with one eyebrow raised, which means he's telling me what he needs me to do, not asking.

He will always be ‘Daddy’ to me, but my father is known as Reaper to everyone else in town. Daddy is the Vice President of the Desert Outlaws motorcycle club. He got his road name when he was just seventeen and started prospecting for the club as soon as he graduated high school. His daddy was the president at the time.

Daddy was doing a detailing job, following Nana from the bank where she just withdrew a large amount of money for the club. A rival club pulled up on Daddy and Nana. My daddy and another prospect fought off over ten men protecting my nana. He killed every single one of them. Since that day, he has been known as Reaper. No one crosses Reaper unless they want to die.

“What do you need? Why can’t Renee get it?” I ask with a slight attitude. No one except me would ever get away with giving Reaper any kind of attitude.

You see, the big bad Reaper has one downfall.

Me. His achilles heel. His baby girl. His kryptonite.

“Your mother,” he begins with another eyebrow raise as I roll my eyes in contempt, “has gone on another hiatus. Haven’t heard from her in a month.”

Crossing my arms, I prop my hip against the counter. “Big shocker there. Can she just stay gone this time?”

Dad chuckles, “If only we could be so lucky.”

“Well, let’s hope it’s at least longer than a month this time.”

“You and me both, kid. Use your club card when you go to the store for Saturday. Ghost has the ladies doing the rest. Just drop it off at the clubhouse.” He kisses the back of my head again before turning a smirk and head nod towards Sasha and heads out the door.

After Dad leaves, the weight of what he’s said hits me like a ton of bricks.

Ringer is coming home.

My cheeks heat and butterflies take flight in my stomach. Ringer may be a bit older than I am, but every wicked fantasy I've ever had since turning 13 has involved that man.

He got locked up eight years ago right after I turned 15.

Sasha's voice pulls me from my Ringer-induced fog. "I know he's your dad and all, but that man is fine with a capital F." She fans herself with the hand towel she's using to clean the work bench.

"Gross! He's like 40-something," I giggle.

"Yeah girl, and I'm like 30-something. He has daddy vibes written on his forehead."

"Okay, I'm going to need you to stop right the fuck now before I throw up. I will never be able to call my own dad 'Daddy' ever again." I feign barfing all over the floor.

"Shit, I will," Sasha purrs. I give her the nastiest expression I can muster while cleaning up my work station. "Lilah, in all seriousness," she continues with a serious expression, "I have the biggest crush on your dad. I know that's weird to you but he does not look forty-something. That man ages like fine wine."

I've gotten this my entire life. Girls always think my dad's hot. I don't see it. Sure, my dad isn't ugly. But he's my dad. I don't think of him that way. He was only 19 when he knocked up Renee. I had girlfriends growing up that always wanted to stay the night at my house, just so they could catch a glimpse of him with his shirt off.

Gross.

"So come to the party with me on Saturday. Shoot your shot," I say with a shrug.

"At your dad? He would laugh right in my face! I'm definitely not his type. I've seen the girls at the club."

"You'll never know unless you try, and Renee isn't around to be a cockblocking snake. Besides," I add, "it'll be nice to have someone I actually like around my dad."

“Maybe I will come. You know, just to keep you company.” She throws a wink over her shoulder.

“It’s a date! Plus, you can come shopping with me. Lord knows I’m going to need the extra help with the amount of people that need to be fed.”

Sasha turns the music back on and we work for the next hour. I place the dirty dishes in the dishwasher and do my closing routine to prepare everything for my baker that comes in overnight to bake for the next day.

Locking up the shop, I turn towards my sleek black 1969 Dodge Charger that my dad’s club brother, Trigger, restored for me. If the bakery is my first baby, that car is my second.

I have Sasha follow me to my house and am not surprised to see Dad’s truck parked in the driveway. I pull in next to the older pickup and cut my engine. Stepping out of my car, I turn to see Sasha parking her small Jetta on the street.

“I’ve worked with you for almost three years, and I can’t believe this is the first time I’ve ever been to your house,” Sasha says while shoving her keys into her purse. “It’s so cute.”

“This was my grandparents’ house before they died. My dad moved back in after he finally left my mom,” I reply and motion for her to follow me around the side of the garage to the door leading up to my space. “He fixed up the apartment above the garage for me when I turned 18.”

“Privacy without having you too far away. Smooth move, Mr. Neil.”

Flipping the lightswitch on, I throw my bag on my large red couch. “Make yourself comfortable! Give me a second to change before we run to the store,” I say with a laugh as I gesture to my black yoga pants that are covered in flour.

After running water over my face, I step into the large walk-in closet my dad attached to my room. He was able to turn the second small bedroom into a large closet connecting my bedroom to the bathroom. I step into a pair of cutoff shorts I made out of jeans from a thrift store and pull a cropped Led

Zeppelin tee over my head. Grabbing my red Doc Martens and a pair of socks, I head back into the main room.

“Do you want me to follow you back to your house so you can change before we head to the store?” I ask Sasha as I pull on my boots.

“Nah, I’m good. I’m heading to the gym when we’re finished. My bag is in my car.”

Grabbing my dad’s truck keys, I lock up behind us.

“I said it once, and I’ll say it again. Next time you go shopping, you need to take me with you. I need a wardrobe change,” Sasha remarks. I look over and see her eyeing my outfit on our way down to the truck.

“And I have told you, most of my shirts come from my dad’s closet, and I cut them to fit me. All of my shorts come from goodwill, which I also cut to fit me.” I laugh.

Growing up, the kids at school always made fun of me for dressing like a boy. I never cared about the newest trends or best fashion. I loved wearing my dad’s shirts, and I didn’t give two shits that they were four sizes too big. It used to drive my mother crazy, but I didn’t care.

When I turned sixteen and filled out, I discovered Youtube and taught myself how to repurpose old clothes into new styles. My nana taught me how to use her sewing machine, and my love for old clothing multiplied.

I look back over at Sasha to see her shrug her shoulders. “Next time you go, you have to take me so I can watch your magic.”

“Let’s go after work Friday. I’ve been wanting to look for some new stuff.”

After a short but enjoyable ride, we pull into the wholesale store in the middle of town, and I back the truck into a parking spot close to the front.

Sasha pulls a large cart out of the cart corral and hands it to me, then pulls out a second without me asking. I laugh at her

when she looks at me and says, “What? You said it’s a lot of mouths to feed. I figured we’d need more than one cart.”

“You thought right! Alright, let’s start.”

For the last few years, it has been my responsibility to do all of the shopping any time there is a large party at the clubhouse. All the ol’ ladies prepare the food (usually Maggie and Maria) and organize the whole thing. After Nana passed away, the shopping fell on me. Since I was the one that always went with her, I know exactly what to get.

I push my cart up to the butcher’s station, and Buck, the butcher that has worked here for as long as I’ve been alive, greets me with a large smile. “Princess!” his loud voice booms.

I cringe at the nickname but smile back at the gray haired man. Buck was a friend of my grandpop’s. It was difficult coming to the store with Nana after my pop passed away in a motorcycle accident because he reminded me so much of him.

“Hey Buck!” I reply with a smile as he rounds the glass case and lifts me up into a bear hug.

“What can I do for ya, Princess?”

“Ringer’s getting out, so big party on Saturday. I need the works.” I eye the case in front of me.

Buck strides to the freezer behind his butcher block and pulls open the heavy door.

“Just the family or the whole gang?” he asks from inside the freezer.

“Whole gang I’m guessing!” I call over the noise of the loudspeaker.

Sasha wanders over to the cold cuts case and peruses the options. I point at the large tray of vegetables and cold cuts. She grabs one and puts it in her cart. Before she can walk away, I stop her.

“Grab all of them,” I instruct.

Sasha’s eyes bulge when she notices how many are in the case.

“That’s enough to feed a hundred people,” she exhales.

I stifle a laugh. “Exactly.”

Buck comes around the counter pulling a large cart. I laugh at Sasha’s stunned expression as she watches how much meat Buck transfers into my cart. He places two whole pigs, fifteen large racks of ribs, a case of hamburger patties, and a case of hotdogs.

“Holy fuck, Lilah. How many people come to these things?”

Buck chuckles. “First time?” he asks, looking at Sasha.

I nod at the older man. “She has the hots for my dad.”

“Lilah!” Sasha shrieks.

I laugh as I give Buck a hug, wrapping my arms around his chubby middle. He places a kiss on the top of my head.

“Thanks Buck! Will we see you and Nancy there?”

Buck isn’t a part of the club, but his son, Texas, is. His real name is Kaleb. He and Ringer were both arrested around the same time. Tex got out a little over a year ago, but Ringer’s been in this entire time.

“Wouldn’t miss it kid.”

I turn and smile at Buck as I push the heavy cart over to the bakery section.

“I know I don’t know much about these things, but um, Lile? You own a bakery. Why are we buying this shit?”

“Sasha, look how much meat we have. I have the Thomas’ wedding Saturday afternoon. I don’t have time to make enough bread for this!” I giggle.

Sasha and I finish grabbing the necessary items for the party. She is once again surprised when I give both full carts to the cashier to hold and fill two more. The total on the register

makes her eyes bulge out of her head as I hand the cashier my dad's club card.

It takes every bit of twenty minutes just to load everything in the back of the truck. When we pull up to the clubhouse gates, Wes sees it's me and opens them. I pull the truck around to the back by the kitchen doors.

Maggie, Horse's ol' lady, swings the door open with a smile and pulls the tailgate down before I can even hop out of the cab.

"Hey, Lilah! You brought help this time?" she calls as Sasha and I round the truck.

"Hey Maggie," Sasha smiles while lifting a hand to wave. The three of us then work together to unload the truck and bring everything into the industrial-sized kitchen.

"This kitchen is huge!" Sasha exclaims once everything is set out on the large counter.

Maggie giggles while watching Sasha's fascination.

"Are you coming to the party, Sasha?" Maggie asks.

"Lilah invited me. I haven't made up my mind yet. This place is pretty intimidating," Sasha confesses.

"It's big, that's for sure," Maggie admits. "But it is full of the best people I know. This party's gonna be a good one. We have a brother coming home that has been gone for years now."

Maggie's mention of Ringer makes my stomach flutter. "Hey Mag, can I have the key to Ringer's room?"

Maggie eyes me curiously as she pulls the key from her master set.

I leave Sasha with Maggie as I creep upstairs to Ringer's room and unlock his door. I enter the dark room and flip on the lights, coating the room in light.

Looking around the empty room, I notice his bed first. How many nights as a teenager had I fantasized about being in this bed? I pad over to the nightstand. On the top is his glock,

a pack of cigarettes that is at least eight years old, and a framed picture I gave him when I was thirteen.

I pick the picture up and run my fingers over the dusty surface. The picture is of me when I was about twelve holding up a rifle, with Ringer standing proudly behind me as I shot the target right on the bullseye.

It instantly takes me back to that day. Ringer, my dad, and I had gone shooting at the back of the compound.

“Alright Princess, hold it steady, take a breath in through your nose, and let it out through your mouth. Slow and steady. That’s it, Princess. Shoot!” My pointer finger squeezes the trigger and the sound of the gun is muffled by the headphones covering my ears.

I lower the gun to my side and squint as I look closer at the target. I hit the bullseye!

I turn towards Ringer with the biggest smile on my face. He scoops me up in his arms before I can register my embarrassment about putting my braces on full display. He lifts me in his arms and swings me around in circles. I feel his chest rumbling against mine and realize he’s talking. I can’t hear what he’s saying because my headphones are still on.

I pull them off as he’s still talking. “Knew you could do it!” I catch him saying and throw the headphones down to the dirt.

Ringer lets me down with a straight, white smile. I hear my dad clapping behind me. I spin around and run at him with a huge smile.

“Did you see that, Daddy? I finally hit the target!”

“I saw it, baby girl! I’m so proud of you. I knew you could do it.” He places a kiss on the top of my head.

Dad walks over to Ringer and pulls him off to the side. I know that means they need to talk without other ears hearing, so I turn the other way and notice Nana sitting in her chair with her own headphones on and her camera lowered to her lap.

“Did you get a picture of my shot, Nana?” I ask excitedly as I skip over to her.

“Sure did, baby. I got plenty.” She winks at me.

Nana knows about my little crush on Ringer. She thinks it’s all innocent. I know I’m young, but I also know it’s not just a crush.

Dad and Ringer are coming back towards Nana and I. Dad squats down next to Nana as Ringer holds his hand up for a high five from me.

“That was a sweet shot, Princess.”

I smile with a closed mouth and slap my small hand against his large, rough one as my belly erupts in butterflies. I have always been known as Princess. It’s been my nickname ever since I was born. But when it comes from him, it always feels so different.

I rub the dust off the photo and frame with the blanket on the bed and place it back down on the nightstand. I gave him the picture for his 21st birthday, thanking him for teaching me how to hit the target.

To this day, my dad still complains that he taught me how to shoot a gun, but never hit a target. Ringer did the first day he ever worked with me.

I strip the old sheets and blankets off the bed and walk down the hall to the closet where I know extra clean sheets will be. Taking new sheets to his room, I set about making his bed.

I quickly tidy his room, knowing I would want to come home to a clean space if I were in his position. I step into the small bathroom last, noticing it’s already pretty decent. Looking around his counter space, I see his bottle of cologne sitting there. I pick it up and my nose is immediately assaulted by the smell that is only Ringer.

I roll my eyes when I catch a glimpse of myself in the mirror smelling his cologne like a fucking stalker. Still to this

day, at 23, thoughts of him bring me to my knees.

“Get it together, Lilah. It will never happen,” I sternly tell my reflection.

I put the bottle back down and pick up the dirty sheets. Locking the door behind me, I head back down the stairs to the kitchen. “I grabbed some clean sheets from the closet and took these off.” I place them down on the counter as Maggie smirks at me, knowingly.

“Alright, I’m gonna head out. I’ll see you on Saturday, Mag. We have a wedding that afternoon, so I won’t be here til after three.” I give her a hug. I feel her lips against my ear when she whispers, “Your Nana told me how you used to be over that boy.” She pulls away and gives me a wink.

“That was a long time ago, Mag. He’s been gone a long time,” I say, hopefully not giving anything away.

“Mhm. See you Saturday.”

Sasha follows me out back and we hop in the truck. We drive the short distance from the club to my house in silence. When we pull into the driveway, I notice dad’s bike parked in the open garage with him laying on his side next to it.

Looking over at Sasha, I smirk as she notices him too. Her cheeks blush and she looks down at her feet.

“Come on, I won’t embarrass you,” I say with a smile, nodding towards my dad.

We make our way up the driveway and into the garage. Dad sits up when he sees us standing over him.

“Hey, Daddy.” I hop up on the tool bench along the far wall. Sasha follows my lead and leans her hip against the bench next to me.

“Hey, baby girl. Hey, Sash.” Dad drops the wrench on the concrete with a loud clang as he stands up and brushes his hands on his jeans.

“Sasha went with me to the store. We got everything for the party. Just dropped it off.”

“I figured that when I got home and the truck was gone.” Dad turns towards Sasha. “You gonna come Saturday? See how our kind gets down?”

Sasha giggles. “Probably. Everyone’s been pretty convincing. I think I’ll stop by for a bit.”

“I’ll look for ya,” Dad replies. My eyes bug out towards Sasha as she smiles at her feet. I turn my look on Dad, and he shrugs his shoulders without an ounce of guilt.

Sasha looks up at me and my dad and smiles awkwardly. “Well, I better go. I have to let my dog out before his bladder explodes all over my house.”

“Bye, Sasha. See you in the morning.”

Dad watches Sasha leave, and keeps watching until we hear her car door shut.

I watch him with wonder. I’ve seen him with many women over the years. My dad is no saint. But every woman I’ve seen him with has been a hook up at the club. The only woman I’ve ever seen him be in a relationship with has been my mom, and for as long as I can remember, it wasn’t because he loved her. She just never fucking left.

“What?” He asks when he notices me watching him with a smile on my face.

“You should go for it,” I say while jumping off the bench. Just as my boot hits the bottom step, his words stop me.

“I love you more than anything, baby girl.”

I smile at him. “Just because you love me that much, doesn’t mean you can’t love someone else too.”

I hear his chuckles as I stomp up the stairs.

By the time I eat and finish my nightly routine, I am exhausted.

Laying down in my large bed, I glance over to the photo collage I have hanging on the wall. Most of them are ones my Nana took. We always told her she needed to do something

with her photography, but she always said it was just a hobby, not something she wanted as a job.

The one picture standing out right now is a picture of me and Ringer, taken a few weeks before he got arrested. I was 15, and he was around 23. We were having a cookout with another local club. Ringer had his arm slung over my shoulder, both of us smiling wide as Nana snapped the picture.

Rolling away from my photo wall, I face the window and drift asleep thinking of memories that are just that. Memories.

two

Ringer

POUNING on the cell door snaps my attention towards the guard's face in the small window. "Let's go, Mack!" the officer's voice booms.

I lift my heavy body off of the thin mattress for what I am hoping is the last damn time. I walk backwards to the door and place my hands behind my back so he can reach in and cuff my wrists.

"Not this time, Mack." I turn towards the officer and see he is giving me a warm grin.

The cell door lock clicks and the heavy door slides open. "Let's get you out of this shit hole. I better not see you back here," Officer Daniels exclaims.

"I hope not, sir," I grunt.

Officer Daniels guides me down corridors until we are finally at receiving and I sign paper after paper for my release.

The gray haired woman at the desk hands me a paper sack of belongings after I scribble my John Hancock on the last document.

"Get changed, Mack. You're a free man now." Officer Daniels extends his hand. I clasp it in mine and give a firm shake. Grabbing the bag, I head into the small bathroom.

Inside is a pair of worn jeans, a plain white T-shirt, boots, and my wallet.

After changing, I step out of the bathroom, and the woman gestures towards the door. Once at the door, I hesitate for a moment. The second I step outside, I'm a free man. *Free*. I have been waiting for this day for over eight years.

Pushing the door open, I step out and jog across the street to whoops and hollers. Looking up, I see a few of my brothers behind my bike with wide grins on their faces.

"Ringer!" they all shout in unison.

At the front of the group is Ghost, the president of our MC and my big brother. Next to him is our pops, Bones. I jog over to them and they both engulf me in a tight embrace.

"Glad to have you out, kid," Dad grunts with a throat full of emotion.

"Glad to be out of that shithole, Pops." Turning towards Ghost, I notice something black in his hands. My cut.

A wide smile breaks across my face as I take the leather from him. Shrugging it over my shoulders, I am immediately calmed with the heavy feeling. One by one, my brothers pull me into back-patting hugs and offer their congratulations.

"I appreciate all the love, brothers. But I'm ready to feel my baby purrin' between my legs."

Ghost laughs behind me and tosses me the keys to my Harley.

Throwing my leg over my baby, I find my sunglasses perched on the handlebars. Fuck yes. Ghost is the best fucking brother.

Nothing could wipe the smile off of my face today. It's Saturday, so I know there has to be some sort of party going on tonight. A long ride to the clubhouse on my bike, an ice cold beer, pussy, and my bed are all I can think about right now.

I wait for the rest of the guys to load up before pulling out onto the highway. I normally wouldn't be leading the line, but

when a brother is released from the pen, he gets to lead the way home. Ghost pulls up next to me at the red light and we catch eyes. He and I smile wide at each other. “Good to have you out, brother,” he yells over the loud rumble of all the bike pipes.

It takes just under an hour to get back to the clubhouse. When we pull into the compound, I see two prospects at the gate I haven’t met. I’ll have to remember to try and meet anyone new at some point tonight, but the things highest on my priority list right now are a beer and a fucking cigarette.

We back our bikes into a line at the front of the clubhouse. Ghost pulls a pack of Marlboros out of his vest pocket and offers me the unopened pack. I take it out of his hand and open it up, putting the smoke between my lips. After lighting his cigar, he hands me his zippo. The first inhale fills my lungs and my eyes roll to the back of my head.

Sure, I had smuggled cigarettes in prison, but they were the shit-nasty kind. “Nothin’ like your first cigarette as a free man,” Ghost chuckles.

“You got that shit right.”

I follow Ghost into the clubhouse where we find ol’ ladies and family members scurrying around to get things prepared for a cookout.

“Party tonight?” I ask Ghost.

“What the fuck, brother? You been in the pen so long that you don’t know how we do shit? Of course we’re havin’ a fucking party. My brother just got outta prison!” He slaps me on the shoulder with a sinister grin.

Maria, Tank’s ol’ lady and my best friend Flame’s mom, comes around the hall from the kitchen. She must have heard the commotion because her eyes immediately seek me out. Once she sees me, she runs in my direction. Throwing her arms around my shoulders, I lift her small frame up into a hug.

“Miss me much, did ya Maria?” I kiss the top of her head as I set her down.

“Watch it, brother,” Tank says from behind her. I lift my arms in surrender as I back away, laughing.

“I’m so happy you’re home,” Maria admits with tears in her eyes.

“Alright woman, let us get Ringer a beer. You finish cookin’.” Tank gives Maria a kiss and a blush tints her cheeks as she smiles.

To be together for thirty years and still blush when your man kisses you is something else. Not many have that, especially in this life. Maria looks at me one last time. I throw a wink in her direction and turn towards the bar.

The next few hours are spent catching up with some of the guys. Brothers come in and congratulate me for getting out early. Ol’ ladies and club girls squeeze me in tight hugs.

Ghost and Trigger follow me inside to the bar as I throw myself on a stool. “Patch, get a beer for our brother,” Ghost tells the prospect behind the bar.

When the young guy turns around, I see why his name is Patch. He has a black leather patch covering his right eye.

“Sup, man. I’m Ringer.” I extend my hand across the bar after he dumps four bottles in front of us.

“Patch.” He shakes my hand. I nod in thanks as I take a pull of my beer.

Damn.

I’ve missed beer. And whiskey. But the hard shit needs to be saved for later.

After my third beer, large hands land on my shoulders. “Well look what the damn cat dragged in,” a loud voice booms from behind me.

I spin around on the stool and hop down and clasp my brother in a hug. “Reaper, brother! How’s it goin’?” We slap each other’s backs and he releases me to look me up and down.

“Well shit, man. Prison really does get people fuckin’ ripped,” Reaper laughs.

“Not really any other shit to do in there, man,” I chuckle.

“You look good, brother.”

“Thanks, VP. How ya been?” Snatching my beer off the bar, I step to the side with Reaper.

My pops slides over to us with a beer of his own. Reaper and Dad start up a conversation about business at the shop we own that they run. While I add comments here or there, my focus leaves the conversation, and I observe the club, spotting what’s changed over the years.

Someone added a stripper pole in the center of the tables at the far right corner. Had to have been Ghost’s doing. He’s been known for his love of strippers. It was no surprise that he opened a strip club. I remember his excitement when he came to see me for a visit and told me he bought a building for the club.

The couches around the place look a little more worn than they once did. I think they’re even the same couches from when I was a teen.

I interrupt my pops and Reaper to excuse myself up to my room.

The key to my room is attached to my bike keys, I use it to unlock the door, hoping they didn’t let anyone else use it in the time I’ve been gone. The first thing I notice is my bed. Someone’s been in here to clean because I have never once in my life made my bed. The sheets are so smooth you could bounce a penny off of them.

I hop in the bathroom and take a quick shower. Strolling out of the bathroom with just a towel around my waist, I pull open the bottom drawer of the nightstand and take a pair of boxers out. My eyes land on the top of the nightstand and see a picture of me and Lilah.

Shit. That girl’s gotta be twenty something by now. I smile, thinking of Reaper’s kid. That girl was my little buddy, my shadow. The club Princess. I’m sure I’ll see her later.

I go through my closet until I find a pair of clean jeans I'm happy enough with, as well as a plain black shirt. Finishing with my cut, I stuff my keys in my pocket.

By the time I get back downstairs, the amount of people around has tripled. I push the door open and stroll out into the courtyard where brothers, families, and friends alike are all drinking, eating, and having a good time.

Tiny, Razor and Tex are manning the row of grills and smokers, cooking all of the meat. I slide up next to them and take a peek inside. "Buck got us the good shit, huh?" I say, whistling at the size of the pig on the smoker.

"Damn right, brother!" Tex grins before taking a pull of his beer.

Spotting the trough full of ice and beer bottles, I grab my own, popping off the top and tossing it in a trash bin.

Once all the food is done, I grab a plate and find a picnic table, taking a seat with Maggie, Horse, my pops, Ghost, Tank, and Maria.

Reaper sits down with a plate full of food after we're all done eating, and we all chat while nursing our beers. Maggie tells me all about the renovations Horse has done on her house while I've been gone.

The carefree environment has a feeling of contentment settling over me as I look around at my family enjoying each other's company while eating good food. I've missed these cookouts and the parties that follow. The parties are when shit gets real. None of the crazy shit happens until the families leave.

My eyes catch my best friend for as long as I can remember standing across the courtyard next to a tiny pixie of a woman. "Flame! Get your fat-ass over here!" I bellow, pushing up from the picnic table.

"After eight years, you'd think you'd put a little more weight on, you twig!" Flame chuckles as we collide in a hug.

"Baby!" Flame calls out to the tiny woman that was next to him.

“So, this is the famous Bunny?” I ask, referring to the woman that he has been talking my ear off about for the last few months.

The tiny girl’s cheeks stain a bright pink. “Famous?”

Flame cuddles Bunny to his side before saying, “I may have talked about you a few times over the last few months.”

“A few times? Every time we talked, I had to listen to you yammer on and on about this fucking chick,” I chuckle.

Flame punches me in the shoulder. “Fuck off.” He turns to Bunny to save face. “Bunny, I promise I only told him good things.”

“Yeah, *all* good things,” I say and wiggle my brows, teasing my best friend.

I take off running at the look on Flame’s face, and he eventually catches me in a chokehold. We wrestle for a few minutes, just like old times, before Tank hauls our asses up off the concrete. I amble back to the tables and wave my middle fingers at my best friend as he wanders in the other direction.

“They settin’ up for fights tonight?” I ask the group.

Reaper gestures towards the middle of the courtyard behind me with his fork. I turn around and see the prospects setting up a makeshift arena for the fights. A wide grin spreads across my face.

“Oh, fuck. Here we go,” my pop says at the same time Ghost shouts excitedly, “Fuck yes!”

“Oh, Pop. You worried about little ol’ me?” I elbow his ribs while laughing.

“No. Worried about whoever the fuck is stupid enough to get in a ring with you.”

Our whole group laughs.

A raven haired beauty strolls over to the table and smiles shyly at Reaper.

“Sash! You came! Where’s Lilah?” he asks.

“She had to head to the bathroom really quickly. She sent me out to find you and apologize about how late we are. When they were setting up the wedding, the guys dropped our cake putting it on the display. We had to pretty much make an entirely new cake.”

“They dropped the fucking cake?” Reaper looks pissed.

“Yeah, but it’s okay. We were able to save it,” the woman he called Sash says.

“They have one fucking job.” Reaper looks at Ghost. He looks upset, but not as murderous as Reaper.

The woman looks scared as she awkwardly glances around.

“I’m sorry, Sasha. It’s not your fault. I didn’t mean to yell.”

I’m confused as shit as I watch the pair. I didn’t know Reaper was seeing anyone. Honestly, I didn’t think he would ever get involved with anyone after all the shit Lilah’s mom has put him through over the years.

“I’ll take care of it, Reap. Won’t happen again,” my brother tells his VP.

Reaper rises off the picnic table and leads the woman away by the hand. Ghost gets up and takes off to the clubhouse at the same time.

“What’s going on?” I ask the remaining of the group.

Maggie is the one to fill me in.

“Lilah opened a bakery, and she does pretty well for herself. She started doing cakes and things for weddings and big events a year or so ago. The prospects are supposed to help her set up the cakes at the venues because half the cakes she makes are double the size of her. Lilah’s a tiny thing. The club technically owns the business, so you know how they see it.”

Horse adds on, “Bad business means a bad name for the club.”

“But Lilah knows her stuff. She probably fixed it better than it looked before they dropped it,” Maggie remarks.

Little Lilah, a baker. *Huh*. I can honestly say I didn’t see that coming, I always thought she just played around with her baking as a kid.

“Fights are starting!” Tiny shouts over the crowd.

“That’s my cue. I’m gonna head home and let the dogs out. I won’t wait up,” Maggie says as she kisses Horse on the cheek and heads inside.

Maggie turns around and gives Horse one last parting remark. “Tell the whores to clean my kitchen. And you, mister, better keep your dick to yourself.”

I choke on my beer hearing Maggie put Horse in his place.

He must register my wide eyes and gives a slight chuckle. “About a year ago, a new girl didn’t know about Mags. Well, Mags came in just as the girl was sitting down on my lap. I didn’t have time to even move her before she yanked her off my lap and put her in her place,” he explains.

I can’t control the laughter that booms out of me at the thought of Maggie attacking a young broad.

Horse is one of the good guys. As far as any of us know, he’s never cheated on his woman. If I ever was lucky enough to find an ol’ lady, I would only hope she was like Maggie. Horse and Maggie are in their fifties with two kids. Their son is a member of the club who has been overseas in the military for longer than I’ve been in prison. They also have a daughter, who I’m pretty sure should be in college by now.

The outside lights are flipped on, illuminating the fight ring which is a large octagon like the pros use. We make our way to the front and I watch as two guys I’ve never met before take their shirts off and step in.

Tiny lays down the rules for them. Like every fight, this doesn’t take very long because there aren’t many rules. No dick shots. No kidney shots. And once the fight is called, it’s done. No taking that shit out of the ring. The list is pretty short and sweet.

Ghost, Flame, and Bunny ease up next to me. Flame holds Bunny in front of his body.

“Who are they?” I ask.

“Two guys from the shop. They’ve been havin’ some issues the past few weeks. Told them to settle it in the ring. Guess they both finally stopped being pussies about it,” Ghost says.

I nod my head and watch on as the first kid’s fist connects with the other kid’s cheek.

“What’re their names?”

“Kid in the black jeans is Wes. Good kid. Nineteen. His pops used to beat on him. Dad saw him riding his bicycle up and down the alley behind the shop everyday. Stopped him one day and asked what the deal was. New black eyes, bruises on the cheeks, the whole works. He asked him if he knew anything about bikes and cars. Wes said no, but he’d love to learn. Dad told him when he turned sixteen to come by the shop and he’d have a job. Been there ever since.”

I nod in understanding. We got lucky with our pops. You hear way too much about kids getting abused and shit. It doesn’t sit right in my stomach.

“And him?” I ask, pointing my beer towards the other kid in the blue jeans.

“That fuckwad is Beau. Your dad hired him because he is a kickass painter. Shit he can do to bikes is unfuckin’ real, but he has a real fuckin’ shitty attitude.” Flame takes a deep breath and another pull from his beer. “For some reason, those two have been at each other’s throats for about two months now.”

I watch as Wes beats the piss out of Beau. Beau gets some good hits in, but Wes is owning the fight.

Tiny ends up calling the fight when Wes knocks Beau out with a fist to the jaw.

Roars and claps erupt around the ring. “Serves the fucker right. Maybe he’ll knock his shit down a few notches,” Ghost exclaims. “You getting in there, Ring?”

I nod while finishing the last of my beer. “In a little bit. Need something a little stronger first.”

“I understand that. Let’s grab something from inside.”

Reaper and the woman from earlier are sitting at the bar. We take the empty stools next to them.

“Patch, can I get some whiskey?”

The prospect looks up and grins at me, probably for remembering his name. Usually they’re all just referred to as ‘prospect’, but I know how it sucks to be called ‘inmate’. I always had a little more respect for the guards who called us by our actual names. Looking around the club, I notice we have about five or six prospects working right now.

Patch pushes a glass of amber liquid my way, and I swallow the whole thing in one shot. I gesture for another while I welcome the familiar burn as it coats my throat.

He fills it back up. This time, I decide to nurse the glass.

Spinning around on my stool, I watch everyone that has turned the clubhouse into a dance floor. I can tell all of the families must have left by now because I can tell quite a few club girls are milling about through the crowd.

I catch a glimpse of the most gorgeous woman I’ve ever seen. Her dirty blonde, almost brown, wavy hair is pulled up into a high ponytail that puts her beautiful face on display. A Nine Inch Nails cropped shirt comes to a stop just above her narrow waist, paired with short frayed jean shorts that leave only her belly button on display.

“Who the fuck is that?” I say out loud, to no one in particular.

Flame follows my line of vision and, once he finds who I’m staring at, breaks into loud laughter. Fucker looks like he’s about to piss himself.

I look at Reaper, confused. “Am I missing something?”

Reaper also laughs straight in my face. “Look a little closer, brother.”

I look towards the girl and try to place her. I will admit that there is a slight familiarity, but I am at a loss. I know for a damn fact I would remember her.

“Okay can someone just tell me who the fuck that is?”

Reaper’s girl, Sasha, is the one to wreck my world with just four words.

“That’s Reaper’s daughter, Lilah.”

She chose the wrong moment to mutter those words, I nearly choke on my whiskey. My throat and nostrils burn as I try to catch my breath from coughing up the dark liquor.

“That’s Lilah? My fucking Lilah?” I shout, turning to glare at Reaper.

Reaper laughs at my outburst, and I am shocked as I realize what I’ve just said. *My Lilah*. What the fuck? Yeah, she was like my little sister, but I never claimed her like that. I’ve never claimed her as *mine*.

“*My Lilah*. Yup, that’s her. Grew up, huh?” Reaper punches my shoulder with a wicked smirk.

I know I am openly staring at her now, and I don’t even care that her father is sitting right next to me. “The fuck she did. Damn.”

“That’s still my daughter we’re talking about, Ring. Watch it,” Reaper says, feigning seriousness before breaking into a smile and laughing at my surprise.

“Yeah, yeah. Whatever,” I say. I can’t take my eyes off of the beauty I now know is little Lilah, Club Princess. When the fuck did she grow up? She sure as shit didn’t look like that when she was 15. That looks nothing like the Lilah I left behind when I got locked up.

I never let Lilah come see me in prison because I didn’t want her to see me like that. We always had a good time doing crazy, stupid shit, and I didn’t think I could stomach seeing her upset from me being behind bars. Part of it was for selfish reasons. That kid had always looked at me like I hung the moon, and I never wanted that to change.

I notice the kid from the fight, Beau, as he creeps up behind her as she dances with a tall, mocha-skinned colored beauty. My jaw clenches as I watch him try to weasel his way up behind her.

“The fuck? You’re just gonna let that shit happen, Reap?” I spit angrily.

“She can take care of herself, Ring. *You* taught her that. Just watch.”

I stare at them for the next ten minutes as Lilah makes multiple blocks on the kid’s advances.

Finally, after what feels like forever of my watching them, Lilah turns around and punches the kid right in the nose. I try to read her lips over the flashing lights. I think I make out the word *stop*.

The kid staggers back for a second and walks away with his figurative tail tucked between his legs.

“*Fuck. Good girl, Lilah,*” I whisper to myself.

“Told ya you taught her well! All of your self defense and boxing lessons paid off,” Reaper exclaims as he turns towards Sasha.

“Who’s your girl?” I ask over the music.

“Ringer, this is Sasha. She works with Lilah at the bakery. Sasha, this is Ringer.”

“Same Ringer that got out of prison today?” she asks.

“One and only,” I smirk.

Her eyes seem to soften in understanding and she nods, smiling timidly at her drink. I instantly wonder what that look was for?

I leave them to their conversation and face Flame, whose eyes are stuck to Bunny as she sits on the stool right next to him.

“Who’s the chick with Lilah. Fuck man, I feel like I’m the stranger around here. So many new fucking people.”

Flame chuckles. “That’s Lyric.”

“Ghost’s girl?” I ask, eyebrows hitting my hairline and noticing the way my brother watches her like a hawk.

Flame’s attention is moved to Trigger and the woman he just explained is Lyric, who stops right in front of him. I drink down the rest of my own whiskey before hopping off the stool. As soon as I turn towards the main room, I knock into a small body. My hands instantly land on her shoulders to steady her. Glancing down, I lock directly onto Lilah’s forest green eyes.

Her breath hitches while her whole body breaks into a shiver. “Ringer.”

My eyes flip between hers as I take in her beautiful-as-sin face. Two delicate silver rings hang on her right nostril and dark red lipstick stains her plump, kissable lips.

A throat clearing breaks the trance we both seem to be stuck in together.

“Princess,” I croak out as I envelope her in my arms, easily lifting her off her feet in a tight embrace.

“You’re home,” she says softly in my ear. I vaguely hear a soft snuffle. Is she crying? Or smelling me?

“Yeah, babe. I’m home.” I squeeze her tightly to my chest, and the euphoria passing through me because of her in my arms isn’t lost on me.

I drop her back to her feet, turning towards Reaper. I chance a glance in his direction, hoping he hasn’t seen the strange effect his daughter is having on me.

“Lilah, will you show me where the bathroom is really quick?” Sasha asks, interrupting our moment.

“Sure,” her wide eyes drop from mine to her friend, and she smiles.

I watch Lilah’s retreating form, my eyes glued to the bounce of her ass in her tight little shorts.

I’m broken out of my lust filled haze by Reaper’s gruff voice. “I’m only gonna say this one time. If you break her

heart, brother or not, I will literally kill you and bury you where no one will find you,” he says seriously without looking directly at me.

Reaper isn't one to take things too seriously. That's why he makes a great VP. He lightens things when they get tense. He keeps my brother thinking positive when times get rough. But right now, I can tell that he is without a doubt, very serious.

“I don't know what you're talking about, Reap. Lilah's like a little sister. You know that.”

“The reaction you both just had to each other was not even close to being sibling-like, Ringer. And you know it.” He stands up and gestures for me to walk outside with him.

I've never in my 30 years of life thought about Lilah in a romantic way. But after tonight, I would be lying if I said she isn't the most beautiful woman I've ever seen and causing thoughts to race through my mind. The thoughts I'm having are anything but brotherly. The tightness in my jeans proves that as a fact.

Lilah has always been the princess. Someone I would've never touched.

I've been gone a long time though.

Reaper leads me over to the fighting ring where a new pair is facing off. “I wouldn't do that, Reap. I mean shit, this is Lilah we're talking about.”

“That girl has been in love with you since she was twelve, Ring,” Reaper laughs softly.

“What? Nah.”

“Keep telling yourself that, brother. Just do me a favor. Don't break her heart. Hell, she might not feel the same as she did when she was a kid. But that girl was destroyed when you got locked up. Didn't leave her room for weeks. Dropped out of school. Honestly, I thought I was going to have to admit her, then I finally got my head out of my ass and figured out what was going on. Right when she was starting to do better, my ma died. She's had a rough go of it over the past eight years. She's grown up and a woman now and finally doing so

much better. I can't tell you how she feels about anything anymore cause she's her own woman. But I'm telling you, if she tries something and you aren't feeling it, tell her. Don't lead her anywhere, because she'd follow. If you're only having brotherly feelings for her like when you were younger, you need to tell her."

I'm shocked silent at his words. I didn't realize her nana died so soon after I went away. I feel so fucking bad knowing I wasn't there for her. I try to remember all the times I've ever spent with her, playing every memory over in my mind, looking for any sign or clue that Lilah liked me in that way. But fuck. *She was a kid.* I wasn't thinking those thoughts about her. After thinking about all of the things she's ever done for me, I can see it.

"Fuck," is all I can muster in response.

Reaper chuckles. "Thinkin' bout the past, huh?" he says.

"Yeah," I admit.

"If it were any other brother, I would've already fucking killed 'em. But I've watched you both since I met you, Ring. You're a good kid." Reaper pauses to light his cigarette. He exhales a large plume of smoke. "Only ever seen her with one guy the whole time you were away. Dated him for a while, but it didn't last. She always claimed it wasn't that serious. He felt differently."

"Who?" I ask all too quickly.

I follow Reaper's finger as he points across the yard.

"Is that that fuck Beau?" I bark out.

"Yep," Reaper nods, clearly disgusted.

"You let that shit happen?"

Reaper shrugs his shoulders. "I love my daughter more than anything in this entire world, brother. But if you for one second think I can control a damn thing she does, you don't know her at all. I'm not gonna push her away trying to control who she can and can't date."

“One of us is about to,” I say as I stomp away, tossing my empty beer bottle in a nearby bin with a loud clang.

“Ringer!” Reaper calls after me. “Ringer!”

I walk over to this fuckhead Beau and point towards the ring.

“Want another round?”

Beau looks at me curiously. “Who the fuck are you?” he spits.

“You in or not?”

He looks towards his few buddies with a smirk before turning back to me. “Sure.”

He follows me over to Tiny, who is standing by the door of the ring. When Tiny sees who is standing behind me, he smirks.

I flash him my best smile.

“Alright everyone! Last fight of the night! Give our boy the warm welcome home he deserves! Ringerrrr!” Tiny’s voice booms over the crowd.

I take my cut off and drape it over the chair outside the ring. Next, I rip my black tee over my head and throw it behind me, not giving a shit where it lands.

I put my game face on and turn back to Beau, who is now also shirtless. I look at his face and catch myself almost feeling sorry for him. Kid already got his shit rocked once tonight. But with the new knowledge that this kid was with my Lilah, my blood flames with hatred. I’m going to fuck him up.

Tiny turns to Beau, grabs our wrists, and brings our fists up, tapping them together. “You ready to find out why his name is Ringer?”

“Emmett Mack! STOP!” I hear Lilah’s voice call my birth name from the left of the ring. She’s right up against the makeshift fence. Beau looks from her to me. He watches as I wink at Lilah.

“You asked who I was. Well, today, I’m you’re worst fucking nightmare,” I say right before I cock my fist back and slam it against his cheekbone.

Beau’s head snaps back and satisfaction radiates through my arm from the crunch of bone on bone.

I play around with him a bit before getting more hits in. “What the fuck, man!” he yells.

I get close enough for him, and only him, to hear me. “You ever lay another fucking finger on Lilah, I’ll break every goddamn one of them off.”

“What?” he mutters, shaking his confusion before schooling his features and trying to swing on me again.

“You may have had her attention while I was gone, but I’m back now, baby, and you will never fucking touch her again,” I growl right before hitting him with an uppercut, effectively knocking his ass out.

three

Lilah

“EMMETT MACK! STOP!” I scream when I see Ringer in the octagon with Beau facing off against him.

Ringer didn't get his name because he loves shiny jewelry.

No.

He got his name because he's a fighter. A nasty one. There has never once been a bell rung to call a round in any one of his fights because they never make it that far. Ringer has always knocked out his opponent in the first round.

He could have gone pro, he would have made it big.

I watch in horror as Ringer and Beau both look at me. Ringer winks at me then turns back to a confused looking Beau and says something. I see fear momentarily flash in Beau's eyes, which happens seconds before Ringer's fist collides with his cheek.

“Ringer! Stop!” I scream at the top of my lungs.

Everyone is stuck between watching Ringer pummel Beau and watching me scream at them.

Large arms wrap around my middle to pull me away from the fence surrounding the ring. I try to pry my way out, but to no avail. “Stop fighting, baby girl. Just stop,” my dad's gruff voice echoes in my ear.

I turn in my dad's arms. "What the fuck, Dad! Why are they fighting?"

"Ringer's showing Beau what happens when you mess with a brother's girl."

"Ringer has a girl?" I ask, baffled. He's been in prison for over eight years. How does he already have a girl?

And why do I feel like my heart is in my stomach?

"Yeah, kid. You."

"Me?" I scream incredulously. "I am not Ringer's girl! What the fuck, Dad!"

I sound like a bratty little kid, but I don't care. Sure, Beau was a shitty boyfriend, but he doesn't deserve to be beat to near death.

I turn back to the ring when the surrounding crowd's screams turn to a deafening level. Ringer is standing over a laid out Beau with Tiny's arm holding his high in the air.

He seeks me out in the crowd and flashes me an award winning smile, as well as a sultry wink.

What the fuck is going on?

Sasha sidles up next to me and my dad, looking just as confused as I feel.

Dad releases me and puts his arm around Sasha's shoulder. "Be easy on him, baby girl. He's just protecting you."

"From what? I don't need any protecting!" I scream at his back as he turns and leads Sasha away from me.

I feel him before I see him. Turning around, I find Ringer standing all too close behind me.

"What the fuck was that?" I ask him with a glare and a whole lot of attitude.

"Kid was talkin' shit. Had to put him in his place," he claims nonchalantly.

"Really? Cause from what I saw, you walked up and asked him for a fight."

Ringer shrugs his shoulders like it's no big deal.

"I don't need anyone fighting for me." I cross my arms over my chest. By following his gaze, I can tell my position has caused my shirt to rise up my stomach.

Ringer licks his lips as his eyes find mine again. "Who said I fought him for you, Princess?"

I stumble over myself as I try to form any words to respond. Maybe Beau *was* just talking shit. Beau is like that. He's an arrogant dickwad that deserves to be put in his place. Do I think he deserves a Ringer size punishment? No. But a beat down? It would possibly knock his ego down a peg.

My eyes meet the concrete under my boots as embarrassment bubbles its way up my chest.

"You in love with him?" Ringer asks me directly.

My eyes whip up to his. "What?"

"Your dad told me you dated him," Ringer growls, nodding to the ring where he just knocked my ex out.

His question sparks an idea in my head, but I quickly shut it down. There is no chance that Ringer decided to fight Beau just because my dad told him that we used to date.

"I don't love him," I utter, shaking my head.

"That's good," Ringer purrs with a grin that hits me straight between the thighs. "That's very good."

"Why is that good?" I ask, even though I'm nervous as all hell to hear the answer.

"Because that means there's not a damn thing in my fucking way." He winks before sauntering off towards the clubhouse, leaving me absolutely speechless in his shadow.

I only stay at the party for a little while longer, mainly to help Maria cleanup as much as I can. I can feel Ringer's eyes follow me whenever we're in the same vicinity. I try really hard to avoid any room that he is in as my nerves are shot to hell after our little chat. Right before I leave, something must

be going down because most of the brother's take off in two separate groups, effectively shutting the party down.

As I lay in bed, waiting for sleep to claim me, a million thoughts rush through my head as I think about what Ringer's words could have meant.

What does he mean there is nothing in his way? In his way for *what*?

Staring at my reflection in the mirror the next morning, I make the decision to steer clear of Ringer. It shouldn't be all that difficult. I only go to the clubhouse when I have to and my bakery keeps me busy usually six days a week.

Seeing him again after eight years, and knowing that the relationship we had before he went away is gone, hurts. Not only was I in love with him as a teenager, but he was my best friend. Even though he was older than me, he never made me feel like I was a burden or annoying to be around. It was like he enjoyed being around me as much as I did him. It feels like a line has been crossed, forever preventing us from getting back to that place, and it sucks. Majorly.

I'm not the naive teenage girl I was when he went away. I'm a woman, a woman that knows what it feels like to be touched by a man. There's no way in hell I can *not* imagine all of the thoughts I used to have for him when I was younger. Seeing him saunter around, fresh from behind bars is only going to fan that old flame.

I scrub the small amount of makeup from yesterday off of my face, cursing myself for not washing my face before I passed out, and turn towards the shower. Cranking the dial to a temperature Satan would be proud of, I peel my clothes off and throw them to the floor.

Lathering my hair with the sandalwood shampoo Maria forces me to buy, I decide that I'm going to do the one thing that always brings me joy.

Sasha and I weren't able to go thrifting on Friday, so if she's still around with my dad, I'll drag her with me today.

Sunday is the only day of the week I don't work at the bakery, same as every other business the club owns. A long time ago, when my grandfather was the president of the Outlaws, he decided that the Lord's day was strictly a family day. Unless it was completely unavoidable, any and all club business was to be put on hold for the entire twenty four hours.

When I set to open the bakery, being closed on Sunday was the only stipulation my dad and Ghost had with funding me the extra money to purchase equipment.

Part of me was extremely pissed because I knew Sundays would be a huge day of sales for a bakery. On the other hand, I knew growing up that Sunday was my favorite day of the week because I always had my dad and my pop all to myself.

I never had a lot of friends growing up. I was an only child, and both of my parents were also only children, so cousins were out. All of the other club kids were either older than me or a lot younger. It made for a lonely childhood. I was the weird girl with biker parents, and it didn't help that I dressed the part in Dad's old shirts and ratty jeans.

When I was in seventh grade, a new girl moved to town. We became instant friends the moment she walked in wearing an Aerosmith t-shirt. She sat right next to me and introduced herself as Sparrow. We became inseparable for the four years she lived in Arizona. Her dad worked for a company that had them moving every few years, so her time here always had an expiration date.

She moved a few months before Ringer got arrested, so it's safe to say that my junior year of high school was the worst year of my life. I lost three of my best friends all in one year. Sparrow moved away, Ringer was sent to prison, and my nana passed away.

Luckily, Sparrow and I were still able to keep in touch over the phone, but the other two I lost completely.

To this day, I talk to Sparrow almost everyday, whether it's a phone call, FaceTime, or just a simple text. We are soul best friends, soulmates, and no amount of distance can change that.

The cold stream of water splashing my skin brings me back into the present. Shutting the water off with my goose fleshed arm, I reach for the fluffy towel with the other. I dry off quickly, and pad into my closet.

An entire wall of clothing racks takes up one side of the room, and the other is lined with shelves of supplies. A table sits in the center with Nana's sewing machine perched proudly on it.

I grab the pair of shorts on the top of the pile and the first tank I see. Slipping a bandeau bra over my head, I quickly throw on the rest of the outfit, completing the look with one of my favorite tops. This particular shirt I stole from my dad already had the sleeves cut off, so I had to make do with the fact that the arm holes show almost everything. I'm not sure everyone in town would appreciate a peep show, so I wear the bandeau bra as a courtesy.

I slip on my yellow and white checkerboard Vans and grab my purse before locking the door behind me. Stomping down the stairs, I make excessive noise while unlocking the side door into the kitchen. I really don't feel like getting a glimpse of my dad nailing Sasha this early in the morning on the table where I eat my meals.

Cautiously, I open the door and see Dad and Sasha sitting at the small breakfast nook, coffee mugs in hand. Sasha has that thoroughly fucked look about her that you just can't hide, even though she's doing her best not to make eye contact with me. Dad is shirtless and wearing the same jeans from last night. He looks like he's been up for hours, while Sasha looks like she just rolled out of bed.

"Mornin', baby girl," Dad says, forcing a smile as he blows the steam rising off of his coffee.

My gaze volleys back and forth between the two, and finally lands on Sasha. When she looks up at me, I toss her a wink and thumbs up.

“Morning love birds,” I reply, making my way over to the steaming coffee pot.

After filling my cup and adding two scoops of sugar, I hop up on the counter and face them.

“So, how was y’all’s night?” I ask, trying to break up the awkwardness I feel swimming in the air.

Knowing how shy and quiet Sasha can be, I look at my dad and watch as he winces before breaking out into a shit eating grin. “It was just fine.”

After a few silent, awkward moments, Dad pushes back from the table and makes his way over to me. Although I’m still sitting on the counter, he pulls me into a hug. When he pulls away, he leaves his forehead resting against mine. “I know how you feel about him, baby girl.”

“Dad...” I interrupt him.

“Lilah, I’m your dad, and I’m not stupid. You don’t think I watched the way you looked at him when you were a kid? I’m not blind.”

“Daddy, that was eight years ago. I’m 23 now, not 15.”

“You also haven’t seen him since you were 15. I saw his face light up last night when he saw you for the first time. Lilah, feelings don’t just vanish because you haven’t seen someone in a few years.”

“Your dad’s right, Lile,” Sasha adds quietly from her seat at the breakfast table.

“I’m going to stop this conversation right now. Not because I think you’re wrong, but because he just doesn’t think about me like that. The look you think you saw him giving me was probably just an initial reaction of surprise. Then he actually realized who I was. It’s fine, you guys. I’m fine.” I hop off the counter.

Dumping the last few drops from my mug into the sink, I turn towards Sasha.

“I’m going thrifting today if you want to join. I know we didn’t get a chance Friday, but if you’d like to come, I’m out

of here.”

Sasha looks towards my dad, and when he gives her a curt nod, she turns and smiles at me. “Let’s go.”

I watch them both, confused as hell why she would feel the need to get permission from my dad to go shopping with me.

Sasha leaves the room, presumably to change out of my dad’s shirt before we go shopping. Dad pulls me into a tight embrace when she is gone. “We need to talk about something when you get back, baby girl.”

His tone sounds pretty serious, but I try to bask in his warmth as he holds me. A hug from him has always made everything a little bit better whenever my world is chaotic or uncertain.

“I’m ready!” Sasha calls from the hallway.

Dad squeezes me one last time before walking us to the door. I’m the first to exit, and when I don’t hear Sasha right behind me, I turn back.

I bring my pointer and thumb finger to my lips and let out a loud wolf whistle when I see my dad’s hands grip Sasha’s face, holding it to his.

“Get a room!” I scream while cackling at them.

Sasha pulls away from dad with a goofy grin on her face and giggles with me.

The loud vibration of motorcycles coming down our street causes knots to form in my stomach and my smile to vanish. Just as I motion for Sasha to get in the car, Ghost and Ringer steer their bikes into our driveway directly beside where I’m parked.

Oblivious to my nonverbal communication, Sasha smiles and waves at them. Ringer’s expression is stuck in a scowl as his eyes drink in my body. He rips his gaze from me to his brother and my dad, and I watch in curiosity. It’s Sunday, so if this isn’t a pleasure visit, it means something is seriously wrong.

If something is wrong, my dad will call me to let me know what's going on. There's no need for us to stick around, so I drop into my bucket seat and turn the ignition until my baby purrs under me.

Sasha slides in next to me, and as soon as her seatbelt is on, I pull out of the driveway. I chance one more glance over to see Ringer watching us leave. I lock eyes with him in my rearview mirror and keep him in my gaze until he disappears from view.

Fifteen minutes later, we're pulling into my favorite thrift store. It's the largest one in the area, just on the outskirts of town leading into the city. The entire building can be compared to the size of a Walmart Supercenter. I cut the engine and we climb out. Smiling at one another, we make our way inside.

"Hello, pretty lady!" bellows Gurdy, the owner of Rose Thrifts, as we walk through the door.

Gurdy is a 70-something year-old widow. She and her late husband opened this shop not long after they got married, and it eventually turned into the huge business she has today.

"Good morning, Gurdy," I greet her in return.

"Who is this we have here?"

"This is my friend, Sasha. She wants to learn my craft," I giggle.

"Well, she has the best teacher! Let me know if you ladies need any help. I just got in a bunch of stuff that's perfect for you. You know where to find it," she says with a wink.

I lead Sasha to the women's section first. I glance her over, mulling over how to best dress her body type. "You're looking for anything that you think will fit your waist. Even if it won't, we can make it fit. So if you like it, grab it. I'll see if it'll work." I flip through the jeans rack, grabbing a few that I think will fit me. I look over and see Sasha holding a few pairs as well.

"How do you know what to do with them?" Sasha asks.

“My nana taught me. She used to love repurposing clothes into everything. When I was little, she would rip up my pop’s clothes to make doll clothes for me.” I chuckle at the memory of my pop coming home one day to see his favorite pajama pants made into a brand new swimsuit for my cabbage patch doll.

“Oh my gosh, Lilah! Look at this!” I round the long rack to see Sasha holding up a long red pair of leather pants.

“Those are awesome, Sash! I could make those into shorts or a skirt for you. My dad’ll go crazy when he sees you in that. He loves red.”

Sasha’s face flames, and she adds the pants to her pile.

We make our way to the dressing rooms to try on our selections. Sasha was extremely lucky with her picks. Some of them I’ll only have to cut into shorts.

My body type is, as always, difficult. Everything that fits my waist almost never fits my thighs, and the ones that are comfortable on my thighs are always way too big on my waist. I usually have to go with what fits my thighs and cut and sew so they also fit my waist.

I decide on four out of the twelve pairs I picked before we head over to the shirts.

Sasha turns to look down the blouse rack while I go farther down to the t-shirt section. I usually don’t find many I like in the women’s section, so I always end up in the men’s area.

I get lucky and find some shirts I can wear to the bakery in the women’s section. Sasha follows me over to the men’s section, and I look over to her with what I’m sure is the widest smile.

“Jackpot!” My giddiness makes Sasha laugh as she watches me take shirt after shirt off the rack and throw them over my arm.

“There are so many,” Sasha exclaims while looking at all of the old t-shirts on the rack.

Gurdy must overhear us, and she comes around the corner, pushing an empty cart. “Younger lady came in to sell those the other day. She said her dad used to wear them. I tried talking her out of it, but she wanted nothing to do with them. I knew you’d love them.” She smiles and gestures to the cart with a knowing wink. “Figured you’d need this,” she smirks.

“You’re the best!” After loading what I’m sure is over thirty shirts in the cart, we make our way to the front.

“You aren’t going to try them on?” Sasha asks.

“No. They’re t-shirts, so I know they’ll be big. Plus, I cut them all over so it really doesn’t matter,” I explain.

I’m so excited to get home and put these in the washer so I can get started.

“Thank you for taking me,” Sasha says once we’re back in my car.

“Of course! Thank you for coming with me. Not many people like to buy and wear other people’s clothes, but there’s something about it that makes me feel good.”

Sasha suggests getting something for lunch before taking her back to her car, so I pull into a popular taco spot near The Castle.

The hostess guides us to a booth in the back corner. After perusing the menu, I decide on steak tacos and a strawberry margarita. I’m starving, and it’s all I can do to not call the waitress over to our table. Fortunately, she appears within minutes holding chips and salsa.

“My name’s Holly, I’ll be taking care of you today. What can I get y’all started with to drink?” the peppy young waitress asks, the twang in her voice indicating she’s from down south.

“I’ll have a strawberry margarita, please.”

Sasha’s nose crinkles as she looks at the drink menu. “I’ll have a mojito please.”

“I’ll get those right out and be back to take your food order.” The waitress smiles and nods at us before turning

towards the bar. I take the opportunity to begin my interrogation of Sasha.

“Alright, I’ve given you all day. I wanna know what happened between you and my dad.”

Sasha’s face flames. “I knew this was coming.”

“Well!” I push eagerly, before realizing that I may have invited her to share more than I’m comfortable hearing. “Wait, I don’t want too many details because that’s my dad and that’s gross. But you gotta give me something!”

“I think we have a lot of chemistry,” Sasha says timidly.

“Come on, Sasha!”

“Okay, okay!” she giggles. “He kissed me at the party, then we went back to the house. After a while, he got a call and had to leave. He was gone for hours and I ended up falling asleep, but as soon as he got back home and woke me up...” Sasha’s face blushes and a shiver racks through her body. “I’m not telling you what happened behind closed doors.”

“So are you going to be be my new step momma?” I tease.

“Gross! You’re only, what, maybe twelve years younger than me!” she laughs.

“So! At least *you’re* not younger than *me!*”

We try to contain our laughter as our waitress approaches. Holly sets our drinks on the table with a smile. “Now what can I get y’all to eat?” she asks.

We order our food and spend the time waiting talking about the disaster that happened when delivering the cake yesterday.

The prospects that Dad had helping us with set up dropped the entire top half of the cake on the ground, destroying the whole thing. Sasha and I had to work against the clock to reconstruct and redecorate the cake. Luckily, we got done just in time for the reception and were able to sneak out as if it was never ruined in the first place.

After finishing our food, we make our way back to my house. I try to pretend that I don't notice Ringer and Ghost's bikes still sitting in the driveway.

We lug our bags upstairs and into my closet room before dumping the contents on the floor.

"Is it ok if I leave all of this here? I need to get home to let my dog out." Sasha pulls herself up from her position on the floor. "Can I come by one day this week after work, and you can show me the magic?"

"Of course! I'm going to throw it all in the wash today, so it'll all be ready whenever!"

"I'm going to go tell your dad goodbye. I'll see you in the morning!"

I smile at her knowingly before she turns and heads down the stairs.

I pluck through my new inventory and pull the small price tags off of each article of clothing. I set aside the jeans and take my rotary cutter to them, cutting them to the length that I like for shorts before dropping them into the laundry basket. Once I hear the rumble of a motorcycle outside, I know the coast is clear. I lift the laundry basket and walk down the steps to the garage, heading towards my washing machine.

As soon as I walk off the final step into the garage, I curse myself for not looking out of my apartment window that faces the driveway. Dad and Ringer are bent over Ringer's bike, inspecting something. I almost turn around to run back upstairs, but I know I'm too late.

Ringer's sparkling eyes meet mine, and a stupid little smirk lifts his right cheek. He says something to my dad, causing him to also look up and smile at me. Ignoring them both, I turn to the washing machine and start to load my new purchases.

"Hey, Princess." I jump at the sound of Ringer's voice so close to my back.

Turning towards him, I cross my arms and lean back against the vibrating washing machine. "Hi."

Dad saunters up behind Ringer, tossing a wrench on his tool bench. “How was shopping, baby girl?”

Ringer smiles, showing off his perfect teeth. It’s surprising that, after how much he has fought in his lifetime, all of his teeth are real and intact. And so freaking perfect. “Yeah, *baby girl*, how was shopping?”

I roll my eyes at Ringer, earning a chuckle from him and turn to my dad’s gleaming face. “It was good, actually. I got tons of new stuff.”

“That’s good. Baby girl, we need to talk about something. Wanna go inside?”

I nod, push off of the machine, and take off for the house. I’m surprised when Ringer follows behind us, as I didn’t realize this was an open conversation. I’m surprised once again when we reach Dad’s dining room table, and he pulls out a chair for me to sit in.

“Thanks,” I mumble as he takes the seat directly next to mine.

Dad grabs two beers and a bottle of water from the fridge, handing the other beer to Ringer and the water to me, before sitting down across from me.

Dad stares at his beer bottle, picking at the label for a couple of minutes before meeting my eyes. Unease creeps up my spine at the sorrow that overtakes his face.

“What’s going on?” I ask.

Dad clears his throat and adjusts himself, sitting up straight in his chair. “Something happened last night after the party, and I just want you to be aware of it. We’re still looking into some stuff, and it has nothing to do with the club directly, but we think you should know.”

“You’re scaring me, Daddy. What happened?”

I’m surprised when Ringer’s large hand grasps my knee under the table. My dad’s expression and tone of voice have me on edge, and if it weren’t for that, I would be freaking the fuck out at Ringer’s touch.

Dad clears his throat and takes another drink of his beer. “Pebbles was kidnapped yesterday.”

Fear shivers down my spine, and a gasp escapes me. “What do you mean kidnapped?” I can hear the tremble in my own voice.

“We found her, and she’s going to be okay, but...” Dad pauses, taking a deep breath.

When he doesn’t continue, I nearly come out of my chair, scared for the woman I’ve known since I was a baby. Pebbles isn’t that much older than I am. “But what, Daddy?”

Ringer squeezes my knee, shifting his hand up my thigh just a tad when he turns his body into mine. “She was assaulted and beat up pretty badly,” he says softly.

My eyes widen, tears immediately hitting my eyelids. “*What?*”

Dad clears his throat again and shakes his head in disbelief. “It’s a long story, but the short version is she was trying to help Bunny by making a page for her tattooing. Some creep found it and wanted to meet with her for a tattoo idea. Pebbles went, the guy took her thinking she was Bunny, and attacked her.”

“By the time we figured out what was happening and got there, we were too late. Bunny actually found her and tried rescuing her, but the guy ended up knocking her around pretty bad too. We got them both to the hospital, but Pebbles isn’t doing great. She was raped,” Ringer adds softly.

“No shit she isn’t doing great!” I yell at him. “She was raped!”

“Calm down, baby girl,” Dad urges. “We just wanted you to know.”

I push up from the chair hurriedly, effectively knocking Ringer’s hand from my lap, and I hurry out of Dad’s kitchen. Eyes blurred with angry tears, I take off for my apartment.

I run up the stairs and into my own tiny kitchen before I start to pace back and forth. I’m surprised I don’t wear a hole

in the ground as I shuffle from one side of the room to the other.

Raped? How could this happen? I've lived my entire life within this club, and I've always known there was a certain danger that came with being involved in it, but never in my life did I imagine something like *that* happening.

I remember Dad saying that it had nothing to do with the club, which could be true, but why the hell would someone kidnap Pebbles thinking she was Bunny? Something isn't adding up here. There must be a hole in this story that I'm not privy to.

The door leading into my apartment opens behind me, startling me so much I nearly jump out of my skin. I whip my body towards it, clearly still on edge from hearing about Pebbles attack.

"Calm down, babe. It's just me," Ringer says, holding his hands up.

When he steps up to me and lifts his hands to my face, using his thumb to wipe the wetness away, it's then that I realize I've been crying since my dad uttered the words.

"Are you okay?" he asks gently.

"Am I okay?" I yell. "Of course I'm not okay! I was just told that someone I've known since before I was even born was attacked and raped. Of course I'm not *okay!*"

I realize I'm hyperventilating when Ringer pulls me into his chest, telling me to breathe in through my nose and out through my mouth. "I've got you," he says calmly, lips nestled on the top of my head.

After a few minutes, my breathing regulates and I'm able to pull away from him. "I'm okay," I whisper.

"What's wrong?" he asks, furrowing his brows at me.

I pull out of his arms, turning to my dark red couch and plop down on it. Ringer lowers himself next to me before putting his hand back on my knee.

“I’ve always known that bad stuff happens, but I guess I always thought the club would be there to protect me. I’ve lived my whole life not really worrying about my safety because I thought the club would protect me.” I pause for a moment, then scoff. “Hearing what happened to Pebbles just proves that the club doesn’t matter. Bad shit can still happen. I guess I’m just a little spooked.”

Ringer reaches out, taking my chin in his hand and forcing me to face him. I’m stunned speechless with the fierceness I find in his eyes. “Listen to me right now, because I am only going to say this once.” I force myself to swallow at the harshness in his tone. “I will *never* let a fucking thing happen to you.” His scorching gaze volleys between my eyes. “Do you hear me? There is not a fucking thing in this world that I would let harm you. I would set the entire fucking world on fire to protect you.”

A shiver racks up my spine at his words.

“Do you understand me, Princess?”

Every ounce of bravery I have ever possessed vanishes from my body as his words surround me. A weight lifts off my shoulders as if my body knows that the words he speaks are true. Wide eyed, I slowly nod.

“Good,” he says, letting go of my chin and dropping his hand back to my knee.

“Is she okay?” I ask timidly. My voice is so small, I hardly recognize it.

Ringer slowly nods. “The hospital checked her out and gave her the okay to be discharged. She’s going to stay with Tank and Maria for a while. I was locked up when Triton passed, but Reaper filled me in on how she was afterwards.”

I nod, remembering back to five years ago and how I feared that Pebbles would never recover from her father’s death. “She went mute for weeks. She would only talk to certain people, and even then, she was a shell of herself.” After this, I fear she may never return to her normal self.

He nods. “She’s in shock, but Maria and Tank will take care of her.”

I don’t respond, too busy waging a mental war as I try to process everything that has happened. Ringer seems unbothered by my lack of response and remains next to me, lightly tracing his fingertips along my knee cap.

I realize after a few moments that his touch soothes something inside of me. My breathing returns to normal as I zone out, staring at an imperfection in the coffee table in front of me.

“You good?”

I nod, rolling my head on the couch cushion towards him. “Thank you.”

“For?” he asks, his face a mask of confusion.

“Calming me down.”

He smirks, letting out a soft chuckle. “Princess, I’ve been calming you down since you were 6 years-old.”

With the reminder of the large age difference between us, I sit up on the couch.

I know exactly what time he is referencing. I was 6, he was around 13 or 14. It was only a couple of years after his dad joined the club. I was riding my bike around the clubhouse when I fell off and skinned my knee. Ringer just so happened to be outside playing basketball with Flame when it happened. Dad tells me I’ve been a drama queen since the minute I entered the world, so even though I only skinned my knee, you would have thought I had cut off my leg.

As I sat there on the hard concrete, holding my injured leg, Ringer dropped down next to me to inspect my knee. While Flame ran to find my mom, which was a joke because she would’ve just told me to suck it up, Ringer sat on the concrete with me and held me while I cried. I remember him telling me jokes to get me to stop crying, and suddenly my knee didn’t hurt all that bad.

I can also recall many times where I was so angry at my mother for whatever reason, and all Ringer had to do was pull me into his arms and hold me tightly to calm me down. When I was a kid, I used to fight his embrace because I knew what he was trying to do. Being his persistent self, he would keep hugging me anyway, eventually tickling my ribs until I surrendered, doubled over in laughter while he kept holding me.

Things started to change as I got older, and his embraces became less comical. His touch was no longer funny, and it elicited feelings inside of me that a teenage girl had no business feeling for a man in his twenties.

“You used to make me so mad,” I say with a small laugh.

“What? Why?” He turns his body towards mine on the couch, but still not removing his hand from my bare thigh.

“All I wanted to do was be mad and pout, but you had to ruin it by tickling me.”

“You’re too pretty to pout.”

I meet his eyes as they search my face. “I was a kid.”

“Even then,” he says matter of factly, his eyes twinkling.

Biting down on my lips, I turn away from him as a warm blush creeps its way up my neck.

Ringer drops his booted feet to the floor, and the loud thud brings my attention back to him.

“I’m meeting Dad and Ghost at the diner for dinner. Are you okay?” he asks, the question punctuated by genuine concern.

I nod my head, pushing up from the couch and moving over to the small kitchen. I take a small sip from the water my dad handed me and turn, leaning my hip against the granite.

Ringer rises and walks over, stopping right in front of me. He’s so close that I can smell his woody cologne. “It’s really fucking good to be out and to be able to see your face again.”

I peer up at him through my lashes and am assaulted by the face that I've loved since I was thirteen. His piercing blue eyes penetrate my soul. His gaze drops to my lips, and I'm made painfully aware that I've been chewing my bottom one this entire time.

His large hand lifts to my cheek, where he uses his thumb to softly pull my lip out from between my teeth. I internally scream as he drops his head to mine and places a gentle kiss at the corner of my mouth. His stubble tickles my chin, but the shock radiating through my body has me speechless and frozen as he pulls away.

The smirk pulling at his lips has me snapping out of it, I roll my eyes and push at his chest.

"Did I take your breath away?" he chuckles.

I roll my eyes again, flipping my middle finger up at him. "Hardy-har-har. You surprised me is all."

"Mhm, sure." He slowly backs away towards my door, while not taking his eyes off of me. "I'll see you tomorrow, Princess."

Not being able to leave it alone, I ask, "Why will you see me tomorrow?"

"I've gotta try the famous baker that is our very own Lilah Neil." He says my name with his big hands held out in emphasis.

"You've had my baking before," I say through a grin. He was the main customer at the many silly bake sales I used to have at the clubhouse. My nana and I would bake all night on Friday nights. On Saturdays, I used to con all the men into buying my treats. Every penny I made in those sales is actually the money I put into the bakery I have now.

Even though it wasn't nearly enough, I am so thankful for the club for investing in my baby.

"Babe, I haven't had one of your sweet treats in a very long time," he says with a wink.

I'm not sure if his comment should be taken out of context, but the way my body reacts to it says a whole lot. I don't have time to think about it further as he leaves through my front door.

I'm left leaning against the counter, wondering what in the hell just happened.

four

Ringer

“HOLY FUCK, I forgot how good Maggie’s cooking was,” I groan over the fork-full of pot roast and mashed potatoes.

Dad chuckles across the booth from me, shaking his head. “Breathe, son. You’re going to choke.”

I scoff at his comment. “Can’t help it. It’s too damn good,” I say over another mouthful.

Ghost, who called earlier to let us know he was going to be late, plops down in the booth next to me. I growl at him as he takes dad’s extra fork and scoops up a large forkful from my plate, just like he did when we were kids. I pull my plate away, guarding it with my arm and snarl at him. “Back the fuck off, Kelan.”

At the use of my brother’s given name, his eyes widen and his white teeth appear from beneath his bushy beard. “Someone’s got their panties in a wad,” he laughs.

“Nah.” I shake my head.

Dad reaches across the table and thumps me over the side of my head. “Quit talkin’ with your fucking mouth full. Jesus, prison made you an animal.”

I let out a hearty laugh. “Yeah, Pops. That’s what made me an animal. It definitely wasn’t from growing up with you two.”

“Hey now, your mother did a fine job civilizing all of us,” Dad smiles. The wrinkles pulling at his eyes and the mention of my mom reminds me of how fucking long I was locked up and the fact that I’m not getting any younger.

Ghost is busy tapping away on his phone, so I successfully finish my plate, soaking every last bit of gravy up with my dinner roll.

“Pebbles is pregnant,” Ghost blurts out, looking across the table straight into Dad’s eyes, who was currently in the middle of taking a drink of his evening coffee. He coughs, nearly spitting out his last sip.

“Holy fuck,” he croaks. “Trigger’s?”

Ghost nods. *Shit*. “When the fuck did that happen?” I ask.

“They’ve been sneaking around for a while. They were real fucking obvious about it. But both of ‘em denied it if you asked,” Ghost chuckles.

“Is she alright?” Dad asks, wiping up his spilled coffee with the black bandana he keeps shoved in his front pocket at all times.

“I talked to Tank a little while ago. She’s settled in at their house but just as mute as she was when Triton passed.”

“Such a shame. How could we have let that happen to her?” Dad shakes his head, dropping it onto his weathered fist.

“I’ve been asking myself the same fucking question all damn day, Pops,” Ghost grumbles.

“What all happened? I still haven’t gotten the full story, just bits and pieces,” I ask my brother.

“Pebbles and Bunny have gotten really close since Bunny came to town. She was real secretive about herself, wouldn’t tell anyone where she was from or anything else personal. She started working with Flame when we all found out she could draw. You probably know that part, though. I’m sure Flame filled your ass in.”

I nod at him, recalling all the phone calls with Flame where he would spend the whole fucking time talking about

his new apprentice.

“Well, Pebbles thought she was helping by making an Instagram account for Bunny. I’m guessing she thought it would help bring in more customers or whatever. Pebbles hasn’t said anything, so that’s all speculation. Bunny found out about the Instagram when we went to Peb’s apartment. One of the posts was a sketch Bunny had made of her old home. Whoever was after her is who kidnapped Pebbles, thinking she was Bunny, and you know the rest.”

I nod my head, not caring to have Ghost retell the full story of how we found her. I was there. I saw the condition we found them in. Bunny is lucky we walked in when we did, or she would have ended up just like Pebbles.

“Fuck, man,” I sigh. “This shit is fucked up.”

Ghost and Dad nod, agreeing with my statement. Maggie ambles over to our table, interrupting our foul moods. “Everything taste okay?” she asks.

I turn my best smile on her. “Maggie, you know damn well your cooking is the way straight to my heart.”

“Good, sugar. I’m glad for it,” she says sweetly before turning to Dad. “Horse is in the garage waiting for you to swing by to look at that bike.”

My dad pulls out his wallet, and Maggie scoffs. He pays no attention to her glare and drops a fifty dollar bill on the table, then winks at his best friend’s wife. “Alright boys, I’m out. I’ll see ya. Ring, I’ll see you at the shop tomorrow?”

“I’ll be there.”

Ghost scoots out of the booth, pulling his phone from his pocket once again as he heads for the parking lot.

“What is so important on that damn thing?” I finally ask when we get out to our bikes. He almost plowed down an old lady and a young mom holding her baby as he stared at the screen.

“Tank, Trigger, and I have a group text going. Just trying to stay on top of things.”

I roll my eyes when he doesn't even look away from the phone to answer me.

After nearly ten minutes of standing in the parking lot while Ghost is glued to his phone, he slides the fucking thing in his back pocket. "Sorry, kid."

I reach out, punching his shoulder. "I'm not a fucking kid anymore, Ghost."

"You'll always be my kid brother, *Emmett*."

The way he says my name pisses me off. I let it go, knowing he only said it because I yelled his real name in the diner. "Fuck off. You going back to the clubhouse?"

"Got nowhere else to go, little brother," Ghost grins.

"Fuck off with the fucking kid names, Booger."

Calling him the nickname my mom gave him when we were little didn't have quite the strike I was going for. His eyes soften a fraction, but immediately shift back to his playful self when he flips me off, throwing his leg over his bike.

Before I can even get my leg over my seat, Ghost's engine is rumbling and he is taking off out of the parking lot.

I spend the drive home volleying between worrying for a woman I grew up with and anticipating what's to come next with another woman I've also known for the majority of my life.

"Welcome to Lilah's!" a teenage kid calls out from behind the counter as I step through the glass door to the bakery.

I look around the small shop in amazement as I think about the fact that the little girl that sold me and the rest of the club cupcakes and pies did all of this. Pride swells in my chest when I realize that there are at least fifteen people in line ahead of me. I even waited until after ten o'clock to come in, figuring the breakfast rush would have died down by now.

I was clearly wrong, and for Lilah and her business's sake, I'm happy for it.

I take in all of the small decor as I wait, not even paying attention to the large menu above me that's written in perfect chalk calligraphy on the wall.

Lilah has always had a love for old stuff. Records and old band posters line the pale red walls. There is even an old electric guitar hanging above a cluster of old school diner tables in the corner. A jukebox near the front door blasts *Learn to Fly* by the Foo Fighters.

This place fucking radiates good vibes.

When I'm second in line, I finally look up at the big ass menu. I can't even hide the fact that I'm overwhelmed with all the choices. The glass cases that are formed in the shape of an upper case *L* house a variety of baked goods.

I know for a fact the one thing I'm looking for probably won't be on the menu. It never is in traditional bakeries.

When it's my turn, I step up to the counter. The young kid smiles wide at me, beaming with customer service etiquette. His eyes briefly drop to my cut for a second, his smile never faltering. "Morning, man. What can I get ya?"

My eyes roam over the glass case and widen when they get to the end. A small pan of baklava is sitting on the top shelf. "Holy shit."

"Boss lady makes a small pan of this shit every morning. Hardly ever sells out, but she insists."

My mom used to make us baklava every Sunday. Ghost and I used to fight like cats and dogs over who got to eat the first piece.

"Is that right?" I ask, not really expecting an answer.

Kid nods his head and gestures to the pastry. "You want a piece?"

"Fuck yeah," I cheer. I wince when I turn to the couple behind me, who are holding hands with a little girl. I smile in apology.

“It’s fine, man. She hears it all at home,” the man says with a wave of his hand and a smile.

I turn back to the kid behind the counter who boxes up the slice of desert. “Coffee?”

“Yeah, please.”

Just as I’m handing over my card, the door to the back swings open and the product of my wet dreams from last night pushes through the opening. Lilah steps out in skin-tight black leggings with a red flannel shirt tied around her waist, complimented by a ripped Jack Daniels tank top that exposes a large chunk of her smooth stomach.

Her eyes catch mine and I smirk at her when I’m caught checking her out. She rolls her eyes playfully at me.

“Morning, Princess.”

“Good morning, Ringer,” she takes over cashing me out, taking the coffee from the kid and putting a lid on top.

“You know, I’m supposed to tell you your money’s no good here, just like everywhere else.”

“But you aren’t going to?” I ask, handing her my card over the counter.

“Nope.” She pops the ‘p’ and slides my card quickly through the reader.

The kid has already moved on to the young family behind me, and somehow we end up being the last ones in line.

Lilah hands me back my card, and pushes the small red box across the counter.

“Baklava?” she asks.

“That’s a silly question, Princess,” I chuckle, grabbing the box and groaning at the warmth radiating on my palm through the thin material.

“That case has an internal warmer. Your mom used to say it was best served warm,” she says matter of fact.

“I have to eat it now then,” I deadpan, meeting her eyes across the counter.

She nods, using her chin to gesture to the tables in the corner.

“Grab a piece. Come sit with me. You know you want to,” I playfully suggest.

She turns and looks over each shoulder, no doubt weighing her options.

“Come on, fifteen minutes tops.”

“Fine. Let me grab a coffee, and I’ll meet you over there,” she replies.

I choose the small booth in the far corner and slide in. I take the plastic lid off my coffee and blow on the steaming liquid.

A red plastic fork and a stack of napkins land on the table in front of me before Lilah slides into the booth across from me.

Not waiting a second longer, I flip the top of the box open and dig my fork into the pastry. A loud groan rumbles up my throat as the nutty flavor explodes on my tongue. Nostalgia rips through me as I’m brought back to my childhood.

“Is this my mom’s recipe?” I ask Lilah with a frown.

I watch as her eyebrows dip and she worries her lip between her teeth as she nods. “Your dad and brother gave it to me. And I knew it was your favorite.” She shrugs, taking a small sip from her steaming mug. “I hope you don’t mind,” she adds softly.

I shake my head. “Of course I don’t mind. The kid said you make a batch every morning?”

She nods again. “Yeah.”

“Why?”

I finish off the last bit of the pastry and wipe my face from any flakes that could be left over while I wait for her answer. I have to lean forward to hear her as she speaks so quietly.

“It somehow made me feel closer to you.”

I lean back against the booth and study her. I’m reminded of the young girl I left behind all those years ago. Her honey brown hair is pulled away from her face, hiding under a red weathered ball cap. I want to knock the damn thing off her head as it casts a pesky shadow across her beautiful eyes.

“You missed me that much?”

She scoffs, rolling her eyes. “You know damn well we all missed you, Ringer.”

“I didn’t ask if other people missed me. I asked if *you* missed me, Princess.”

She doesn’t answer me with words. But the way she doesn’t pull her gaze from mine gives me all the answers I need.

I decide to take it easy on her, shifting my eyes around the bakery once again. “This place is kick ass.”

Lilah’s beaming smile overtakes her face as she looks around her shop. I have no doubt she’s looking at it as if she’s taking it all in for the first time, like I am. “Thank you! I’ve worked so hard on it.”

“I can tell. You did an amazing job, babe.”

“I had a ton of help from my dad and the club. Your dad actually helped me find most of the decor from different antique and vintage markets. My dad and I took a trip with him to Phoenix one weekend and went to a huge vintage and craft show. I was in absolute heaven.”

I point at her shirt. “Seems your style hasn’t totally changed since you were younger.”

She rolls her eyes playfully. That’s one thing I do remember very clearly about her. She rolls her eyes so goddamn much I’m surprised they don’t get stuck in the back of her damn head.

“I still wear all the same stuff. I just make it fit me better,” she shrugs.

I finish off the last bit of my coffee. “I like your style. It’s sexy as fuck.”

Her cheeks stain a beautiful pink. “Thanks.”

After a few beats of silence, Lilah sits up straight. “Have you heard anything about Pebbles? How is she doing?”

I shrug, linking my fingers together on the table in front of me. “I talked to Ghost this morning. He was going over there to check on her. In my opinion, I think everyone needs to leave her the fuck alone. I’m not a woman, but I feel like if that shit happened to me, the last thing I’d want is a shit load of people up my fucking ass.”

Lilah nods in agreement. “Same. I just feel so bad. I want to reach out, but I don’t want to make things worse.”

“Just message her and let her know you’re there for her whenever she’s ready. That way she knows you care, but you’re not up her ass like everyone else.”

Our conversation is interrupted as the woman with black hair that I met at the party comes over to our table and slides in next to Lilah. “I’m sorry to interrupt your breakfast.”

Lilah waves her off and scoots over giving her more room. “No worries, Sash. What’s up?”

“I have to head to Sedona for a week. My mom just called. Dad’s not doing too well in his current nursing home. I need to get him moved to another one.”

“Oh no! I hope everything’s okay. Let me know if there’s anything I can do to help,” Lilah says.

“I’m sure it will be fine. I just feel bad taking off on such short notice, and especially on this weekend of all weekends.”

“Shit,” Lilah croaks. “I forgot about that.”

“What’s wrong?” I ask.

“We have a huge wedding in Vegas this weekend,” Lilah says, visibly pained.

“Maybe I can call my mom back and see if we can just figure it out next week.”

“No!” Lilah chirps. “Family comes first always, Sasha. Go get your dad taken care of. I’ll be fine.”

“Only if you’re sure,” Sasha says worriedly.

“Of course. Why don’t you take off early and go pack? Mikey can help me close up.”

Sasha throws her arms around Lilah and squeezes her tightly before rushing out of the booth. It’s not until the bell over the door is ringing that Lilah lets her head drop into her hands.

“You alright?” I ask.

“I’m not the best on long roadtrips by myself. Driving to Las Vegas alone is not high on my ‘want to do’ list.”

“Why would you go by yourself?”

Lilah looks at me like I’ve grown a second head. “Did you not just hear her say she can’t go with me?”

“And?”

I watch her think about it for a second and then her eyes light up. “I can ask your brother if one of the prospects can drive me!”

“Uh, absolutely fucking not,” I growl.

“Why not?” she asks, her pert nose tipping up even farther.

“I will go with you.”

“You?”

“Yes, me.”

“Why you?”

“I told you yesterday, Princess. I’m always going to protect you.”

“What does going to Vegas with me have to do with protecting me?” she asks, confusion lacing her tone.

“Lilah, don’t play dumb.”

Her head snaps back in offense. “I’m not dumb!”

“I never said you were, babe. I said don’t *play* dumb. Think about it. A single young woman in Vegas? Fucking Vegas, Princess? You don’t go to Vegas by yourself.”

She tries interrupting me but I don’t let her.

“You go to Vegas by yourself for this wedding, and next thing we know, you’re on a ship to Aruba to be sold as a sex worker and on the next episode of *Dateline*.”

Lilah’s eyes widen, shifting from anger to shock. “That’s morbid, Ringer.”

“You forget I just got out of *prison*, Lilah. I’ve heard about much fucking worse.”

“Okay, so I won’t go by myself.”

“Then it’s settled. I will come with you.”

I chuckle when she rolls her eyes again. “Fine. But you’re sleeping on the pullout couch.”

At my curious stare, she elaborates. “Sasha and I always share a king size room. They are cheaper.”

“Have you done many weddings in Vegas?”

“Sparrow opened a small party planning business. She makes bank doing weddings there. Quite a few of her brides have liked my cakes and never seem to have a problem paying my travel fees,” she shrugs, “so I get a mini vacay out of it, and I get to see my best friend.”

“When do we leave?”

Lilah’s face finally breaks into a small smile. “Friday at nine a.m.”

Lilah leaves me sitting alone at the table to help with a small rush that comes through the door. I only stay about twenty minutes to watch her work before I take off.

Pulling up to my dad’s garage, I glare at the punk that I fought in the ring on Saturday. Satisfaction creeps through my veins as I get closer and notice the black eye he’s sporting, courtesy of the knockout punch I threw his way. I grin only for him to scowl at me and turn in the opposite direction.

“Hey, Pop,” I greet my dad, who is laid out under a car on a small lift. I kick the bottom of his boot with the toe of mine when I get close enough.

Wheeling himself out from under the Impala, he huffs as he lifts himself up.

“Gotta lay off those damn cigars, old man,” I joke.

“Ain’t that the damn truth. Ghost is going to end up with COPD by the time he’s 40 with the way he chokes ’em down,” Dad grumbles.

I follow him as he ambles over to the small office in the corner. I smile at the picture on his desk, taken a few weeks before the car accident that took my mom’s life. It’s of the four of us sitting on a picnic table at the club. Our mom was a tiny little thing, but her Russian temper was something else.

Dad throws himself down into his chair and nods to the small armchair against the wall.

“So let’s cut to the chase,” I say, breaking the silence. “Why’d you call me in here?”

Dad chuckles, lighting up the familiar scented cigar he’s favored my entire life. “Have you thought of what you’re wanting to do, now that you’re out?”

“I want to open a gym.”

He nods, a smile breaking his lips. “Still on that kick, huh?”

“It’s not a secret I’ve got a thing with using my fists.”

“Have you talked to your brother about it?”

“I just got out two days ago, Dad.”

“Well you’ve got my vote. I’ve also got some money stowed away if you need help.”

“I appreciate that, Pops.”

Before I went to prison, my goal was always to open up a full service gym with fully functional boxing rings, octagons, and certified trainers. I wanted it to be a place where kids and

adults of all kinds can come to let off steam and learn to direct their aggression in the right way.

I spent many nights, staring at the bunk above me, dreaming of the gym that I would one day make a reality.

“I’m sure your brother and the rest of the club will be all for it. The club recently purchased a plaza off of Rose Street. We’ve been working on building Pebbles a dance studio, and I’m sure your brother would jump at the idea of a gym in there too.”

I think about what he says, excitement bubbling in my stomach. It would be fucking amazing if that were to happen.

“I’ll bring it to the table if you want me too,” Dad offers.

“Let me talk to Ghost first, just to put the feeler out and see what his thoughts are.”

Dad nods, finishing off his cigar. “Well, you got me in your corner, son. It’s damn good to have you home.”

“It’s good to be home, Pops.”

“If you don’t want to stay at the clubhouse, you are more than welcome to come stay in your old room. You know that.”

“Thanks, Dad. I’ll keep that in mind.”

I spend the rest of the afternoon with Dad at the garage. It feels good to push my sleeves up and get elbow deep in grease like I used to love doing with him.

The sun has set and the moon hangs high in the sky by the time I guide my bike through the gates of the parking lot at the clubhouse. I nod to the young kid Lee who’s currently manning the gatehouse and back into an open parking space.

Just as I’m removing my helmet, Ghost and Tiny fly through the gate on their bikes. Ghost’s boisterous laugh echoes through the dark lot and Tiny flicks him off. “You fucking cheated.”

Ghost laughs even harder before slapping his large palm on Tiny's wide back. "No need to be a sore loser, big guy."

"What's going on?" I ask, my boots scraping against the cement as I make my way over to them.

My brother turns his wide smile my way and gestures to Tiny with his thumb. "This guy bet me a bill that he could beat me here from The Castle."

"Still have the need for speed I see," I tease Ghost.

He shrugs, nodding to Tiny. "He started it."

"Motherfucker, you were the one telling Lyric that my bike was slow. You asked for it," Tiny grumbles.

"Still won though," Ghost brags.

"Fuck off," Tiny says, laughing. "I want a rematch tomorrow on a fucking straight road. You cheated turning down that alley."

"You never said there were any rules." Ghost shrugs, moving towards the front door of the clubhouse. I clap Tiny on the back sympathetically as we fall in line behind him.

The music immediately assaults my ears as we step through into the main room. Brothers and nearly naked chicks are strewn about. I follow Ghost over to the bar and recognize the kid manning it from my party.

"Hey, Pres. Tiny, Ringer," he greets.

"Patch! I'll just take a beer," Ghost says, taking the middle stool.

Tiny and I take the seats beside him and I nod in confirmation as Patch sends a cold beer my way.

The cold liquid hits my tongue and I moan as I swallow it down. I was never much of a beer drinker before getting locked up, but it's funny what you miss when you can no longer have it.

Turning around in my stool, I look out over the small party happening in the club. I can vaguely make out Razor sitting in the corner. There's a topless woman on her knees between his

thighs with his dick so far down her throat that I'm glad I can't see anything else from this angle.

"Still a fuck fest like always, huh?" I chuckle over a swig of beer.

Tiny grunts out a laugh. "That'll never change, brother. It doesn't matter how long you're gone."

"Except for Wednesdays. This place is a graveyard on Wednesdays," Patch adds, wiping the counter in front of us.

"That's because everyone is at The Castle," Ghost grins. "You gotta come check it out."

"Is anyone going to be there?" Tiny asks.

"I'm sure Tank, Flame, and their women won't be. But as far as I know, everyone else will still be in attendance," Ghost says with a shrug.

"James taking over?" Tiny asks my brother.

"Who's James?"

Ghost turns his stool to look at me. "We hired him a while back when Bunny was getting more serious with tattooing. She wasn't supposed to be done behind the bar yet, but there's no way I'm making her get behind there again."

My brother has always had a soft spot for women. I think it's because he was a huge mama's boy. Women flock to his side. I know he exudes a sense of protection that most women stick to like a fly trap.

"She any good?" I ask, eager to learn more about the woman who has my best friend enamored.

"What? Bartending or tattooing?" Tiny chuckles.

"Either," I shrug.

Ghost lets out an obnoxious laugh. "She's fucking amazing at both."

Without warning, Ghost pulls off his cut, laying it across the wooden bar before ripping off his black shirt. His chunky,

silver rings clank against each other as he aggressively points to a freshly tattooed snake on his pec.

“Damn, she did that?” I ask, inspecting the badass art across his chest.

He nods, smiling like a proud papa bear while putting his shirt and cut back on.

“I’m low-key pissed as hell I lost her behind the bar. She has the best fucking personality to work that shit.”

“Give her time, man. I’m pretty sure she’ll come back once in a while,” Tiny says.

“That’s the truth,” Patch adds with a nod.

“Alright, fuckers. I gotta be up early. Don’t burn the place down,” Ghost states with a yawn before draining the rest of his beer.

Patch slides another beer across the bar to Tiny and I before I can protest. I look to Tiny for some sympathy, completely beat from the day and wanting nothing more than to follow in Ghost’s lead and get in my own comfy bed.

“Come on, man. One more,” Tiny says just as *Black Dog* by Led Zeppelin comes over the surround system.

I let a grin pull at my lips and grab the beer off the bar, and stroll over to the vacant pool table. I feel Tiny follow behind me and see him stop near the cue rack. I hold the mouth of my beer between my teeth as I rack the balls.

When I’m done, I take a healthy swallow and drop the bottle on the high top. I catch the stick Tiny tosses my way and lean against the table as I wait for him to break.

After Tiny sinks two solid balls, he scratches on his next shot, making it my turn.

“I haven’t played in a long damn time, don’t fuck with me,” I glare at Tiny before breaking into a smile and taking my shot.

I’m just as surprised as Tiny when I successfully sink four stripes.

Even though I start off strong, Tiny still beats me in the end. Despite the loss, I don't think I did too bad for not playing in so many years.

While Tiny racks the next round, my eyes drift over the club once again and land on a raven-haired woman and a blonde sitting on the couch across the way. I don't let my gaze settle for too long before I move on. There is nothing too intriguing to look at, but I bet if a brown and curly-headed spitfire was sitting there, my eyes would be glued.

I'm pulled out of my perusal when Tiny slaps his open palm against my shoulder. "Your turn to break, brother."

During our second round, Razor comes over, landing his ass in one of the tall bar stools. "I get winner."

We assemble a small audience. Drinks are flowing and the noise is deafening. I have to take a pause in the bathroom when it becomes overwhelming. Prison can get pretty damn loud, but not for long periods of time since the guards could be dickheads about it. The constant noise that is a clubhouse full of drunk men and women alike has my brain ready to explode with sensory overload.

While in the bathroom, I decide to call it a night and head down the hall towards my room, pulling an Irish goodbye.

Before I can make it there, the raven-haired woman from the couch stops right in my tracks and smiles up at me, giving me her best fuck-me eyes.

"Ringer, right?"

"That's me."

"I've heard so much about you," she purrs, pressing her slim hand against my chest. I look down at her pale skin against my cut.

I fucking hate when chicks grab my cut.

I gently take her by the wrist and remove it from my chest. "I bet you have."

"All good things," she says, biting her lip while looking down at my dick.

I let out a chuckle. “Barking up the wrong tree, babe.”

Her smile falters. “No one said you were gay.”

Now it’s my turn for the smile to wipe from my face. “I’m not gay. You’re just not the pussy I’m looking for.”

Her perfectly manicured eyebrows pinch and her nose scrunches in distaste. “You were in jail for like, what, ten years? How can you be picky?” she says pompously.

I find myself once again laughing at the stupid, arrogant girl. “Don’t be so dense. Just because I was in *prison* for *eight* years doesn’t mean I’m going to stick my dick in the first whore that offers herself up to me.”

She rears back as if I slapped her and stomps her foot. “You don’t have to be such an asshole.”

“What’s your name?”

“Demi.”

“Word of advice for ya Demi. But first, I have a question.”

She stares at me, not offering an answer.

“How long you been hanging around here?” I ask her.

“Six months,” she huffs, crossing her arms.

“Just because you have a pussy doesn’t make you entitled around here. Actually, it’s quite the opposite. Don’t expect every brother in here to fall at your feet,” I proclaim before stepping around her small frame, continuing on the path to my room.

Her small voice calls out behind me, causing me to stop in my tracks and hear what she has to say. “I’m sorry. A few of the girls said you’d be interested since it’s no doubt been awhile for you. I really didn’t mean to be rude.”

“It’s fine, babe. Just remember that next time. You’re here because you want to be, but that doesn’t mean every guy in here has to want something from you.”

I shut myself in my room, making my way to the shower to wash off the grime of the day. I still have grease on my arms

from helping my dad out in the shop, and my mouth tastes like a beer distillery.

Demi was right about one thing, it's been a long fucking time since my dick has touched anything but my hand. Eight long fucking years, but it can wait a little longer til I get my hands on who I really fucking want.

If Demi would've approached me before seeing Lilah at that party, I'm not even going to lie to myself, I would have been all over that at the drop of a hat. But even at her mention of fucking tonight, my dick didn't even twitch.

All I have to do is think of Lilah and I'm rock hard.

I'm cursing myself for offering to go to Vegas with her so quickly. If I have to share a hotel room with her without being able to touch her, I'm going to suffer from the worst case of blue balls in my life.

Fuck.

I'm going to even be stuck in the car right next to her for four hours.

Vegas is going to either fucking suck or be the best weekend of my goddamn life.

five

Lilah

SWEAT DRIPS down my cleavage as I lean over the open trunk of my car. “God damnit!” I curse, kicking the stupid flat tire that’s stranded me on the side of the road. The throbbing pain that shoots through my foot only adds to my frustration.

“Ow!” I groan as I hop around on one leg, holding my injured foot. It’s a good thing I never depended on these steel-toed Doc Martens to protect me from heavy things falling on my feet at the bakery.

I pull my phone out of my back pocket, irritated with myself for forgetting to plug it in once again. I roll my eyes. *You’ve really fucked up this time, Lilah.*

Then again, I can place some blame on Dad for this whole mess. He was supposed to replace the spare tire we had to use when I ran over a nail a few months ago. I know I should’ve been responsible and made sure to replace it myself, but this stuff is my dad’s thing. He’s the one that works on this shit for a living!

I huff and rub my temples with my fingers, trying to calm down the raging headache I can feel simmering. I can find anything to be pissed about right now. I’m blaming it all on mother nature for deciding to bless me with my pseudo-period this morning.

Oh well. At least the PMSing should be gone before I leave for Vegas in three days. Thank the Lord for birth control and stopping the spawn of satan from visiting.

Tires crunch over rock as a flashy truck pulls off the road with hazards on, stopping in front of my Charger.

A handsome man in his early thirties hops out of the truck. Once he reaches me, he pushes his mirrored Ray-Ban's to the top of his head.

"You lost, city boy?" I call out, nodding towards his outfit with a chin lift. I have to use my hand to block the rays from the sun so I can take the newcomer in.

Perfectly pressed navy slacks that hug his thighs are held together by a belt that looks like it could cost more than my entire outfit. He glides a hand down his pale gray tie and smiles at me. The whites of his teeth blind me momentarily as I continue to take him in.

I never thought primed and pressed was my type, but this guy sure does it for me.

"Not lost, just new to the area," he says as he gestures to my flat tire and saunters my way. "Do you need any help?"

"Well, unless you have the exact tire I need in the bed of your truck, I'm afraid you can't be of any help."

"Do you have someone on the way?" he asks, looking down the long, deserted road.

"Nah. My family has a business way down the road, so I was kinda hoping one of them would eventually pass by."

"You can't call anyone?"

I hold up my dead phone and shrug. Later on, I'll think about how fucking dangerous this entire situation is. Right now, I need solutions.

"I have a gun in my waistband and I can kill a man in .8 seconds, so I wouldn't try any sneaky shit," I deadpan.

His eyes widen and he holds both of his hands up in surrender. A laugh bubbles up my chest at the fear in his eyes.

“I promise I just pulled over to offer some assistance. I’m actually kind of the opposite of dangerous– I help people that are in danger.”

He pulls his wallet out of his back pocket and hands me his card. I read it over and then laugh.

“A lawyer, huh? That explains the get up,” I chuckle, pointing the card towards his outfit and waving it up and down.

“Gregory Morgan, but you can call me Reggie.”

“Reggie,” I test the nickname out on my tongue and reach my hand out to shake his.

“Nice to meet you.”

“Nice to meet you too. I’m Lilah Neil.”

After talking to him the last few minutes, I can sense a sort of feminine quality to his voice and wonder if he’s gay. I’m not one to pass judgment or assume things, but the man’s creases in his slacks are straighter than my icing lines, which are pretty fucking perfect if I say so myself.

“I was on my way to meet my husband for lunch, but can I drop you off somewhere?”

Bingo. I fucking knew it.

I chuckle lightly to myself. “No thanks, but if it’s ok with you, I’d like to borrow your phone.”

Just as Reggie holds his phone out for me to grab, a loud rumble from the tailpipes of a bike echoes behind me.

It just has to be him.

“Everything alright?” Reggie asks, obviously seeing my eyeroll.

“Just peachy,” I laugh as Ringer’s bike comes to a stop next to me.

“Princess,” Ringer drawls as soon as he shuts the engine of his bike off. “What’s going on?”

“Well, based on the rim that’s currently touching the road, I’d say I have a flat tire,” I say sarcastically as Ringer drops his kickstand and kicks his leg over the bike.

He shoots an accusatory glance my way and then his eyes land on Reggie, who stands a few paces behind me.

“Who’s your friend,” Ringer nods toward Reggie.

“This is Reggie. Reggie, this is Ringer.”

“Who’s Reggie, Princess?”

“Reggie is a nice man who saw a damsel in distress on the side of the road and was nice enough to stop and offer assistance,” I say sweetly. Ringer obviously doesn’t sense my playful tone as he turns a hard glare on Reggie.

“Woah, woah. Calm down, crazy-eyes. I already told him I’m strapped and am a good shot. He truly just stopped to offer some help.” I lift one shoulder in a half shrug.

Ringer’s eyes soften just slightly as he steps around me to assess the damage of my flat tire.

“Jesus Christ. What the fuck did you hit, Lilah?” Ringer growls, squatting down to examine the mangled rubber.

“One minute I was driving, the next I’m riding on the rim. Your guess is as good as mine.”

Turning his eyes on the road in the direction I came from, he squints as if trying to look miles down the road.

“I came from that direction. There was nothing laying in the road,” Reggie offers.

“This isn’t just a random flat tire, Lile. You *had* to have hit something.”

“I’m telling you, Ringer, I don’t remember hitting or hearing anything. I was listening to my music pretty loudly, but I feel like I would’ve heard something or at least felt it.”

“We’re gonna have to call the wrecker for this one, Princess. It needs to be towed to Dad’s shop. You may have bent the rim,” Ringer says, pushing off the ground and coming to stand in front of me again.

“That’s where I was headed anyways.”

“What for?”

“If you guys are good here, I’m going to get going,” Reggie says, lifting his hand in a small wave.

I smile. “Thanks for stopping and offering to help!”

“No worries! Hang onto my card, you know, in case you’re ever in any type of trouble I can help with,” he says as he takes off in the direction of his truck.

At Ringer’s growl, I turn back to him. I slide Reggie’s card out of my back pocket and hand it to him. “He’s a lawyer.”

“I don’t care what the fuck he is. He’s flirting with you.”

“Aww, is someone jealous?” I tease. The thought of Ringer being jealous where I’m concerned has butterflies fluttering low in my belly.

Ringer turns his scowl on me and scoffs. “Jealousy would mean that it’s even a competition.”

His comment shocks me speechless, which isn’t common. It’s my turn to glare at him while his face morphs into a smile and he winks. “Let’s go, Princess.”

I grab my bag from the front seat of my car and lock it while Ringer goes over to his bike to call his dad’s shop.

I make it to him just as he hangs up the phone. “Ready?” he asks.

“As I’ll ever be.”

I take the helmet from his outstretched hand and watch as he turns his hat backwards on his head before throwing his leg over the seat.

Jesus, I’m in trouble.

“What was that?” Ringer asks with a chuckle.

Fuck. I must have said that out loud.

“Nothing,” I mumble.

“Mmm. Sure. Hold on tight, Princess.”

I haven't been on the back of Ringer's bike since I was 15. Back then, I used to fantasize about riding behind him, not as a little girl, not as the daughter of one of his club brother's, but as his. His ol' lady.

Some women hate the term. Even I find it a little sexist. But there is something about the thought of being Ringer's ol' lady that does something to my insides. My heart mainly, but especially something down lower.

Ringer revs the engine before taking off. The vibration of the powerful machine between my legs elicits the same yearnings as the simple thought of him between my legs does. I hold tightly onto his abdomen as he takes off, flying down the open road.

I've always loved riding with my dad, but there is something to be said about riding behind a man that holds a very special place in your life.

It takes a disappointing amount of time to get to the shop. Unfortunately, that's the reality of living in a smaller town. Sometimes those quick commutes are a blessing, but other times they suck.

As soon as Ringer parks in an open space, he holds his hand out, waiting for me to get off. "Why is it you needed to come here?"

A smile pulls at my lips. "I bought a van for deliveries and your dad redid it for me."

"Ah," he nods, and I follow behind him as we make our way across the parking lot towards the shop.

"Lilah! Ringer!" Bones greets us. "Where's your car, Princess?" he asks, looking behind us from his spot at the open bay door.

"Flat," I say with a groan. "I know. I know. I should've had a spare. But I never replaced the other one."

"She also didn't call me for help," Ringer grumbles.

"I would've called, Bones, but my phone is dead. Forgot to plug it in last night."

“When I pulled up a stranger was pulled over with her,” Ringer says, scowling once again.

“And like I already told you, *Ringer*, I told him I had a gun and that I know how to shoot.”

Bones chuckles at our banter and nods at one of his workers, Benji. “Go ahead and drag ’er back here so we can get her fixed up.”

“Got it,” Benji mutters. “See ya later, Lilah.”

“Thank you, Benji!” I call after him as he hustles out to the tow truck.

I giggle at Ringer’s ever present glare and roll my eyes as I follow behind Bones.

“Who the hell is, Benji?” Ringer aims his question at his dad.

Bones shakes his head and smiles widely, causing his crow’s feet to wrinkle. Before Bones can answer, I step in.

“You don’t remember Benji? He took me to homecoming my freshman year. We graduated together.” I’m having more fun than I could’ve imagined getting a rise out of Ringer. Who knew it would be so easy?

“Jesus, son. You worked right next to him yesterday. Turn your damn tunnel vision off,” Bones laughs heartily. “Alright, Miss Lilah, down to business. Beau finished the paint up yesterday.”

I let out a groan. I should’ve known Bones was going to let Beau paint it. After all, he is the best painter in town.

We follow behind Bones, and I let out a giggle at Ringer’s obvious pout. The smile drops immediately from my face when I see my van parked in the open parking lot behind the shop. My van is covered in the ugliest pink I have ever fucking seen, with a huge gaudy cartoon cupcake on the side.

“What the fuck is that?” I ask through clenched teeth.

Bones let out a cough. “That’s your van. Beau said you would love it. He said you love pink.”

“I don’t mean to sound ungrateful in the slightest, Bones, because I am so thankful you did this for me.” I take a deep breath and pinch the bridge of my nose in frustration. “But I fucking hate pink.”

I can feel my blood pressure rising and am reminded once again why breaking up with Beau was the right call.

“Ah, come on, Princess. It’s not that bad,” Ringer lays a supportive hand on my shoulder.

“Not that bad?” I scoff, holding out my arm and waving toward the atrocious van. “Do *you* want to drive to Vegas in a Pepto Bismol bottle?”

“We’ll get it fixed, Lilah. I’ll have Beau repaint it,” Bones offers with a chuckle. “I didn’t even question him when he said you’d like the pink. I should’ve known by the colors in the bakery that it wasn’t your taste.”

Bones’s sincere apology makes me wince. I hate seeming like a spoiled brat, but I was so fucking excited to pick up my van today. I was really looking forward to breaking her in this weekend on the trip to Vegas.

Just then, I notice Beau coming around the side of the building. A cocky smirk overtakes his face when he notices me by the van. His smile falters only slightly when he sees Ringer standing behind me.

“You like it?”

He must be oblivious to the scowl on my face. “I fucking *hate* it.”

His eyebrows pinch and his head rears back. “What do you mean you hate it?”

“Beau, we dated for a fucking year! Name one fucking thing that I’ve ever owned that’s fucking pink.”

I can feel more than hear Ringer’s growl in distaste behind me at the mention of our past relationship.

Beau’s face twists in confusion, and I watch in satisfaction as he thinks back to no avail.

“Can’t think of anything, huh?” I ask, rolling my eyes. “This is exactly why we didn’t work out, Beau. But that’s besides the point. Fix my fucking van.”

“You don’t have to be a bitch about it,” he argues.

I feel Ringer step forward and reach out to hold him back. “I got it, Ringer. I can handle it myself.”

I cross my arms over my chest and stare at Beau, ice running through my veins. “I think I have every right to be a bitch towards you. If you’d like to share with the class why that is, I’m all ears. Otherwise, fix my fucking van, dickhead.” Turning on my heel, I stomp my way back through the shop and stop next to Ringer’s bike.

I’m kicking a rock with the toe of my boot like a child when Ringer storms up next to me. “Mind telling me what that was all about?”

“Not really, no.”

“Well I don’t give a shit. Start talking.”

I look up at him through my lashes. Finding determination pasted on his face, I know he isn’t going to give it up. “He cheated on me. When I found out, he said I should be used to it since that’s the norm in our world. I told him to kick rocks, and he didn’t like it.”

“So what’d he do?”

“He hit me where it hurt.”

“You better not fucking say that he *hit* you?” he grits through his teeth, balling his fists next to his sides.

“Nah. He’s too much of a pussy. He knows I’d shoot him if he ever touched me.” I press out a laugh. “It’s so silly.”

“I’ll kill him if you want me too,” Ringer says with such sincerity, my nerves tremble.

I force a swallow and shake my head. “You don’t need to do that.”

“What’d he do, Princess?” His soft voice has goosebumps pebbling my flesh.

I tear my eyes away from him, feeling like a small child again as I admit the feelings I've been harboring for the last two years. Ringer always knew how to get me to talk with just a look. "He just made some small comments that I took to heart. It was stupid."

"Princess, quit beating around the fucking bush."

"He said I suck at baking, and that I only have customers because people are afraid of the club. Then he said that Mom doesn't stick around because of me, and that I suck in bed," I shrug, blushing.

"That's it?"

I squint my eyes in displeasure as he chuckles at me. Though I try, I can't stay mad at him for long, and I end up joining in with his laughter, even if it is at my own expense. "At the time it really hurt!" I say through giggles. "Later on I realized he only said those things to hurt me, but you know how I feel about people putting me down."

"I know, Princess. Does the family know he cheated on you?"

"Nah," I sigh, shaking my head. "I know how good he is and how much your dad needs his skills. I wouldn't want anyone put out, even if he is a douchebag."

"That's pretty nice of you, Princess."

"What can I say, Ringer. I'm a nice girl."

Ringer's smile drops from his face and his eyebrows rise. "Are you, though?"

"Am I what?" I ask, feigning innocence. I know exactly what he's asking, but the devil inside of me wants to hear him say it.

He takes another step towards me, dropping his voice. "Are you a nice girl?"

"That's for me to know," I whisper.

"And for me to find out?"

"Hm. We'll see," I tease.

Quick as a flash of lightning, I reach up on my tiptoes and nip at his nose. Before he can retaliate, I'm throwing my leg over his bike and settling my ass on the back seat.

Arms encircle my waist and he traps me against the bike with his body. Bringing one hand to grasp my chin, he guides my face to his.

“Let's get one thing straight, Princess. I will find out one day.”

I yelp as he nips at my nose in response. I swat at his chest and he lets out a laugh as he turns around and adjusts himself onto the bike in front of me.

“Where to?” he asks, sliding his aviator glasses onto the bridge of his nose and then flipping his hat backwards once again.

I shrug in response, pressing my hands together around his hips.

“Where is The Castle?” he asks over the loud groan of his engine.

“You want to go to The Castle at three o'clock on a Tuesday?”

“I haven't been yet, and I'd like to see it before tomorrow night.”

I give Ringer directions to the strip club the club owns that his brother has an unhealthy obsession with. Nausea sweeps through my belly when we pull into the parking lot as I think about the last time I spent a Wednesday night here. Bunny got me so fucked up on Moscow mules that I spent the following three days in bed. The girl sure knows how to pour them heavy but delicious, so they sneak up on you.

As soon as we enter the club, I spot Ryan behind the bar and skip over to him, planting my ass on the nearest stool.

“Hey, lady,” he greets. Stepping up on the barstool rung, I lean over the bar to give Ryan a quick kiss on the cheek.

“Hey, boo.”

“What’re you doing here on a Tuesday?” Ryan asks, drying off a glass and setting it in front of me.

“That better not be for a Moscow mule. I will puke on this clean bar.”

He raises one brow as he fills the glass with ice and uses the soda gun to fill the glass with dark liquid.

I smile at him in thanks and take the glass. “My car had a flat, so I hitched a ride with Ringer. He wanted to come see the club before it’s a shit show tomorrow. I assume he also wants to see his brother.” I nod over at Ringer and Ghost, who looks like a kid in a candy store as he shows his brother around.

“Are you going to come by tomorrow?”

I let a cackling laugh slip free. “Doubt it.” I suck down another blissful sip of Dr. Pepper and push the empty glass to him across the bar. “Wednesdays are forbidden from now on. Sasha had to come peel me up off the floor of my bathroom last time.”

“Don’t overindulge, silly goose.”

“Easy for you to say! Your body must not hate you. Mine doesn’t let me know I’ve had enough until I’ve passed the point of no return.”

Ryan laughs at me as he transfers beers from a crate into the ice chest below the bar. “So Ringer, huh?”

I roll my eyes. “That ship sailed when I turned 15 and he went to prison, Ryan.”

“Mhm, sure looks like it.” He nods over to Ringer, who is staring at me from across the club while Ghost talks to him, swinging his arms and gesturing, obviously oblivious that Ringer’s attention is elsewhere.

I spend the next hour chatting with Ryan while I wait for Ringer to be ready. We talk about Pebbles and how neither one of us really knows what to do to help her in any way.

After an enjoyable afternoon at The Castle, Ringer drops me off at my house with the promise of picking me back up in the morning to take me to the bakery.

“I get there at four a.m.”

“Jesus, why so early?”

“Baker’s hours,” I shrug.

“I’ll be here.”

“Mhm. We’ll see.”

I kick my leg over and climb off the bike. Just as I’m situating my bag back over my shoulder, Ringer’s rough hand catches my wrist.

“I’ll be here, Princess.”

I nod. Biting my lip, I search his face. If I leaned over just slightly, our lips would meet.

Ringer takes matters into his own hands, hauling me by the wrist and holding me flush against his body. His free hand wraps around my cheek and he pulls me to him.

The air leaves my lungs as his lips crash against mine. I’ve had dreams about doing this since I was twelve. Dreams have absolutely *nothing* on the reality of it. His lips against mine have nervousness in the best way floating through my subconscious. Every memory and fantasy involving Ringer is cheering in the background as his plump lips move against mine.

I’ve been in denial the last few days thinking that whatever I felt at 15 was in the past.

Before I can register what’s happening, Ringer pulls back. I pry my eyes open, and they land on his, which are glazed over in pleasure.

He clears his throat and grins. “I’m going to stop this now, before Reaper shoots me for defiling his daughter in his driveway.”

I let out a laugh and take a small step back, pulling my lips in to savor the tingle his kiss left in their wake.

“I’ll see you in the morning,” he says, starting his bike.

I wave behind him as he backs out of the driveway.

Once I can no longer see him, I take off running to my apartment. His kiss has me as giddy as a teenager, and 13 year-old me is doing cartwheels as she giggles in my head.

I plug my phone in, willing it to turn on faster. As soon as the screen lights up, I slide the screen open and my fingers fly across the screen searching for Sparrow's name. Slowing my breath, I calm my excited nerves just enough for my shaking thumb to find Sparrow on Facetime and call.

six

Lilah

“GOD DAMNIT, SPARROW! ANSWER YOUR PHONE!”

I grumble to the empty living room.

The dial tone echoes in the quiet space and I almost faint when her gorgeous face appears on the screen.

“Ahh!” I squeal louder than a thousand girls at a boy band concert.

I watch Sparrow on my screen and crack up as she whips her head back from the assault of my scream. “Holy fuck! What’s wrong?”

I throw myself down on the couch, holding my phone in the air, cursing the stupid charger for not being long enough. “He kissed me!”

“What the hell, Lilah! You scared me half to death. Who kissed you?”

“Ringer!”

“WHAT!” It’s my turn to pull the phone away from my face as Sparrow screams in shock.

We both dissolve into fits of laughter, just like we did as teenagers in high school when Sparrow’s crush kissed her under the bleachers.

“I’m so confused! I thought he was in jail?” Sparrow asks, her brows furrowing.

I sit up and settle in for an overdue conversation with my best friend. Ringer’s only been home for a few days, so I haven’t had the chance to fill Sparrow in on everything that’s happened.

“Wait, so he’s coming with you this weekend?” Sparrow asks with an accusatory smirk.

“Yes, mom,” I laugh, rolling my eyes.

“You do realize that means you’re going to be spending two nights in a hotel room alone with him then?”

“I am painfully aware of that fact, but thanks for reminding me!”

She laughs at my expense. “As long as you know that, after this weekend, most of your childhood fantasies will be going down in Sin City.”

“Shut up,” I moan with a smile at my best friend.

Sparrow talks my ear off over the next half an hour about her busy life in Vegas. I miss her more and more every single time I go to visit her. If I didn’t hate her douchebag of a husband, I would stay with her when I travel. I can’t stand him anymore than he can stand me, so we mutually decided it was best for me to stay elsewhere.

“Hey, Lile, Jack just got home.”

Of course he did.

“You’re good. I’ll see you this weekend!”

“Love you!” Sparrow puckers her lips and I laugh as she blows kisses into her phone.

“Love you too, weirdo!”

I'm folding laundry when my phone vibrates against the table. I groan as the name Renee pops up on the screen.

I take a deep breath before I accept the call. "Hello?"

"Lilah, I need you to go into your father's room at the clubhouse to get my boots," my mom snaps over the phone.

"Hello to you too, Renee."

"Lilah Jane, I am your mother."

"Maybe you should act like it once in a while, *mother*," I snap sarcastically.

"Knock it off, Lilah. Quit acting like such a fucking child. Go get my boots and I will be by the house later to get them."

She hangs up the phone without even a simple goodbye.

I swear I would have mommy issues if not for my nana. Some may argue I still do. Oh well.

I find my dad's contact and press call. I know Renee called me because she knows damn well that Dad wouldn't have answered. If I'm the one to ask him, I know he will bring them home just so she doesn't take it out on me.

"Hey, baby girl."

"Hey."

"What's up?"

"Your wife called."

"You know damn well she ain't my wife, Lilah."

I giggle at my dad's growl. He can't stand my mother any more than I can.

"What'd the wicked witch of the west want this time?"

"She wants her boots out of the closet at the clubhouse. She's coming by later to get them."

Dad sighs before answering. "I knew it was too good to be true."

"What's that?"

“Last I heard, she was moving to Phoenix with some big wig in real estate.”

“She finally found someone to leech off of?”

I feel bad for my dad because he truly did love my mom at one point. He’s told me stories about when they were teenagers in love. But as it turns out, small town life wasn’t for her like it was for him. He never made enough money for her, but she still hung around for some reason, slowly draining my father’s happiness for far too long.

“Apparently. I’m here now, I’ll bring them home. Did she say when she was stopping by?”

“Nope.”

“Of course not. I’ll see you later, baby girl.”

I hang up with my dad and spend the rest of the afternoon packing my suitcase for this weekend.

I roll my eyes at myself as I meticulously pick my outfits, each one curated with the knowledge that I will be spending the entire weekend with Ringer. I know damn well Sparrow will say some shit, but who cares. It’s summer and Vegas. I’d rather not sweat my ass off tucked under layers of clothes. Besides, it’s not like I don’t wear any of this shit on a regular basis anyways.

A few hours later, when I’m finally relaxing on my couch with a bowl of soup, a car door slamming pulls my attention away from the movie I’d been watching. Pushing to my feet, I cross the living room to peer through the window.

Renee is adjusting her shirt and fluffing her hair. I scoff and roll my eyes. She’s barking up the wrong tree if she thinks my dad is going to fall at her feet, but I wouldn’t put it past her to try.

Spying from the window, I watch my dad come out of the garage and hold out a bag to her. I watch in satisfaction as she continuously tries to flirt with him. He must say something she doesn’t like, and I chuckle in satisfaction as the smile is wiped from her face.

I slowly make my way downstairs to the garage and cringe when I see Sasha's Jetta pull up to the house and park along the road.

Dad sees her too, and his eyes widen.

"Who the fuck is that?" my mom sneers.

"That's my friend Sasha. She works with me," I say, gaining my mom's attention. My dad's eyes lower in thanks and I grin at him.

I can tell Sasha has been crying, so before my mom can say anything, I grab her around the shoulders. "Hey, Sash!"

Sasha quickly wipes her face and her eyes jump around the group of us. "Oh, I'm so sorry. I didn't realize you guys were busy." She sniffles and goes to turn back to her car.

"Wait, baby," Dad calls out. My eyes whip back to see Dad stand stiff, keenly aware of what he just let slip.

"Baby?" Mom snaps, flipping her gaze between my friend and my dad. "Who the fuck is she Thomas?"

"Don't fucking call me Thomas, Renee. Take your boots and get the fuck outta here."

"Excuse me?" Renee screams. "You do not get to talk to me like that!"

"Just leave, Mom," I add, trying to stop Sasha from running away.

Shit, if I were her, I'd be running away too. My mom looks like a crazy fucking psycho. Who the hell knows what's going through Sasha's head right now.

I watch the train wreck that is my mom and dad arguing in front of me for just a moment before grabbing Sasha's hand and leading her to her car. Once we're out of earshot, I turn to her as she opens her car door to leave. "Don't listen to her. She's crazy and my dad has absolutely no feelings for her anymore. If you really care about my dad, come up to my apartment with me and wait for her to leave, then let him explain. She's only here to pick some shit up. Then she's hopefully moving away for good."

“Be honest with me, Lilah,” she sniffles. “If I do this thing with your dad, is Renee just going to keep popping up?”

I wince at her question. Unfortunately, no one ever knows what Renee is planning. She shows up when she feels like it and leaves just as fast. “I can’t answer that, Sash. We all hope she doesn’t come back, but she always does. My dad knows her game. He deals with it so I don’t have too.”

Sasha nods and looks back towards my dad. Something must click in her head because she closes her door, presses the lock, and turns towards me. “Let’s go.”

I smile, thankful my dad has someone in his corner. It’s a plus for me that she’s someone pretty damn important to me too.

On the down side, the only way to get to my apartment is to pass where my dad and Renee are currently in a screaming match. Eyes forward, we start walking back up the drive.

“Lilah Jane! Do not just walk away from me like that!” Renee shrieks behind me.

I don’t skip a step as I continue on, pulling Sasha behind me. “Fuck off, Renee.”

She’s shouting so loud at my dad that I can hear her even as we climb my stairs. “You’re going to let that spoiled brat talk to me like that? Your mother ruined that child!”

If she hadn’t brought Nana into it, I would have kept on climbing the steps. I would have taken Sasha into my apartment and kept her busy until my dad came for her. I would have let Renee spout her stupid bullshit like she always does.

That woman can do any damn thing she wants. She can leave for the rest of my life, she can call me names, and she can make our lives miserable. But the one thing she doesn’t get to do? She does not get to bring my poor nana into it.

Sasha gasps behind me as I leave her on the steps to my apartment and rush back down.

My dad's strong arms catch me around my waist, stopping me as I charge at my so-called mother. Tears sting my eyes as I fight against his grip. "Nana was more of a mother to me than you ever were! You don't get to tarnish her name and say shit about the way that I turned out! You weren't there!"

Renee smirks at me and shrugs. "You're proving my point by how you are acting right now, Lilah Jane."

"Quit fucking calling me that!" I wipe the hot tears across my cheek with the back of my hand. "Get the fuck out of our lives and stay gone, Renee. No one fucking wants you here."

Her smile falters just slightly before she recovers with a smug grin. "Oh believe me, little girl. I'm gone. Just like I've always said, I've found someone to give me the life I've always wanted. This shit hole was never enough for me." Her eyes rake over me and my dad and she turns her nose up at us. "You two have never been enough."

I can vaguely hear Sasha's gasp from the garage through the roaring in my ears.

Even though I can't stand the woman in front of me, it still hurts to continuously hear that you aren't good enough for one of the only people that's supposed to love you unconditionally. I go limp in my dad's arms, no longer fighting him as I shake my head and laugh. "Good thing you were never a good enough mother for us either."

She opens her mouth to respond, but my dad is faster than her. "Get the fuck off of my property, Renee."

"Oh Thomas, I know you aren't serious," she chuckles, waving her manicured hand.

"If you don't get in your car and leave right fucking now, you'll find out just how fucking serious I am," Dad seethes. I can feel his chest shaking with anger against my back.

"Calm down, no need to get your panties in a wad. I'm leaving."

Like the mature adult Renee is, she flips her hair over her shoulder and flicks us off as she exaggeratedly sways her hips

back and forth to her car. I will her stupid heel to break or get stuck in a crack so she'll fall flat on her face.

The thought is too much to bear, and I break into a fit of giggles as Renee's tires squeal down the road.

"What the hell?" Dad asks before joining in my laughter.

"Oh, nothing," I giggle, waving him off. "I was just picturing her heel breaking and her falling flat on her face, popping one of her fake boobs."

"Don't forget her lips," Sasha adds quietly.

I throw my head back and roar with laughter. "Oh my God! Yes!"

Once I finally stop laughing, I take a few deep breaths and drop my fists to my hips, looking between my dad and Sasha. "Who wants to go to The Castle? I need to get drunk."

Dad's eyes widen and Sasha smiles uncomfortably. "Are you sure, Lile?" she asks tentatively.

"I'm positive. Renee getting the fuck out of here calls for a celebration, don't you think?"

Sasha looks from my dad to me. "I guess?"

Dad chuckles, wiping his hands on his jeans before walking over to Sasha. "Let me go get cleaned up and we can head over." He drops a kiss on her cheek, and I smile at the way she blushes.

I run upstairs and head straight for my closet. Tonight, I'm going to drink my mommy issues down the drain without a care in the world. I'm sure my dad will be watching me like a hawk the whole time, so I'm free to let my hair down and have fun without having to watch my back.

As I'm pulling a clean pair of ripped shorts up over my lace bodysuit, a wave of sadness hits me at the thought of Pebbles and Brenna not being at the club. It isn't going to be the same without them there, but I'm sure once I have a few drinks in me, I will be okay.

I quickly do my make up and put on my favorite red high top converse.

Sasha knocks on the doorway behind me as I'm buckling my belt. "Your dad said we should ride over together and he'll get us home."

I lightly spritz my favorite perfume onto my neck and all of the important spots, like my wrists and between my tits before turning towards her. "Perfect."

"Are you sure you're okay, Lilah?"

"I'm great."

"Even if I call you on your bullshit, you're not going to talk to me about it, are you?"

"Nope." I shove my phone in the tiny back pocket of my shorts and tie a flannel around my waist. "I promise I'll be fine, Sasha. I'm used to Renee's shit."

"She's your mom, Lilah. It's okay to be upset."

"And like I said, I'll be fine, Sash. I promise." I link my arm through hers and pull her out the door. "At least I have my dad. He's all I need."

"Your dad is pissed."

"What's new," I shrug.

Dad is always in a bad mood when mom comes around. Hopefully with Sasha around, he won't be a grumpy ass for long.

"Mule?" Ryan asks as soon as my ass hits the stool in front of him.

I click my tongue and point at him with a wink. "How'd ya know?"

"Probably the fact that you're sitting at my bar in that outfit when just yesterday you were complaining about the last

time you were drunk.”

I shrug with a smile. “Don’t ever listen to me.”

Drink in hand, I hop off the stool and head back to the special table that is strictly for the club. I take the seat closest to the stage and catcall Foxy, who is currently grinding her naked ass for the crowd.

Turning back to the small group, I see Sasha looks a tad uncomfortable. Just as I’m about to go talk to her, my dad runs a hand down her thigh. I take that as my cue to rip my eyes away and assess the rest of the crowd.

It doesn’t feel the same without everyone being here. I texted Pebbles earlier today to tell her I was thinking about her and asked her to reach out if she needed anything. She replied with a purple heart emoji, which is good enough for me.

Bones, Horse, Maggie, and Razor make up the rest of our small group so far. Razor takes up the chair right next to me and has his eyes glued to the stage.

Not Afraid Anymore by Halsey blasts through the surround system. I dance in my seat to the sultry beat.

The song makes me think of the movie I first heard it in and a giggle escapes me as I recall watching it with Sparrow in theaters for the first time. I remember her telling me about the Christian Grey inspired night she and Jack had when we talked on the phone the following afternoon.

I’m on my second drink and watching Lyric’s performance when a deep voice behind me elicits goosebumps to pebble every inch of my skin. As soon as I turn my eyes back to the group, electric blue eyes pierce my soul as our gazes lock across the expanse of the table.

He winks, evoking the most wicked thoughts from my mind. I grin saucily at him, turning back to the stage.

Razor has been my observation buddy over the last half hour as we’ve watched different girls perform, tossing money left and right. Up until a moment ago, he hadn’t left his seat once. But now his seat is vacant and up for grabs.

I take a deep breath as a large body plops down into the cushioned armchair. A smirk pulls at my lips before taking another sip of my gingery drink. The man next to me props his ankle up on his knee and leans back, resting his whiskey tumbler against his bent knee.

“Princess,” Ringer rasps over the seductive music.

“Ringer,” I greet.

“Thought you didn’t come on Wednesdays?”

“Disappointed in seeing me?” I face him just slightly. I can still see Lyric moving across the stage out of the corner of my eye as I try to keep my cool.

“Nah. Just surprised is all.”

“Hmm.” I mumble, taking another drink.

“You alright?” he asks, dropping his boot to the ground and leaning forward to his elbows on his knees.

“Yeah, why wouldn’t I be?”

“You just seem a little off.”

I lean over to the table and set my empty glass down before turning to face him. “You’ve been here for all of five seconds. How do I seem a little off to you?”

“Lilah, I can see you from a mile away and know when something’s off,” he says with a smirk.

I roll my eyes and push up to my feet. “I need another drink.”

Ringer’s eyes slowly sweep from the top of my shoes before landing on my eyes. Pulling his bottom lip between his teeth, he rises out of his chair. Assuming he stood up to follow me to the bar, I head in Ryan’s direction.

I take the only empty stool and feel Ringer’s warm fingers land on my bare shoulders. He lightly squeezes before leaning over me to gain Ryan’s attention.

Ryan stops in front of us and smirks at me. I flick him off in response and roll my eyes. “Moscow Mule please.”

“You sure?” he asks with a laugh.

“Fuck off, Ryan. I told you I’m here to get drunk, not to be babysat.”

“Just making sure, boo.”

Ryan slides a fresh beer across the bar to Ringer before starting on my drink. The guy to my left gets up and Ringer slides on, trapping me between his legs.

“Talk to me, Princess.”

“About?” I ask, licking a drop of liquid off the side of my cup.

“Don’t play stupid, Lilah. You’re smarter than that. I can tell something’s up.”

“If I’m being honest, I really don’t want to talk about it. I want to get shit faced and *not* think about it. I’m fine, I promise.”

Ringer studies me for a moment before sitting up. “You got a ride home?”

I turn to face him, hopping off my stool and tap his shoulder. “Looks like you’re it, buddy.”

Ringer

Sitting back and listening to the conversation around the table, I’m painfully aware of all of the naked women strutting around the club. I’m a man that hasn’t fucked a warm body in eight fucking years, but the only object of every one of my fucking desires is sitting in the sexiest fucking outfit right across from me.

I’ve watched her suck down no less than five drinks, which doesn’t take into account how many she had before I got here. She seems to be acting absolutely fine. There are only two

options here: either Ryan has a really light pour, or Lilah knows how to hold her fucking liquor.

Reaper drops into the chair next to me and I lean over, nodding towards Lilah. “Should I be worried?”

He looks between me and his daughter before chuckling. “Nah. She can hold her shit pretty well for now. It’s later we worry about her.”

I draw my brows down in confusion. “I’m not following.”

“Lilah doesn’t drink often, but when she does, she goes all out. She holds it pretty damn well for a while. But no one, not even her, knows when she’s had enough.”

“Still not following, Reap.”

“She’ll be hugging her toilet for the next few days.”

“Fuck.”

“Yep.”

Sasha, the woman who has been attached to Reaper all night, leans forward. “A few weeks ago she didn’t move off of her bathroom floor for three days. I had to make sure she was alive multiple times.”

“Shit,” I groan. “We’re supposed to drive to Vegas on Friday.”

Reaper chuckles. “You’ll be doing all of the driving.”

Sasha winces. “Sorry about that. My flight leaves later today.”

I look at my watch and see it’s already one in the morning. “Should I get her out of here before it gets worse?”

Reaper’s eyes jump to his daughter as she and Razor go crazy over the dancer currently on stage. “Probably. Don’t worry about her, Ringer. Sash and I will get her home.”

I hold my hand out, stopping him from getting up and wave him off. “I got it. You guys hang out and enjoy your time together.”

“You sure?” Reaper asks, brows pinching.

“I’ll get her home and make sure she doesn’t break a tooth on the toilet bowl.” I chuckle.

“Her medicine cabinet is in the kitchen!” Sasha calls behind me as I head over to collect my drunken Princess.

I wrap my arms around her from behind and lean down so she can hear me over the music. “You ready to head home, Princess?”

“Already? You just got here!” she slurs happily, talking entirely too loud. I love it.

“I’ve been here for hours, babe.”

She turns in her seat to face me. Her eyes are glassy as they glide across my face. Biting her lip she nods, letting me help her out of her chair.

I don’t let go of her hand as I lead her past our small group and towards the exit. On our way out, we pass Ghost talking to Skull, one of his old buddies from high school who mans the door.

When his eyes drop to my hands on Lilah, he points a curious glare my way with a frown. I smile nonchalantly and nod. “See ya tomorrow, brother.”

“You be safe now, Ring,” Ghost grouches behind me as we pass the few people standing outside.

Stopping in front of my bike, I look down at Lilah who is smiling to herself.

“What?” I say when she looks up at me through her thick lashes.

She shrugs, giggling to herself as she accepts the helmet from my hands. Watching her put my helmet on her head without question and straddle my bike behind me has a certain intoxication holding my heart in a vice grip.

If you were to tell younger me that the Lilah I once saw as my little buddy was going to be the only woman I wanted beneath me after eight years of abstinence, I’d say you’re fucking crazy.

“Will you drive fast?” Lilah’s sweet voice tickles the shell of my ear from behind me. She wraps her arms tightly around my middle and wiggles her hips in her seat.

My laugh vibrates my chest. “You think you can hang on?”

She scoffs against my shoulder. “Who do you think I am?”

“Hold tight then, Princess.”

I take off out of the parking lot and gun it down the street. The only noise surrounding us is the wind whipping past and the rumble of the bikes pipes.

Lilah leans her head back and laughs loudly, not loosening her death grip on my cut in the slightest.

I pull into her dad’s driveway and hold the bike steady as she gracelessly hops off. I’m certain she would have toppled over if I didn’t have such a tight grip on her arm.

“I love riding behind you,” she stammers.

Her hazy gaze catches my smirk and she rolls her eyes. “Thanks for bringing me home, Ring. Goodnight.”

“Not so fast, Princess.” I drop the kickstand and push off the seat. “Let’s go.”

“What do you mean? Where are we going?”

Pushing her towards her stairway, I follow behind. “Your dad and Sasha were nice enough to tell me how drinking with you goes. So up you get.”

She huffs, grabbing the handrail and pulling herself up the stairs. Once we get to her door, she drops her keys to the ground three different times. She eventually breaks into a fit of giggles, tears streaming down her cheeks as she laughs her ass off. I can’t say that I’m not enjoying the view of her round ass every time she bends over, but I’m only so strong, and seeing her bent over right in front of me is not helping my situation whatsoever.

I take the keys out of her hand, grab the one she points to and shove the metal in the lock.

Drunk Lilah is entertaining. Sure, she's entertaining sober, but I have to admit that I'm enjoying the fuck out of drunk Lilah as she tries to navigate her small kitchen.

I follow her into her large bedroom and plop down on her bed. I lay back, turning on my side as she fiddles with a package on her dresser. She turns back towards me, using some sort of wipe on her face.

"What are you doing?" I ask.

"Getting this shit off my lips," she mumbles as she scrubs the now reddish wipe against her plush lips.

I don't take my eyes away from her as she kicks her shoes off and undoes her belt. My dick has been hard since the second I laid eyes on her across the club tonight. If she loses any more clothing, I can't trust myself not to fucking attack her.

"Lilah," I interrupt her undressing.

She turns her eyes on me. "What?"

"Take these." Per Sasha's instructions, I hold out the white pills I remembered to grab from the medicine cabinet in the kitchen.

She takes them and pops them in her mouth, swallowing immediately. Her knees knock against the side of the bed as she studies me.

"Have you had sex with anyone yet?" she asks, surprising the fuck out of me.

I sit up in her bed. "Why are you asking?"

She shrugs her shoulder and bites her lip.

"Why are you asking, Princess?"

"I'm just curious."

My eyes follow her hands as she brings them to the button on her shorts. I can feel her eyes on me as she slowly lowers the zipper.

"Stop, Lilah," I say through clenched teeth.

“Why?” she asks sassily.

“Because you’re drunk.”

“Look at me,” she purrs sternly.

I rip my eyes away from her center and bring them back to her eyes, which look surprisingly clear. “I’m not drunk, Ringer.”

Her shorts drop to the floor, and I can feel my resolve cracking, bit by bit.

“It’s been what, eight years?” she asks, teasing me further by lifting her bare knee onto the edge of the bed.

My gaze wanders down to the lace number that hugs her from the small straps at her shoulders, across her taut stomach, and down to the small silver snaps peaking out at me from between her legs.

“I know what you’re doing, Lilah.” I cough over the lump rising in my throat. My dick has never been harder than it is right now as she slowly situates herself on the edge of the bed.

She purposefully sits perched on her heels with her knees open so I have an unobstructed view of the creases lining her legs on either side of her slit.

My last ounce of control erupts as she uses her finger to unsnap the thin piece of fabric that was hiding her pussy from me. She giggles. “Oops.”

Wrapping one hand around the back of her neck and the other around her waist, I pull her on top of me. Her giggles turn into moans as I press our mouths together. She sucks lightly on my tongue, eliciting my own moan that vibrates through my throat.

“Fuck,” I grunt as she drops down on my lap and grinds her pussy against my length.

She hisses against my throat as I grip her hips and grind us together again. I flip us over and groan as I trace my large hands against the lace covering her middle. “Take it off,” she begs.

“If I take it off, Princess, there won’t be much of it left.”

“Take it off, Ringer.”

Grabbing each side of the flimsy fabric, I rip it off of her in one pull. I toss it behind me, not caring where it lands as I take her perfect body in, fully naked beneath me.

I take her delicious breasts in my hands and she moans as I run my thumbs along her peach colored nipples. I lean forward, taking one bud into my mouth and chuckle against her as she squirms beneath me.

“You okay?” I ask, kissing across her rib cage from one side, up her sternum and to her neck. I latch on to the skin at the base of her throat while running my free hand along her side.

“Mhm,” she moans.

Her hands fumble as she works on getting my jeans undone. While she works on my pants, I toss my cut across the room where it lands on an armchair. I pull off my T-shirt and fall back on top of her while pushing my jeans the rest of the way off. I groan, my eyes rolling to the back of my head as her small hand wraps around my aching shaft and she squeezes.

“Unless you want me to come all over your hands, I would stop, babe.”

She smirks up at me. “Promise?”

“Princess, it’s been eight years since I’ve come anywhere near a woman. I can guarantee you the last place I *want* to come is anywhere other than inside you. But I’ll take whatever the fuck I can get with you.”

“Why haven’t you had sex since you’ve been out?”

Her question sets me back. I pause and pull away from her, looking at her in confusion. “I mean, I’ve wanted to. Honestly, fucking was my main fucking goal when I got out. But as soon as I saw you, no one else compared.”

“So you haven’t had sex because you wanted to have sex with me?”

“Fuck, Lilah. You want me to admit it out loud?”

She giggles, running her manicured hands along my abs and pecs. She nods her head with a shy smile.

“Yes, Lilah. I haven’t fucked anyone yet because I want to fuck you. And *only* you.”

She blushes. “Why haven’t you?”

There’s a question. Why haven’t I? Why haven’t I tried?

I shrug. Leaning down and taking her lips with mine once again, I kiss her into silence. She tries gaining control, forcing her tongue past mine until I reach down and take her hands, pressing them above her head and holding them to the bed.

The surprise causes her to falter slightly, allowing me to regain control over her as I dominate the kiss. I grind against her, satisfyingly slipping through her wetness. I moan against her mouth and feel her smile against me.

“Forgive me if this first time is a little rough and quick, Princess.”

“We have all night, Ring.”

“Don’t make promises you can’t keep, babe. I have eight years to make up for.”

“I’m yours,” she says without reservation.

I ignore the clench in my gut at those words and guide my tip to her center. Wrapping my hand around the base, I spread her wetness around before dipping my head into her opening.

I vaguely notice her eyes rolling to the back of her head as she lets the pleasure consume her. It may have been awhile, but I still know how to fucking please a woman.

I bring my thumb to her clit and draw small circles around the bud while working the rest of my cock into her heat. “Ah!” she cries out as I slam the rest of the way into her.

“Fuck,” I groan. “*Fuck!*”

Lilah writhes beneath me in an attempt to quicken my pace, but I flex my thighs, staying stock still. “Lilah, quit

fucking moving, baby.”

“Please!” she whines.

I count down from twenty in my head, not wanting to embarrass myself by coming from one fucking stroke. Goddamn she feels fucking amazing.

“Lilah, give me a second!” I can hear the frustration in my voice.

“Oh,” she giggles as she regains a sense of what’s going on in me.

I drop down so our chests are once again touching and hold her still. “Unless you want this to end right now, let me lead so I’m not fucking selfish.”

“What if I want you to be selfish? Just this once? Use me however you need me,” Lilah says, looking up at me through her lashes.

“You sure?”

She nods slowly. Bracing one hand against the headboard of her bed, she places the other against my shoulder. “I can handle it.”

I search her eyes one last time, looking for any type of indecision. When I don’t find anything but determination, I pull out only to slam back into her. Over and over again, I fuck her savagely. The only noise audible over our skin slapping are the moans and cries coming from her sweet lips.

I know for a fact I don’t last long at all. She lifts her ass up off the bed, creating a deep angle that swallows me whole, completely consuming my length. My balls slap against her lush ass as stars erupt behind my lids. I slam into her again and again, my come coats her insides as my orgasm robs me of air.

Lilah breathes heavily underneath me, her chest heaving as she pants. “Woah.”

I smirk down at her before quickly pulling out and dropping to my knees between her legs. I throw her legs up over my shoulders and smirk as she lets out a scream as I latch my lips around her clit.

“Holy shit!”

I attack her pussy with my whole mouth like it's the last fucking supper and don't stop until I add two fingers into her, causing her thighs to squeeze the sides of my head as she shakes beneath me.

Her sweetness is mixed with my seed, but I couldn't care fucking less as I watch her fall apart. “Yes,” I hiss as her walls contract around my fingers.

Lifting up to hover above her, satisfaction surges through me as I take in the total bliss overtaking her face. She sighs in content when I kiss her.

I chuckle as she keeps her eyes closed, a smile still kissing her lips.

She claps her hands twice and I laugh as the lights of her bedroom shut off. I push off the bed, stumbling through the dark into her bathroom.

I find a small basket full of washcloths and get one wet, taking it out to her. I use the light coming off the screen of her phone to clean her off before dropping onto the bed next to her.

As soon as I get under the blanket, she rolls over, cuddling into my outstretched arm.

I'm not used to sleeping with anyone next to me. Even before going away, I wasn't one to stick around long enough. But the feel of Lilah's soft, naked skin pressed against mine is fucking perfectly intoxicating.

Her soft snores fill the air only seconds later. I chuckle, settling further into the bed.

I fall asleep that night with pure contentment settled low in my soul. I knew waiting for her was the right fucking choice.

Sure, I could've fucked any woman at my coming home party, and there have been more than enough willing women at the clubhouse each night. But not one of them have a damn thing to offer me in comparison to her.

seven

Lilah

HOLY SHIT I don't feel good. Nausea rolls through my stomach as I sit up in bed.

I stumble out of bed and practically crawl to the bathroom. I make it just in time to spill the contents of my stomach into the toilet.

I spend the next few minutes leaning heavily against the sink, brushing my teeth in an attempt to remove the awful taste of vomit.

I study myself in the mirror. My lips feel bruised, and reddish purple hickeys dot my chest. I don't even attempt to deal with the knotted mess that is my hair. I take the rats nest and throw it into a bun on the top of my head

Memories of what can only be considered the best fucking night of my life filter through my mind as more vomit threatens to expel from my stomach.

I don't even know how many times I was awoken by Ringer assaulting my body in the most delicious way possible. I even recall waking up a few times and initiating it myself. The memory makes me painfully aware of how sore my lady bits are from the amount of fucking we did.

He wasn't lying when he said he had years to make up for. What felt like years of pent up aggravation on my end was most definitely satisfied in just the first few rounds.

As I'm brushing my tongue, nausea rolls through my belly once again, and I drop to my knees.

Each time I heave into the toilet, every muscle in my body spasms as a reminder of how physical we got.

Ugh. *Kill me now.*

I crawl over to the tub, pouring epsom salt on the bottom and flipping the faucet over to the hottest it will go.

It takes every bit of strength I have left to step into the tub and settle myself down. Thank God I decided on the large soaking tub when building my apartment. On the rare occasions I decide to overindulge, the baths really help.

That's where Ringer finds me a short while later. I growl at him and close my eyes, refusing to look at his morning wood. "You can keep that fucking thing far the hell away from me."

His chuckle has me splashing water over the side of the tub, wetting his side. "You feeling alright?" he asks, his sexy voice still groggy with sleep.

"I've been better."

Opening my eyes, I watch as he bends over and pulls his boxers back on. "Thank you."

"For?" he asks with a smirk.

"For covering that monster. I don't think my pussy will ever recover."

"Don't be dramatic, Princess."

I roll my eyes before closing them and settling my head back against the edge of the tub.

"Why did your dad and Sasha say you get really sick after drinking?"

"Because I do."

"Are you feeling alright now?"

"Well, I've already vomited three times and I'm thinking very hard about not doing it again. Hangovers are not the same for me as they are for other people."

“How so?”

“It starts with vomiting, followed by a two day long migraine, and then rounds out with more vomiting from the migraine.”

“That sounds fucking horrible. Why do you drink if it causes all this trouble?”

“I don’t know. I wouldn’t doubt it if I was allergic to alcohol or something like that.” I roll my head on the edge of the tub and open my eyes. To my surprise, Ringer is propped against the side of the tub, staring at me. “I very rarely drink. It only happens when I really have a reason or I’m hanging out with the girls, which isn’t often since I have a whole business to run.”

“Oh shit, do you need me to go do anything?”

I smile. “It’s nice of you to offer, but nah. I texted Mikey. He and Allison have it handled.”

“So why were you throwing them back last night? I can tell something was bothering you.”

“Fucking Renee,” I scoff, laying my head back and settling my eyes on a spot on the ceiling.

Ringer brings his hand to the edge of the tub and pulls my wet, pruned hand into his. “What happened?”

“I just hate her,” I sigh and close my eyes, not wanting to find pity in his. The memory of the way he used to look at me when I was little as he watched my mom have one of her tantrums still haunts me. His mom was the best. She was so *motherly*. I never had that with Renee.

“What happened, Princess?” he asks softly.

I let out an audible exhale and tell him about the interaction from the day before. “I feel weak. I fucking hate that it hurts me. I can’t stand that she gets to me. And it’s like she knows it,” I whisper.

“That doesn’t make you weak. That’s normal, babe. She’s your mom.”

“I’ve never been good enough, and I never will be.”

“Princess, look at me.”

I turn my gaze on his as he searches my face, his brow furrowed over his serious stare. “What did I tell you on your twelfth birthday when you were moping around because Renee had called you worthless yet again?”

“That I’m enough for you.”

“Exactly. You are enough just as you fucking are. Don’t let some fucking bitch challenge your worth just because she’s your bitch ass mom.”

I giggle at his description for her and squeeze his hand. “Thank you.”

“That’s what I’m here for.”

At my curious glance he smiles.

“I’ll always be here to pick you back up. Always have been, and that isn’t stopping.”

“Well, minus the eight years you refused to talk to me.”

He lifts his free hand to squeeze the back of his neck uncomfortably. “You didn’t need to see me like that.”

“What? In prison? It wasn’t a secret that you were there.”

“I know that,” he shrugs. “But I still liked the idea of the hero complex.”

I slap his chest with my wet hand and laugh.

Nausea rolls back through my stomach and I push him away before jumping out of the tub in the most unladylike way possible. Ringer rubs my back lightly as I heave over the toilet. Nothing comes out, but that doesn’t stop my stomach from retching again and again.

I spend the rest of the day going between lounging on the couch and throwing up the small sips of water I’ve taken. Ringer heads out around noon, but only after I threaten to never get naked for him again if he doesn’t leave me alone to wallow in self pity.

He left with the promise that he will be here tomorrow morning to leave for Vegas.

Around seven, the migraine hits. I pop two painkillers before dragging myself to bed. Thankfully, I only wake up twice to vomit.

Friday morning, I'm up at nine and am able to successfully stand through a hot shower.

While drying my hair, my phone pings with a text message. I smile as Sparrow's name appears on the screen.

Can't wait to see you, babe! Love you and drive safe. xoxo

I smile to myself as I reply. I cannot wait to see and squeeze my best friend. It's been a few months since the last wedding I've done with her, so we are well overdue.

Same! I will text you as soon as we are on the road. xo

Another text vibrates the device in my hand, but this one from Ringer.

I'll be there in an hour, I picked up the van.

Fuck. I really don't want to drive the fucking Pepto Bismol van all the way to Vegas.

The migraine has turned into a dull headache, so I shake a few Tylenol out of the bottle and pop them in my mouth. Since we'll be in the car for a few hours, I throw on a soft pair of cheetah print bike shorts and pull one of my dad's old, large shirts over my head. Grabbing my suitcase, I pull it out to the living room behind me. I throw some last minute items in my bag before tidying up my apartment while waiting for Ringer.

An hour to the minute after Ringer texted me, my attention is pulled away from the Tik Tok I was watching by the loud honking coming from the driveway.

I grab my bags before locking up and heading downstairs.

Shock registers immediately. Where I expected to see an awful pink van, a solid red one sits instead. Blood red. Perfection.

“Holy shit!” I squeal as Ringer hops out of the driver’s seat. I jump up and down excitedly as I circle the van. “How the fuck did you manage this?”

“I asked dad to just cover it in red. We’ll add your logo later.”

I run up to the man I’ve been in love with since I was a kid and throw my arms around his neck. He catches me against his chest as I wrap my legs around his middle. “Thank you!”

Ringer groans as I pepper red lipped kisses all over his face before landing on his mouth. He takes it a step further, pushing me up against the side of the van and deepening the kiss.

I pull away with a smile, dropping my feet to the ground. “I love it!”

“I hoped you would, Princess.”

I continue to walk around the van, inspecting it from every angle and smiling until my cheeks begin to ache.

He takes my bags, pulls open the small side door, and throws them inside. I notice his small weekend bag sitting under his cut behind the driver’s seat.

“Are the freezers on?” I ask.

I follow Ringer around to the back where he opens the back doors. The fog from the freezers pour out around us.

“This is so fucking awesome. I love your dad.”

“He was telling me all about this yesterday. He really fucking killed it based on what he says this thing started out as.”

“You have no idea.”

Ringer opens the passenger door for me, letting me climb in. We stop by the bakery, and Ringer helps me load up all of the supplies I need for the construction of the cake. I’ve had the sheets of cake made since Wednesday morning, so now all I need to do is make the frosting to decorate it once we get to the venue.

As soon as we're on the highway towards Vegas, I plug my phone into the stereo and laugh as Ringer dances to the music I turn on. I figured we needed something light to set the mood since I'm really not ready to talk about what we did Wednesday night. All I want is a smooth, uneventful ride.

Four hours later, after dropping the cakes off at the venue, we're pulling into Sparrow's neighborhood. I squirm in my seat as soon as I see my blonde headed best friend jumping up and down in her driveway.

"That's Sparrow?" Ringer asks, and I glare at him. He chuckles. "Calm down, Princess. All I'm saying is she looks different than she did as a kid."

"Well, we are 23 now. Not 16."

"Shit, that sounds fucking shitty when you put it that way. We haven't seen each other since you were 15. Fuck." Ringer shakes his head.

"Hey, it's alright. I see you now, yeah?"

"Yeah," he says soberly.

Ringer puts the van in park and I barely have the door open before Sparrow is right there, ripping me out.

"Hi!" she screams, hugging me tightly.

"Shit, I've missed you!" I squeeze her back.

Ringer comes around the van and stops next to us, laughing at us. I push away from Sparrow and look between the two.

"Sparrow, you remember Ringer?"

Sparrow smiles broadly and winks at him. "Ringer."

"Sparrow," Ringer greets.

"How is it being a free man?"

"Fan-fucking-tastic."

"I bet. Now you can get pussy anytime you want," Sparrow spits unabashedly.

"Sparrow!" I cry.

“What? I’m not wrong,” she shrugs.

“Oh my God,” I groan, slapping my hand on my forehead.

“What? Based on how relaxed he seems and the smile plastered to your face, he’s already fucked you ten ways to Sunday.”

“I do remember how fucking honest you always were, Sparrow,” Ringer chuckles.

“Jack isn’t home yet, but I told him he can fuck off since he’s always working late. We’re going to eat!”

We follow Sparrow inside. Ringer and I both using her bathroom before heading back out. We drive behind her so we can head to our hotel after dinner, and she can go to the rehearsal dinner for the wedding tomorrow.

Sparrow pulls into the Italian restaurant we always go to when I come to town. The hostess leads us to a booth in the back, and Ringer slides in right next to me.

I’m painfully aware of his thick, muscular thigh pressed against mine. We haven’t really talked about what the fuck happened the other night, and part of me is thankful for that. The other part is desperate to know if it was a one time thing or if Ringer feels for me what I have always felt for him.

My gut is saying he has feelings for me, but what the fuck do I know? I’ve never been good at reading men.

Sparrow has never been one to know when to shut the fuck up, and she chatters about any and everything. I watch Ringer out of the corner of my eye to get a sense if he is annoyed or not, but to my surprise, he keeps conversation flowing with her effortlessly.

He laughs when she cracks horrible jokes, and halfway through her story about a bar mitzvah gone wrong, his strong, warm hand lands on my bare leg. Goosebumps pebble my skin as he runs the tips of his fingers along the inside of my thigh.

“How long are you going to need in the kitchen tomorrow?” she asks me.

I swallow down the piece of garlic bread I'm chewing, nearly choking on it as another stroke of Ringer's hand on my thigh takes me off guard. "Probably three to four hours."

"Perfect!"

Our meals are delivered, and we eat in comfortable silence until Sparrow's phone rings.

Ringer and I listen to the one sided conversation as she talks in hushed, annoyed whispers to the person on the other line. She hangs up, and pastes a smile back on her face.

"Everything okay?" Ringer asks.

"Fine!" she chirps a little too quickly.

"You sure?" I ask.

"Mhm." She returns to slurping her noodles.

Her attitude seems a little off after her phone call, but we finish dinner, and before either one of us can pay, Ringer slips money in the waitress's billfold.

As we're walking back to the parking lot, Sparrow turns to us. "Thanks for dinner! Ringer, am I going to see you tomorrow?"

Ringer turns his gaze on me and shrugs, so I answer for him. "Yes he will be there. I need the muscle."

"And tomorrow night?" Sparrow fishes.

I roll my eyes. "Yes, Sparrow, we will come to the club with you."

She lets out a squeal and opens her car door. "Yes, bitch! It's been too long since we've been dancing."

"I'll see you tomorrow. Love you!" I call out to her as she climbs into her car.

At Ringer's curious glint, I laugh. "Sparrow's favorite thing to do is to take me to a club and get me shit faced so I will dance with her."

"That should be a sight to see. Two hangovers in one week?" Ringer winces with a chuckle.

“Eh. It’ll be fine.”

“Maybe for you. You know how shitty it was watching you like that?”

“You weren’t even there for all of it! I made you go home.”

“Even worse,” he adds with a grunt. “Get in the van. I’m tired of driving.”

“We’re right around the corner you big baby.”

Twenty minutes later, I’m pushing the key card into the door of the hotel room. Ringer drops his bags on the king size bed and heads over to the window. I watch in amusement as he pushes the curtains open and gawks at the bright lights of the strip.

“Have you ever been to Vegas before?” I ask from my spot on the edge of the bed as I unlace my boots.

“I came on a run a few months before I got arrested, but we never made it to the strip.”

I move over to stand next to him, perusing the city from up here with him. “So you’ve never gambled in Vegas before?”

“Nope,” he admits, turning to look down at me.

“Hmm.”

Ringer’s phone rings, interrupting our intense stares. I leave him in the main room to answer with some privacy while I head to the bathroom at the other side of the suite.

A hot shower sounds divine. I tear off my clothes and throw them in a heap on the floor before stepping into the large glass enclosure. The cold tile against my bare feet stings my skin as I wait for the hot water to warm me up.

One thing I love about this specific hotel is their complimentary shampoo and conditioner. I know that’s a weird thing to like about a hotel, because it’s normally just cheap garbage, but this place has top-of-the-line products.

I’m rinsing the last of the suds out of my hair when cold air wafts in through the open door of the shower and tickles

my skin. I rinse my face off and slowly pry my eyes open, landing on Ringer's scorching gaze. He's naked and pushing himself into my shower.

Who the hell am I to tell him to get out?

I take a tentative step back, offering the stream of water to him. He seems to have a different goal in mind as one of his hands wraps around the side of my neck and the other lands on my hip, effectively backing me into the cool granite wall. He slowly lowers his mouth to mine, taking my bottom lip between his teeth.

I refuse to close my eyes as I want to watch every single thing he does to me and etch them into my mind. I don't want to forget a moment of this.

Loosening his grip on my lip, his eyes come back up to mine, searching between the two. He must like what he finds as he goes back in, settling his lips back on mine. Lashes fluttering closed, I'm lost in the feeling of his rough fingertips pressing into the nape of my neck as he deliciously controls my mouth.

It takes a while for my mind to catch up with my hands. As soon as I'm brought back to the moment, my palms land on his rippling chest, now covered with water droplets from the spray of the shower.

A yelp leaves my throat as his hands drop to wrap around my thighs and he hoists me into the air. My back once again lands on the cool wall, and I don't even have a second to adjust to the new position before his focus is back on my mouth. Our tongues fight for control, but just like last night, I'm no competition as he manipulates me. I'm like putty in his hands.

My fingernails graze his scalp, earning a low groan from him. I smile against his lips in pride as I do it again, this time pulling on the hair at the back of his neck.

I let out a loud moan as his fingers reach between us and find my clit, running light circles around it in the most mind-numbing way.

“Do you know the best part of fucking in the shower?” he asks, his voice somehow even deeper than before.

I don't know how he expects me to be able to think straight as he continues strumming against me. “Hmm?”

He chuckles before dropping me back down to my feet. “No mess to clean up.”

I let out a whine in protest as the change in position causes him to drop his hands. Before I can even think of doing anything myself, Ringer drops to his knees in front of me.

He grins up at me devilishly and kisses the inside of my thigh as he guides it onto his shoulder. “Fuck, I missed pussy.”

I roll my eyes. “You better be talking about mine.”

“I'll do you one better. Best fucking pussy I ever had.” I gasp as he licks a trail from my opening all the way to the sensitive bud at the top. “Mmm”

The vibration coming off his groan sends me even higher as he works his tongue all over my pussy. As soon as he adds two fingers to my opening, the synchronization of his thrusts and the lapping of his tongue at my clit threatens to make my legs give out from underneath me. Using his free hand, he wraps it around my waist and uses the wall to his advantage to hold me up.

I scream out when he lets go of my clit, sinking his teeth into the sensitive skin of my thigh before swirling his tongue along my slit once again.

Hooking his fingers inside of me, he hits that one special spot over and over again. I see stars, and the continuous suction of his lips takes me over the edge, finally exploding against his face.

“Fuck!” I scream, my legs shaking to the point that I'm afraid of falling. He doesn't stop fucking me with his mouth until I'm pushing against his forehead. “Ringer! Stop! S-so sensitive!”

Ringer hops back up to his feet, crowding me once again against the wall. “I'd wait another eight years for that.” Lifting

his hands to wrap on each side of my neck, he guides my face up to his and presses the sweetest kiss against my lips.

Pulling away faster than I'd like, he steps out of the shower, leaving me speechless in his wake as the now cold water streams down over my head.

I dry off with a dazed mind, wrap myself in a towel, and walk out into the main room to find him lounging in his boxers on the king size bed.

"What?" he asks when I stop beside him, eyeing him suspiciously.

"All that and you don't want anything in return?"

"I said the best part of being in the shower was we could make a mess."

"I didn't even touch you?"

He chuckles, patting the side of the bed next to him. "Babe, I've been beatin' off for eight years."

I climb onto the bed, settling down next to him under the covers before throwing my towel across the room. "And? Shouldn't that make you not want to do it, like, ever again?"

Ringer lets out a loud laugh and lifts his arm, pulling me into his side. "It doesn't take much, especially when I'm eating your pussy. I took care of it. That was about you."

"Wow."

"What?"

"I've never had that before," I admit incredulously.

"You've never had a man make you come without expecting anything in return?"

"Hell no!"

"Well that's because you've never been with me before," he shrugs. "But forget I fucking asked that. I really don't want to hear about every guy you've fucked."

I let out a giggle and snuggle farther into the bed. "If it makes you feel better, there isn't much to say. There have only

been a few.”

“We’re going to keep it that way, yeah?”

My eyes start to feel heavy and I let out a yawn, nodding against his chest. “Sure.”

Ringer kisses my forehead, running his fingers along my arm. “No, not sure, Princess. Yes.”

“Mhm,” I mumble, succumbing to the sleep that was inevitably pulling me into it’s clutches.

eight

Ringer

WATCHING Lilah in her element is fucking wild.

She runs around this kitchen like she works in it every day, not like she just saw it for the first time yesterday evening.

I drag in all of the non-perishable ingredients we left in the van and watch as she turns a bunch of random shit into ivory-colored icing. She effortlessly whips a four-tier cake together and decorates it in no time like it's quite literally a *piece of fucking cake*.

This morning, she asked me to put on a long-sleeved black shirt and black jeans so I will blend in when she needs me to move the damn thing. I looked at her like she had grown two heads. She wants me to be responsible for moving this thing? I mean, sure, it's an ego boost, but what the fuck happens if I drop it? Looking at it now only makes me more anxious for what's about to come.

She adds the finishing touches to the top of the cake before taking a step back and smiling at the finished product.

“Done?” I ask. Rounding the counter, I make my way over to stand next to her and drop my arm around her shoulder.

She obliges me by snaking her arm around my waist. “Done,” she agrees.

“Fuck. You really trust me to move this thing?” I rub my free hand on the back of my neck, trying to imagine the logistics of moving this big ass thing to the rolling cart and then again onto the table in the reception hall.

She taps me on the stomach. “Don’t worry, big guy, it’ll be fine. Just remember one thing. Drop it, and I’ll cut your fucking dick off.” The little devil smiles at me like she didn’t just make me imagine her with my bloody dick in one hand and one of her baking knives in the other.

“You’re lucky you’re cute,” I say, tapping my finger against her nose.

Waving the frosting knife in her hand towards me, the side of her mouth quirks upwards. “I’m not fucking cute.”

I shrug. “I think so.”

She hums, spinning to face the door as Sparrow barges through it. My eyebrows rise with surprise as the woman who was always so bubbly and all smiles as a teenager storms into the room like someone lit her ass on fire and pissed in her Cheerios.

“Who pissed in your Cheerios?” Lilah asks, causing my eyes to widen as she says the exact thing I was thinking.

“Stupid fucking bridesmaids. Cunts like that remind me why I never fucking had any.”

“Thanks, bitch.”

Sparrow rolls her eyes at Lilah and grabs the closest thing to her, which happens to be a cake cutter. “I’d like to take this and cut the maid of honors fucking throat.”

“Nah, not sharp enough.” Lilah casually reaches onto the counter and slides a different knife across the surface. “That’ll have more of the effect you’re looking for.”

Sparrow eyes the handle of the serrated knife and waves it in the air. “I bet this one would even cut through the bone.”

My eyes jump between the two women as they ever-so-coolly volley back and forth about slicing a woman’s neck.

“Did you guys do time in the women’s prison down the road while I was away?” I finally ask as Sparrow spins the large knife.

“Wouldn’t you like to know?” Lilah chuckles, smiling at me with a sinister glint in her eye.

“Uhm yeah, Princess, I’d like to know. Need to know what I’m getting myself into here.”

Sparrow throws her head back and cackles. “Wooh! That was just the entertainment I needed.” Wiping the tears from her eyes, she sets the weapon back on the counter in front of her. “But seriously, I’m five seconds away from committing murder and getting arrested, never to be seen again, if I have to spend five more minutes in a room with that bird-brained twat.”

“What’s she doing?” Lilah is back to being as serious as ever, as if she didn’t just make me question her sanity and my safety.

“What *isn’t* she doing? That’d be a shorter list.” Sparrow dunks her finger in the leftover frosting in the huge metal bowl. “I stopped by the dressing room to give them their schedule for the rest of the day, and she threw it away! She then took out a handwritten minute-by-minute schedule. So, instead of telling her friend that we have a strictly planned schedule that took us *months* to plan over hundreds of emails, texts, and coffee meetings, the bride took her friend’s and handed it to me! What the fuck am I even here for?”

“To look gorgeous?” Lilah winks at her.

Sparrow rolls her eyes, sticking her tongue out at her best friend. “Suck up.”

“Ah, come on, Spar. Fuck them. You already got paid, yeah?”

Sparrow nods.

“Then they can all fuck off. Point them where to go when they walk, and then fuck it after that.”

“Hmm. I like it,” she shrugs. “You’re right. Fuck ’em.”

I shake my head at the odd display of girly shit happening right in front of me.

“You have a better idea?” Sparrow snarks my way.

“Yeah, go back to the room and tell the bride she hired you for a reason. If she doesn’t like what you did for her, she can figure out the rest of this stupid ass wedding by her-damn-self.”

“I like it. Alright, I’m going back in there. You guys put the cake out, and I’ll meet you back here in fifteen.”

Sparrow scurries out the door before either of us can stop her. Lilah turns an accusatory eye my way, and I shrug.

“This could be bad for her business.”

“Like you just said, babe, fuck ‘em.”

Lilah laughs.

I roll the cart meant to take the cake out to the reception hall up to the counter. I’m going to be so fucking pissed at myself if I drop this damn thing. Lilah holds the cart against the counter while I grab hold of the base. I gently slide the heavy-ass dessert towards me.

“Fuck, this thing is a lot heavier than it looks.”

“Don’t drop it,” Lilah squints at me.

“I’m not going to fucking drop it,” I curse.

Lilah’s giggles behind me are the only thing I hear over my heartbeat as I lift the cake off the counter and move it onto the cart.

I don’t admit out loud that I let out the suffocating breath I was holding as I push the cake to the reception hall.

After getting it situated on the table in the corner, I smile to myself. Lilah reaches over, giving me a high five as we admire her work.

“You’re really fucking good at this shit, Princess,” I say, dropping my arm around her shoulder.

“Thanks, Ring.” She blushes.

I lead her back to the kitchen, and we find Sparrow already there, waiting for us.

“Well?” I ask.

“I may have told them to fuck off,” she admits. “This is going to be bad for business.”

“You just said last week that you’re getting sick of this shit anyways.”

“Yeah, you’re right. Let’s clean this shit up and get the hell out of here!” Sparrow exclaims excitedly. “I’m *so* ready to have a margarita in my hand, dancing the night away!”

As long as it took to design the entire cake, Lilah and Sparrow get the kitchen cleaned up in no time. Lilah waves me out of the space to let them finish up. I lug the large totes back out to the van, and after shutting and securing the back doors, I fish out a much-needed cigarette from my back pocket.

Lilah and Sparrow find me leaning against the side of the van a while later, scrolling through my phone. I don’t know how the fuck to work much social media, but Ghost did download a few apps for me and showed me the basics. I’m laughing at a video of a son pranking his mom as the girls walk up.

Sliding her arms out of the heavy chef’s coat, Lilah lets out a relieved breath.

“Good to go?” I ask, slipping my phone back into my pocket.

“So ready,” she groans, rubbing her fingers along the back of her neck. I reach out to her, guiding her back to my front as I massage my thumbs into her neck. Her moans cause my dick to harden, and I force myself to think of old NASCAR stats to make it go back down.

“Alright, lovebirds, go back to your room to change, and meet me at my house at six!” Sparrow sing-songs as she skips towards her car.

I let out a chuckle at Lilah’s dreamy state as I continue to work my thumbs along the columns of her neck. I lean

forward, kissing the top of her head. “Get in the car, sleepy girl. According to your friend, we have plans.”

“Ugh,” she groans. “I just want to nap.”

I chuckle again, holding the passenger side door open for her. “You can nap on the way to the hotel and then again on the way to Sparrow’s.”

“Promise?” she asks, her hazy eyes meeting mine.

I hold up my right hand in what I think is the scout’s honor sign and wink. Lilah lets out a loud giggle. Reaching forward, she lifts my ring finger so that only my pinky and thumb are down.

“If you’re going to pretend to be a scout, you at least have to do the sign right.”

I drop my hand and shrug. “I never claimed to be honorable.”

Her smile drops, and her eyes darken. “I hope not.”

With a smirk, I wink at her one more time before closing the door and rounding the van.

I feel like a million fucking bucks as we drive to Sparrow’s that evening. Right around this time two weeks ago, I was sitting in my cell and staring at the gray cement ceiling. Now, I’m in the driver’s seat as one of the most important people in my entire life bobs along to the music on the radio. This is what freedom feels like.

Man, it fucking feels good.

When Lilah came out of the bathroom after getting ready, I had to forcefully scrape my jaw off the damn floor. She came out in what I can only describe as a lace lingerie top that disappeared under short-as-hell, frayed denim shorts.

Her glistening cleavage is off the fucking charts, and I’m physically unable to tear my eyes away as tiny specks of

reflective glitter shine against her skin. The entire outfit is pure fucking sin, with so much fucking skin showing. There is a small bowtie holding the two triangles covering her nipples together, making me want to reach out and lick the bare skin from her belly all the way to her neck.

It'll be a miracle if I don't go back to prison tonight based on all the mother fuckers that will have their eyes on her. Come to think of it, it will be a miracle if we can make it to Sparrow's without me crashing the fucking van.

I never imagined myself being the jealous type. I've never given a shit if other men have wanted any woman I've been with. I can guarantee that is not the fucking case with Lilah. Not at all.

The shiny metal from all the chunky rings lining her fingers shines as we pass a streetlight as she reaches across to adjust the radio.

Since our drive has only just begun, I'm surprised when she turns it all the way off. Out of the corner of my eye, I can see her turn in her seat to face me.

I quickly glance at her before pulling my eyes back to the road.

“What's up?”

“Thank you for coming with me,” she blurts. Her tone seems off. Nervous, maybe?

“Anytime, babe. You know you can count on me.”

I chance another glance at her before slowing down for a red light. “It seems that's a trend with us, yeah?” she laughs uncomfortably.

I knew the day would come when she'd bring up the reason I was arrested. It's not a conversation I ever wanted to have. I just want to forget about it and go on with our lives. I don't want to come between whatever it is that we are or could be building here.

I let out a deep sigh and crack my neck from left to right. “Seems so.”

“Why’d you do it?”

Rolling my head against the back of the chair, I meet her eyes and drop my voice to an almost whisper. “You know why, Lile.”

“I was fine. I had it handled.”

“Lilah, you were 15 goddamned years old, and you had a 20 year old piece of shit trying to slip something in your drink.”

“I didn’t drink it,” her voice quivers.

“Fuck, I know that. But what if you had?”

Shivers rack her body, and I’m forced to break eye contact as the light turns green in front of us.

“I never got to thank you for protecting me, but I hate that you had to do what you did. It took you away from me for all those years.”

“I wish I could say I’m sorry that I did it. But I’m not. I’ll never regret it. So don’t try to make me apologize.”

“The only thing I want an apology for is for not letting me come to see you.”

Trying to lighten the mood, I look over at her and smirk. “Princess, if I would’ve let you come see me, looking how you look now, I never would’ve survived that place. Not being able to touch you would have killed me.”

“You know, you never told me what you were doing at that party that night in the first place. I saw you before I ever left the clubhouse, and then the next thing I know, you’re beating the shit out of Derek.”

I wince at hearing her say his name, rubbing my palm along the back of my neck. “I followed you. Me and Flame went to school with the kid’s older brother, Michael, so there were a bunch of people our age there too.”

“Hm. I noticed that.” She seems lost in thought as she taps her finger against her chin. “If you were hanging out with all your friends, how did you even see him with me?”

“Princess, my eyes have always been on you.”

After the words come out, I realize how creepy they must have sounded, so I try my best to backpedal.

“I mean, when you were a kid, I was always worried about you. Especially then, how could I let the VP’s daughter run loose at a party with a shit load of teenagers *and* adults and not keep an eye on her at all times?”

“And now?” she asks, ever so softly.

“Fuck, now? Now I can’t take my eyes off of you because I want to devour you every second of the fucking day. You are the most delectable creature on this fucking planet.”

That analogy pulls a large belly laugh out of her, and I’m thankful for the break in the serious conversation. I don’t like being that kind of guy.

Her mood seems to shift as a smile rests on her face once again. I can’t help but wonder how she really felt that night. Does she blame herself? I fucking hope not. I didn’t mean to kill the guy. I only meant to teach him a lesson. Nobody fucks with what’s ours.

I didn’t count on the kid being so doped up on God knows what that he couldn’t even fight back. I saw black and went a little too crazy. I hit him in just the right spot as he was already falling, and it killed him.

It isn’t my best moment. He wasn’t my first kill, either. Just my first and only *unintentional* kill.

Just as we exit the freeway towards Sparrow’s, she finds her voice again. “I saved every single thing you sent me while you were away.”

I turn towards her with shock evident on my face. “Seriously?”

She nods excitedly. “I have the letter you sent me after my 18th birthday. The one after I wrote to you about Renee ruining my entire birthday. In the corner, you wrote, ‘You are enough, just as you are.’ I cut it out and taped it to my mirror so that every morning when I’m getting ready, it’s a small

reminder that I may not be enough for her, but I'm enough for someone."

I reach across the center console, entwine our fingers together and bring them to my lips. I kiss each knuckle and smile. "You are way more than just enough, Princess."

She scoffs. "Maybe for you."

"I should be all that matters, dammit!" I laugh as she rolls her eyes.

Pulling up to Sparrow's house, we see she's already waiting for us in the driveway. She and Lilah squeal with laughter as Sparrow shimmies her body into the barely existent backseat of the cab. "I should have just taken an Uber and met you guys there! Holy shit, my ass is so squashed back here!"

"Suck it up!" Lilah snickers. "We crammed into much smaller spaces when we were kids!"

Images of Lilah and Sparrow up to no good as teenage girls filter through my mind. Thoughts I really don't fucking care to think about. Images of the two of them in the back of some punk-ass's car or, even worse, the image of her on the back of another dude's bike.

Fuck that.

"Oh, calm down, *Dad*. We weren't that bad!" Sparrow babbles out, smacking my arm.

I catch her eyes in the rearview mirror and raise my brow at her with a smirk. "Yeah, I'm sure you two were angels."

Lilah rolls her eyes with a smile and bounces in her seat excitedly. "We haven't been here in forever!" she says as she looks at where Sparrow's GPS led us to.

"I know! That's why I picked it!"

"I thought we were going to dinner?" I ask as I help the women out of the van.

"This place is both!" Lilah says eagerly.

After paying to get through the door, I wince at the change in scenery. I'm not used to this fucking shit anymore. The

decibel in which the girls spoke the entire ride over here prepared me for the noise level in the club or restaurant, or whatever the fuck this place is.

A hostess leads us over to a high-top table in the center of the room. Lilah leans towards me, and my eyes follow her outstretched finger across the space. “The club is through that opening. Once we’re done eating, we go in there to party.”

She straightens back in her chair, and I can’t help but admire her beauty. I really fucking like the red lipstick she always seems to be sporting. My cock tightens against my jeans as I imagine her plump, ruby lips wrapped around me.

Throughout dinner, Lilah’s eyes sparkle with pure joy as she talks and laughs with her friend. It’s a fucking treasure to witness. I feel robbed of all the years I couldn’t experience her growth as a woman.

And what a fucking woman she has become.

After I pay the bill, Sparrow leads us through the club and stops at a small reserved table. She spreads her arms out and smiles excitedly at us.

“You got us a table?” Lilah asks over the music.

“I figured we had company this time! We may want to chill.”

“What do you normally do?” I ask, not wanting to impede on their chick time.

Lilah turns to me and giggles. Reaching up on her toes, she presses her lips to my chin. “Well, we never sit and chill for one,” she grins and drops down on the leather couch, Sparrow and I following her lead. “We dance the night away.”

“We can dance,” I prod.

Lilah looks at me suspiciously with her brows raised. “You? Dance?”

I smirk at her and take her fingers to entwine them with mine. “You have no idea what I can do, Princess.”

“Show me what you got then, big guy.”

“Ahhh!” Sparrow squeals as she stomps her heeled feet against the ground. “Let’s fucking go!”

Luckily, our waitress filled our drinks before coming over. I gulp down the remaining amber liquid at the bottom of my glass and drop it onto the table. I take Lilah’s hand and drag her to the middle of the dance floor with Sparrow not far behind.

Even though I am so fucking far out of my comfort zone, the second Lilah presses her tight body against mine, I could give two shits less about our whereabouts. All I give a damn about is the woman in my arms and the way she is moving her body so deliciously against me.

The loud music couldn’t be farther from the shit I’m used to listening to, but I’d play it every day of the week if it made Lilah move the way she is right now. I relax my muscles and sway against her. I’ve never been more thankful for Sparrow as I am at this moment as she grabs Lilah’s hand, spinning her away from me, which causes her to press her lush ass on my dick.

Gripping her hips in my hand, I groan as her body starts to move in tandem with the beat.

Lilah’s body never leaves mine as Sparrow feeds her shot after shot. Just like at The Castle the other night, she seems to be just fine even though Sparrow is close to three sheets to the wind. The only telling feature on Lilah is the slight, glassy glint in her green eyes that causes them to shine like emeralds.

Sparrow slips away from us once again, so I spin Lilah around in my arms. She throws her arms around my neck.

My eyes follow the smallest droplet of sweat as it slips down the column of her neck. When it disappears between her cleavage, I force my eyes back to search her face, where I find a mischievous grin pasted on her lips.

Surprise lights up her face as bubbles start to fall from the ceiling.

“What the hell!” she yells, spreading her arms out and leaning her head back as the bubbles rain down on us.

I let out a laugh as I watch her in amusement. Whether it's the alcohol talking or simply experiencing her joy, I could live in this fucking moment forever.

The amount of strength it takes me not to lay her down on this dance floor at our feet and ravage her body is unparalleled. Sparrow finds us a few minutes later as Lilah dances to the beat in my arms, our skin shining with the residue from the bubbles.

"Let's go sit for a minute!" Sparrow calls over the music, holding our drinks out for us to take.

I follow the women back towards the tables and can't help my eyes from searching out Lilah's ass in her tight denim shorts. I could try to blame it on only having my hand for company for eight years, but I think it has nothing to do with that and every bit to do with the seductress sipping her drink as she takes a seat at our table.

"Is this a casino too?" I ask as I sit, trying to start a conversation to focus on anything but the thought of my little vixen naked and beneath me.

"Well, there is a chapel on the second floor, the entire third floor is a casino, and the rest is the hotel. You find some weird shit in Vegas," Sparrow answers easily.

"Damn. So you can eat dinner, get drunk, get married, get rich, and get fucked all in one place?" I ask with a laugh. "Why would anyone leave?"

"Oh my god! Please tell me the chapel has one of those tacky Elvis guys that will marry you!" Lilah asks while laughing her ass off at her own question.

"You bet your ass they do!" Sparrow leans into Lilah, causing her drink to slosh over the side of the glass.

Both girls think it's the funniest thing in the world, and I can't help my laughter from taking over.

"We need more shots!" Sparrow yells as a song about everyone taking shots blares over the speakers.

Fuck. I'm in for a long night with these two.

nine

Lilah

HOLY SHIT, I'm never drinking again.

My head.

My feet.

Everything hurts.

I roll over from my stomach onto my back and wince as a break in the curtains causes sunlight to beam right into my eyeball.

“Fuck!” I hiss as I roll back to my side, bringing my hands up to dig my heels into my eye sockets.

I scrub my hands across my face and hiss as something sharp clips my nose.

What the fuck?

I blink over and over as I try to clear my vision. What the fuck is on my hand?

The sunlight is causing me to see shit.

Yeah, that's it.

I slam my eyes closed and dig my thumbs into them in an attempt to rub the sleep and light exposure away before prying them back open.

I jackknife up in the bed as my eyes regain focus on the no less than three-karat, princess cut diamond ring glistening on my fucking left ring finger.

What in the absolute fuck.

I look around the room just to verify that I am in the correct hotel room. I skim my eyes across the floor. My lace top is hanging across the floor lamp in the corner, my shorts are right next to the hotel door, and Ringer's clothes that he had on last night are lying haphazardly across the armchair next to the lamp.

The only thing seeming to be missing from the room is Ringer.

Throwing the sheet off of me, I look down at myself, and my eyes widen at the love marks littering my entire body.

I can make out the exact pattern of teeth on my left tit. They are so defined that they could probably be used to I.D. the person who made them if necessary.

What in the fuck happened last night.

And why the fuck do I have a massive-ass fucking ring on my finger?

I drag my ass into the bathroom and turn the shower to scorching hot. I pry the white gold ring off my finger and place it on the sink before stepping under the molten stream of water.

After scrubbing my entire body clean, I dry off and furiously brush my teeth to remove the stale taste of last night's drinks.

How much did I drink last night?

I side-eye the ring again before deciding last minute, right before leaving the bathroom, to put it back on.

I really fucking hope I didn't marry a stranger last night.

I inspect the ring closer, convincing myself that whatever happened was just a joke and this is just a fake toy machine ring.

Yeah. That's it.

My head pounds as I try to remember anything from last night after I headed upstairs to the casino.

I search the hotel room for my phone.

No luck.

The lock on the door clicks before Ringer pushes through the doorway holding a brown paper bag in one hand and two coffees in the other.

I eye him suspiciously as he smiles shamelessly at me. “Good morning, Princess.”

“Morning.”

He places the bag and coffee on the small table and nods towards the coffee.

“You should probably drink that. I heard caffeine is good with bad hangovers.”

I tentatively take a step towards him and sit at the table. He sits across from me and opens the bag up.

I moan when I take the first bite of the heaven-sent bagel he hands me. After washing it down with the perfect sip of coffee, I slam my elbow on the table and glare at him. “What the fuck is this?”

Ringer glances at the piece of jewelry on my finger before returning his eyes to mine. “That looks like a wedding ring.”

“No shit, Emmett. What the fuck is it doing on my finger?”

He dares to look sheepish. “It usually is a sign that two people got married.”

My eyes widen, and I drop my hands to the table, pointing from him to my chest. “Did we...?”

I can't even finish the sentence.

At his slight nod, my heartbeat pulsates in my chest all the way up through my temples and out my ears.

“What!” I screech. “Holy fuck.”

I push away from the table and pace behind my chair. “My dad’s going to kill me.”

I whip my head back to him. “Please tell me this is a fake ring. That it’s costume jewelry that we got out of one of those silly toy cent machines.”

Seeing the rise in Ringer’s chest as he takes a deep breath, I know my answer.

“Emmett! How the hell? What the hell? How did– why did–”

“Calm down, Princess.”

“Calm down! Emmett, we got fucking married!”

“Yeah, and?” he says, pushing back from the table and standing to move around it towards me.

“What do you mean ‘and?’ Married, Emmett! Like married, married! Not just fake married like I used to pretend we were when I was little!” I start to hyperventilate. “This is a \$20,000 ring!”

He shakes his head and waves my comment off. “Thirty-two, but that doesn’t matter. Lilah, it’s fine.”

“What!” I scream, pulling the ring off my finger and holding it out to him, half afraid to even touch the fucking thing. I feel like I’m going to puke, and not from the hangover.

“Put that back on,” he says gruffly.

“No! I cannot wear that, Emmett.”

“Why do you keep calling me Emmett?”

My head is reeling. I feel like I’m going through a wind tunnel as my mind races and my heart pounds. I’m going to pass out.

“I think I’m going to puke,” I say before turning and running to the bathroom. I manage to drop to my knees before all of the contents in my stomach expel into the toilet.

I vaguely hear Ringer let out a deep sigh behind me as he gathers my hair up into a ponytail behind my head.

I heave two more times before dropping onto my ass on the tile, leaning my back against the side of the tub.

I take the washcloth he hands me and wipe my face before tossing it into the hamper by the sink.

I pry my eyes open, and nausea rolls through my stomach again as I see Ringer's outstretched hand holding the ring out to me again.

"Put it back on."

"Why?"

"Because you're my wife, and I want you to wear it."

A disbelieving laugh bubbles out of me. "Ringer, listen to yourself right now! Married? *Wife?*"

"Yes, babe, that's what happens when two people go to a chapel and sign a piece of paper that says they are married."

"Let me see it," I demand, glaring at him.

He lets out another deep sigh before pushing up and leaving the bathroom.

A few minutes later, Ringer comes back into the bathroom, holding a piece of paper and his phone.

The first thing he hands me is the paper. I let out a loud maniacal laugh as I verify that I sure as shit signed my name right under his on a Nevada State marriage license.

I sit that down next to me and reach out to take the phone. My eyes slightly soften as I see the first picture on the screen.

"Why don't I remember this?" I ask softly.

"We were all pretty drunk, Lile."

"But you remember it?"

"Every minute," he sighs, his face falling. "I had a feeling you weren't going to remember."

"Whose idea was it?"

"Kind of everyone's, I guess?"

I let out my first real laugh of the morning. “What does that mean?”

Ringer drops down onto his ass in front of me. “You kept asking to see the Elvis that marries people. Sparrow outed that you used to write Lilah Mack on all your journals.”

My face heats, and I let out a groan, dropping my head back to rest against the cool edge of the tub.

“I said if I won a round of roulette, I would buy a ring right then.”

“How did that go?”

He gestures to the item in question and shrugs. “I bought the ring, didn’t I?”

“Probably as a joke! Ringer, this is our life. Not a drunken joke.”

“You don’t see me laughing, Lilah.”

Ringer has been uncharacteristically serious all morning, and I haven’t noticed until now. My freaking out hasn’t allowed me to read his emotions properly.

“Do you want to go and get it annulled?” I ask carefully.

“Lilah, this isn’t a conversation we should be having on the bathroom floor.”

I push to stand, adamant about having this conversation now.

He holds the ring out to me again. When I shake my head at him, he pushes farther. “Please, Lilah, put the fucking ring on.”

I feel the tension in his voice, so I take it from him and turn to walk out of the bathroom.

Instead of putting it on, I lay it on the table, sit back down, and reach out with trembling hands to grasp my coffee.

Ringer takes the seat right next to me instead of the one across from me.

“You would annul it?” he asks cautiously.

I let out a sigh and drag my hands through my hair. I pull slightly on the ends, causing pain to jolt through my scalp to ensure I'm not stuck in a dream.

I drop my head back and stare at the ceiling.

Married. I think I'm in shock. I need to go to the hospital before I have a heart attack at the ripe age of 23.

"Talk to me, Lile."

I drag my eyes over to him, finding him staring intently at me. "You want to be married to me?" I ask.

"You seemed pretty fucking happy last night to be marrying me."

"That wasn't what I asked. Besides, you can't hold that against me. I've been in love with you since I was like 13. But that was then. This is now, Ringer. We hardly know each other!"

"That isn't true."

My eyelids drop as I glare at him, and he chuckles. His next question hits me square in the chest and has tears gathering in my eyes. "Why wouldn't I want to be married to you?"

"Ringer, you've been out of prison for five minutes. How do you even know you like me? We aren't even dating!"

"You're right. We aren't dating. We're married."

"You're impossible!"

His chuckle settles the tension in my shoulders, and when his hand lands on my forearm, the rest of it melts away.

"I'm not letting you give up on us, Princess."

"I didn't even really know there was an us, Ringer."

"What'd you think was going on the past couple of weeks?"

"I don't know! I was honestly too shocked that the guy I've been pining over for ten years was even looking at me in that way!"

Ringer's free hand reaches out, taking the ring between his fingers. He studies it before training his eyes on me. "Please put it on," he asks gently.

I pause for a moment, volleying between listening to my head that says this is the most insane thing I could ever imagine and listening to my heart screaming to let him put the ring back on my finger. This is the person that I've wanted to be attached to for my entire life.

I don't miss the slight drop in his shoulders and the small smile pulling at his lips as I outstretch my left hand. Sliding the obnoxious diamond down my finger, Ringer smiles triumphantly at me before kissing my knuckle right above it.

"You really want to be married? Why me?" I ask, my insecurities rushing to the front of my mind.

"Don't do that shit, Lilah. You are more than good enough for anyone to marry. I'm just the lucky fucker you said yes to."

"You asked me?" I ask in disbelief.

Ringer grabs his phone from the table, opening the photo app once again. The picture he showed me in the bathroom is still on the screen. It's of the two of us with the tacky Elvis in the background. Ringer looks down at me like I'm the only woman in the world, and the smile on my face as I look back up at him has tears burning my vision.

The memory of me as a teenager, dreaming of marrying this very man, reels through my mind as I focus on the picture of adult me making that dream come true.

The next image has me bursting into a fit of laughter. In it, Ringer is holding my face as he kisses me fiercely. But that isn't what has me crying from laughter. The reason I am laughing is because at the bottom corner of the picture is Sparrow. She took the photo in selfie mode, so Ringer and I are farther in the back, but in the front is her and the Elvis impersonator with her tongue down his throat.

Ringer scrolls through a few more of us at the jewelry store, each showing me holding my hand out with the biggest smile on my face while showing off my new jewels.

He lands on the picture he must have been looking for, and I roll my eyes and smile.

Ringer is on one knee in front of me, and I can see the ring in one hand and a small piece of something in his other.

“What is that?”

“Do you remember when we were kids, and you were obsessed with that George Strait song?”

“Check Yes or No?”

Ringer nods, leaning to his side to reach into his back pocket.

Tears blur my vision as he slides a bar napkin across the table toward me. Written in red lipstick, it says:

Do you love me? Do you want to be my ol' lady?

I laugh as I wipe the tears off my cheeks.

“Where did you get the lipstick?”

“Sparrow,” he shrugs. “I asked for a pen, but she had this.”

“Clever.”

“That’s another thing Sparrow kind of blabbed. She said you always wished someone would’ve asked you to be theirs like that.”

“I was ten!” I laugh.

He shrugs again. “So.”

Ringer folds the napkin up again before putting it back in his pocket. We sit in silence for a few minutes as I process.

I break the silence after Ringer finishes off his coffee. “So we’re really married, huh?”

“Says the state of Nevada.”

“My dad’s going to kill me.”

Ringer winces and bites his lip before saying, “You and me both.”

“What do we do now?”

“We go home and tell our families. We’ll figure it all out.”

My eyes widen, thinking about telling my dad I went to Vegas for a job and came home with a husband.

Husband.

Holy fuck.

“Wait...”

“What?”

“We can’t tell our families.”

Ringer rears back as if I slapped him. “What? Why?”

Words get caught in my throat as I start to panic, thinking about telling everyone that we got married while we were drunk in Vegas.

“What if we don’t work out?” I whisper, refusing to make eye contact with him.

“Why the fuck wouldn’t we work out?”

“We don’t know each other anymore, Ringer!” I push away from the table and start to pace again. “We haven’t known each other since I wasn’t even old enough to have a driver’s license! Fuck, Ringer, I barely had my period for six months when you got arrested!”

I can’t believe I just said that out loud, but fuck it. I’m out of my mind right now. My emotions are taking me through the wringer. Quite literally.

Strong arms engulf my waist before I’m pulled into a hard chest. He takes my face in his large hands and tilts my head up to his.

“Relax, babe.” His beard tickles my nose as he kisses my forehead. “Everything is going to be okay.”

I take a deep breath, and it doesn’t escape me that I instantly relax with his touch. Just like when he put his hand on my arm, his touch soothes something in my soul.

Ringer holds me in his arms as I continue to slow my breathing until I can no longer hear my heartbeat throbbing in

my ears.

“Do you promise?” I ask, causing Ringer to gently release me.

“Promise what?”

“That everything will be okay?”

Ringer smiles before placing a gentle kiss against my lips. “I fucking swear it.”

“Okay.”

“Okay?”

I nod my head. “Yeah.”

“So you aren’t going to divorce me?” he asks with a smirk.

I roll my eyes, crossing my arms playfully. “Not yet, but you better play your cards right, big guy.”

It takes longer than usual to get packed up and ready to head back home. Forget the fact that I just found out that I’m married to my lifelong crush, and I got so drunk I don’t even *remember* getting married. I’m paying the price for that every few minutes when I have to stop packing so I can sprint to the bathroom and vomit.

This is the hangover to trump all hangovers. When else have I been able to say I woke up married? Never, that’s when. Before this, the worst thing I’d ever done while getting blacked-out drunk was streak down Main Street with Pebbles, which was years ago. To this day, I still hate myself for allowing my dad to find me like that. Pebbles could have cared less since they all saw her naked on a regular basis. Me? Not so much.

I fight off a wave of nausea as Ringer pumps gas by the highway. Putting my oversized sunglasses on, I lean my head back on the headrest and groan.

I'm pulled from my stupor when Ringer opens his door and hands me a small bag from the convenience store.

I pull out a ginger ale and a pack of mint gum. Holding up the gum, I look at him in question.

"Mint helps with nausea. Trust me," he says while directing the van out of the parking lot.

He rolls the windows down as I pop a piece of gum in my mouth and take a small sip of the ginger soda. I try not to think about the fact that ginger is the main ingredient in my favorite cocktail and choke down the bubbly liquid. The fresh, hot air coming in through the windows contrasts the icy air conditioning blowing from the dash.

Leaning my head back against the headrest again, I let my eyes drop down to my lap. The colossal diamond still sits on my finger, sparkling as the rays from the sunlight beaming in through the windshield hit it.

I close my eyes, listening to Ringer's soft voice as he sings along to the classics as they play over the radio, lulling me into a deep slumber as he drives us home.

"What in the absolute fuck," Ringer grumbles as I blink my eyes open sometime later.

I sit up straighter in my seat, looking out the windshield, noting the cars at a standstill all around us.

"What's going on?" I ask as I stretch my arms out in front of me. I realize the gum is still in my mouth. Thank fuck it didn't fall out into my hair.

"Car accident or something, I'm assuming," Ringer yawns, nodding toward the cars in front of us.

I open up the map app on my phone and groan at what looks like miles of a bold red line on our route home. "Looks like we're going to be stuck here for a bit."

Ringer rolls his head toward me and gives me a small smile. "How are you feeling?"

"I've been better, that's for sure."

“Nauseous?”

I take a deep breath and shake my head. “I’m not, actually. Thank God.”

Ringer chuckles, turning his head back to the road.

“How long was I out?”

“Eh. Hour and a half, maybe.”

I nod, taking another sip of the now lukewarm soda.

Since I’m awake, Ringer turns the dial on the radio slightly louder. Grateful that he left it low so I could sleep, I smile at him.

Even though we’re in standstill traffic with no sign of moving anytime soon, he leaves his left hand on the steering wheel. My eyes zone in on his hand, and I realize I’m the only one here wearing a ring.

“Where is your ring?”

Ringer laughs, stretching out his left hand as if looking for one himself. “You were pretty adamant that I wasn’t allowed to buy my own ring.”

“Why didn’t I buy you one?”

“You didn’t have your wallet.”

“So when you put my ring on me, what did I put on you?”

He leans to the side, fishing something out of his front pocket, and hands me a small bread tie.

“Where the fuck did we get that?”

“You stole it off a loaf of bread at a corner store.”

“Jesus Christ.” I grab my head, shaking it in incredulity. I hand the bread tie back to him and let out a deep breath. It seems that drunk me was quite the romantic as well as a thief.

I wonder what my dad will say when we get home and break the news. The last time he saw me, I was single, and now I’m coming home married to one of his club brothers.

Holy fuck, I’m in trouble.

Aside from the low bass from the radio, Ringer seems to be comfortable sitting in silence. I can't say I'm the same. Anxiety creeps up my chest, and my neck feels like it's on fire. The nausea of last night's indulgences is gone, but now the fear of what's to come when we get home is making me feel queasy.

All my life, I would've given anything to be married to this man. But now, as an adult, is this really something I want? And is this how I really wanted it to happen?

"What happens now?" I work up the courage to ask.

"With us?"

"Yeah."

"Well, when we get home, we tell everyone we got married."

My eyes widen, and my heartbeat thuds in my ears.

"Ringer, I don't know..." I mumble.

"What do you mean you 'don't know?' Lilah, we're married. Don't you think people will ask why you have a rock on your finger? Why we're living together?"

"Woah, woah, woah. Slow down," I scoff, putting my hands out. "Living together?"

"That's what people do when they're married, Lilah," Ringer says. I can tell by his tone he's getting agitated and I'm not sure whether it's with me or because we've been sitting in traffic for over an hour.

"You can't get mad at me when I was piss-drunk when we got married. Have I wished my whole life that you would marry me one day? Yes. But those were teenage dreams, Ring. I'm an adult now. I have a business to run. I have friends. I have—"

Ringer cuts me off with an icy stare. I can sense he's hurting, and it pulls at something in my chest. His voice drops as he says, "And you think being married to me will ruin all of that?"

“I didn’t say that.” I drop my head into my hands, feeling the tears burning in my eyes. “I just think this is all happening really fast, Ringer.”

“So what if it didn’t have to?” he sighs. “Please don’t cry.”

“What are you suggesting?”

Ringer reaches out, pulling my hand away from my face and lacing our fingers together. “What if it all didn’t have to happen so fast? What if we only told our dads and maybe Ghost? We could, I don’t know, date or something since you seem hell-bent on thinking we don’t know each other anymore. That’s bullshit, by the way, but I’ll respect it.”

“You want to date?”

“Sure. Fuck it.” He shrugs. “We can just relax on the whole ‘we’re married’ thing and just date for a while. Whenever you think you’re comfortable enough, we can either get married again with everyone involved, or we can just tell everyone we’re already married.”

“You seem pretty confident that that’s how it will end up.”

Ringer flashes me a bright smile with a wink. “Cause I am.”

“What about the living situation? You can’t move into my house without everyone asking questions.”

Ringer hums. “I guess I’ll just have to stay at the clubhouse. All by myself. While my wife is warming her own bed.”

I roll my eyes. “Don’t be so dramatic.”

“Can we have sleepovers?” he pouts.

“Ugh! Fine!” I relent.

I gasp in excitement as the brake lights from the car in front of us turn off. “We’re moving!” I squeal.

“Damn, babe. You might hurt my feelings if you act too excited about getting out of this car.”

The rest of the drive home, we steer the conversation away from anything serious. Ringer tells me about his plans to open a gym and how he wants to have somewhere for kids to go to let their aggravation out the right way instead of getting in trouble with their fists.

By the time he pulls the van into my driveway, I'm exhausted from the constant stop-and-go traffic.

My eyes widen as I see my dad working on his bike in the garage. I rip the ring off of my finger, sliding it into the side pocket of my purse.

When I catch the hurt in Ringer's eyes, a weird pang settles in my chest.

"I'll put it back on after I tell him," I whisper.

"It's no big deal," he says, forcing indifference and leaving the van.

Ringer meets me around the side of the van where neither of us is visible from my dad's point of view. Grabbing my head in his hands, he guides my face up to his. Pushing his lips against mine, he presses three rough kisses to my lips before letting go.

The look in his eye is so serious, yet sincere. It makes my heart ache. "Even if we're the only ones that know about it, you *are* my ol' lady, Princess."

Butterflies erupt in my belly. Growing up in the club, everyone always had my back because of my dad's position. But something about holding the title of an ol' lady, *his ol' lady*, has my heart constricting. I smile at him and nod.

ten

Lilah

“MARRIED!” my Dad’s voice bellows as I shrink into the chair at his dining room table.

I curse myself for deciding it was a good idea to tell our dads separately instead of together. In hindsight, together would’ve been better.

“What in the fuck were you thinking, Lilah? He just got out of prison!”

“I was drunk-”

“That’s not a fucking excuse, and you damn well know it! You are twenty-fucking-three, for God’s sake,” Dad interrupts, dropping into the chair across the table from me and lowering his head into his hands. He scrubs the heels of his palms into his eye sockets. “Jesus Christ.”

“I’m sorry,” I whisper.

“What the hell would your Nana say if she were here?” he asks, his voice croaking with emotion.

I rear back as if he slapped me across the face, and tears leak from my eyes. I straighten my spine before answering. “I think she’d be disappointed, but she also knew I’ve loved him for the better half of my life.”

“Fuck, Lilah. I know that. Fuck, we *all* know that. But that doesn’t make it right.” He shakes his head in denial. “He’s

been out of prison for, what, two weeks?”

I don't answer. When my dad gets into this kind of lecture mode, he isn't asking for answers. He wants to get everything off his chest, and then he'll be open for discussion at the end. He's all I have left. If I lose him over this, I will be devastated.

“You're my only kid, Lilah. I didn't even get to be there or walk you down the aisle. Or give you away? Fuck!” he yells with so much emotion that it breaks my heart, pounding his fist on the wooden table.

“What the fuck is Bones going to say?” he asks in frustration.

I continue to stare at the nick in the table in front of me as he rants. He's no longer yelling, but I almost think it would be better if he did. Instead, the pain in his voice has my heart threatening to rip into two.

When he hasn't said anything for a while, I drag my blurry gaze back to his, wiping my cheeks with my wrist.

“Do you still love him?” he asks softly.

I shrug, sniffing. “I don't know, Daddy. But we're going to find out.”

“What does that mean, baby girl?”

“It was a drunken bet,” I laugh, shrugging again. “Ringer bet on the roulette table and said he was buying a ring if he won, and well, he won.”

I pull my purse across the table, take the diamond ring from the side pocket, and slide it onto my finger. It's wild that it's only been on my hand consciously for a little over seven hours, but when it was in my purse, my finger felt naked. Now I feel whole again.

I hold my hand out for my dad to look at it, and satisfaction bubbles in my belly as he whistles while checking it from all angles.

“How much did he win? Goddamn.”

I let out a small giggle and pull my hand back. “I’m told a pretty penny.”

“And it looks like every penny was spent on that thing,” Dad says with approval. “You are worth every damn penny of that, Lilah. I hope you know that.”

“I try to be, Daddy. I try.”

He chuckles, still staring at the rock on my hand.

“We decided we’re only telling you and Bones for now, so I would appreciate it if you kept it hush-hush until we’re ready.”

“Of course, baby girl, but why?”

“Well, I think it’s an understatement to say that I kind of freaked out this morning. We decided that we’re going to continue to date until I’m no longer worried that we’re strangers again.”

“You two could never be strangers,” he scoffs, just like Ringer did when I suggested it.

“He was in prison for eight years, Dad. You also need to remember that even though all of you went to visit him all the time, he wouldn’t let me. I literally *have not* seen him in eight years, and a lot changes in that amount of time.”

“You’re still the same girl, Lile. Just a little bit older.”

“Well, we’re going to find out if he’s still the same guy.”

“Alright, baby girl. I’ll trust you. Is he going to be moving in?” Dad forces out with a cough, making me laugh.

“No. I told him we could maybe do sleepovers, but I think we’re just going to date for now.”

“Good idea.”

I reach across the table and take my dad’s hand in mine. “I’m sorry if I disappointed you, Daddy.”

He lets out a sigh and squeezes my hand back. “I’m not disappointed in you, baby girl. I’m disappointed that I wasn’t there. Every dad fears the day they give their baby away. But

at the same time, every dad prays for that day. They pray that the man they give her to is honorable and will love her just as they think she deserves.” He looks off into the kitchen and then nods. “The only thing that really hurts me in all this is wishing I would have been there.”

I push away from the table and walk around it so I can give him a hug. “I’m sorry.”

“Out of all the guys, I think Ringer is the only one I’d feel this way about. I don’t know if it’s because I’ve known how you’ve felt about him your whole life or if it’s because Nana threatened my life one day to not give you shit about your little crush.”

I groan at the smirk on my Dad’s face and roll my eyes. “I told her not to tell you!”

Dad’s boisterous laugh echoes throughout the kitchen, and he squeezes my shoulder. “If you don’t think that every fucking person in this family didn’t know about it, you’re crazy, baby girl.”

I feign annoyance and push back from the table with a huff. “Whatever.”

He continues to study me with a smile before sobering. “Promise me one thing?”

“Anything.”

“If you ever get married again, even if you remarry Ringer, for God’s sake, you tell me. I want to be there.”

“You’ve got yourself a deal,” I say with a wide smile, reaching across the table and shaking my dad’s warm hand.

Rounding the table, my big, scary biker dad pulls me up from my seat and envelopes me in one of his famous squeezing hugs. I grunt over the loss of air and giggle like a kid again. Before letting me go, he kisses the top of my head and tousles my hair.

I swat his hands away and make my way over to the fridge to get some water since most of my nerves have finally subsided. I’m still worried about how Bones and Ghost will

react to the news, but my dad was the most important thing to me. This didn't go nearly as badly as I thought it was going to.

Ever since it's just been Dad and me, I've always been so worried about upsetting or disappointing him. He's been the only constant in my life since I was born, and to upset him upsets me. If I took the time and explained it to a therapist, they would probably determine that deep down, I'm afraid he'll leave me just like Renee constantly did. But that's neither here nor there because my ass is not seeing a therapist for the shit Renee has done. That would give her the satisfaction of the win for fucking me up.

Dad leaves the kitchen with another kiss on the top of my head and tells me he plans to go to the gun range for the rest of the day. I decline his invitation and change my clothes before going to the bakery.

I never schedule myself to work on Sundays since we aren't open, but the rest of the crew comes in to clean or start on projects for the week. I make an appearance occasionally to take care of the ins and outs of running a business, typically holing up in my office to work on ordering and invoices.

I enter through the back door that leads directly into the kitchen. Allison smiles widely in greeting. "Hi! How was the wedding?"

I shrug and smile, not wanting to get into the shit show that was this entire weekend. "It was alright. How was everything here?"

"Great! We were busy as hell. Mikey's out front, cleaning."

I go to check my watch to see the time and notice that I'm still wearing my ring. My heart speeds up, and I drop my hand quickly, hidden behind the counter. Allison smiles at me curiously and then turns her attention back to the cake in front of her.

As carefully as possible, I wiggle the ring off my finger and shove it into the pocket of my jeans without her noticing.

Allison seems none the wiser, so I take a deep breath and walk through the kitchen and into my office.

Flipping the light on, I let out a groan at all of the paperwork I've been avoiding.

Even though I've been dreading it, it's just the thing I need to distract me from worrying about how the talk with Ringer and his family is going. That and, let's be honest, the anxiety from the fact that I got fucking married to Ringer this weekend.

It takes me two hours to finish one order that should've taken thirty minutes, but I can't stop thinking of everyone's reactions and what they would say.

It's no one's business but ours, but I can't lie and say I'm not scared shitless of the judgment from some that will come with the news of our nuptials.

I zone out, staring at the bulletin board hanging on the wall behind my desk, when the vibration of my phone against the wooden desk scares me out of my stupor.

Pressing accept and then the speaker function, I put the phone back on the desk in front of me. "Hello?"

"Hey, wifey," Ringer's playful tone filters through the speaker, causing butterflies to erupt in my belly. When my mind finally catches up with my environment, with my wide-open office door and Allison not far from it, I fiercely stab the volume down button on the side of my phone.

"What's up?" I lean back in my chair, blowing air through my lips to clear the hair from my face.

"Currently? Laying on the floor, staring at the ceiling," he chuckles.

"That sounds boring," I let a small laugh slip, even though my nerves are on fire waiting for him to spill the news of how his talk went.

"Eh. I've had enough excitement for one weekend." He clears his throat before continuing, "How'd your dad take the news?"

“Surprisingly well, believe it or not.”

“Seriously?”

“Yep,” I pop my lips on the ‘p.’ “He was obviously bummed that he wasn’t there, but I think he’ll let you live.”

“Fuck, I was honestly more worried about him more than my own damn family.” I immediately pick up the sadness in his tone and sit up a little straighter in my chair.

“Does that mean Bones and Ghost didn’t take it very well?”

“Dad took it just fine, said he could never imagine a better daughter-in-law. It’s my brother who’s a fucking prick.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah.” Ringer grunts, clearing his throat. “He broke into a whole lecture about me just getting out of prison and all that shit like I don’t fucking know I just spent eight fucking years there. Anyways, he just needs time to come around.”

Out of everyone, Ghost is the last person I anticipated having a problem with this. I’ve always looked at him like a big brother. I hope he isn’t mad at me.

“Are you okay?” I ask carefully.

“What, me? Of course. Why wouldn’t I be?”

“Just making sure,” I casually reply, even though I don’t believe him. Ringer has always looked up to Ghost. But then again, like my entire argument since this morning, that could’ve changed. I don’t know if Ringer feels the same about his brother as he always did because I don’t know adult Ringer.

“The main reason I called was to ask you a question. I figured you’d probably want a day or two, but when you’re ready, do you maybe want to go on a date?”

I let out a small laugh at the torture in his voice. The way he says it makes it sound like he’s afraid I’ll say no.

My cheeks start to burn as I realize my muscles are sore from smiling so much. “What’d you have in mind?”

“To be honest, I have no fucking clue,” he chuckles. “I don’t think I’ve ever been on a date.”

“Seriously?”

“I went to prison when I was 23, babe. Before that, I had no interest in dating. All I cared those days about was fucking and the club.”

A jealous mewl escapes my throat before I can stop it, and I immediately regret letting it slip.

“Hmm. Is that jealousy I hear?”

“Shut up,” I groan. “You said yourself you didn’t want to hear about anyone I’ve ever had sex with, so I’d like the same courtesy.”

“Touche. Fair enough. Although, I’ve been home a few weeks, and I don’t think you have to worry about it anyways. I don’t recognize any of these girls.”

“Good.” I ignore the joy that minor detail brings me and turn my attention back to the topic of him taking me on a date. “I haven’t been on many actual dates myself, but it doesn’t have to be anything formal. I just want to get to know you again,” I say carefully.

“So just hang out and do shit together?” he asks.

“Exactly.”

He blows a breath through the phone, and then a tight laugh escapes him. “Fuck, I’m glad you don’t want me to put on a fucking suit and take you somewhere fancy. That’s what I imagined when you suggested dating.”

A real laugh bubbles out of me, and I can’t control the cackle that erupts. “A suit! My God, can you imagine?”

“No. Not even a little. Which is why I was fucking worried!”

“Where the hell would we even go that you would have to wear a suit? Do you even own a suit?”

Ringer’s tone sobers. “No, but I’d buy one if I had to.”

More butterflies tickle my stomach. It's then that I also notice I've gone from doodling little spiral circles to signing 'Lilah Mack' over and over again on my scrap paper. I shake off the emotions the silly act erupts in my gut and roll my eyes.

"No suits. Let's just start with something small. Do you want to come by the bakery in the morning?"

"Will there be baklava?"

"I wasn't lying when I said it gets made daily!" I say with a grin.

"What are the odds I can convince you to make two pans?"

A blush hits my cheeks, and I press my cool hands against the warmth. "I think I could make that work."

A loud clang of metal pans hitting the floor in the kitchen pull me from the trance I seem to be in while talking to Ringer. "Shit. I gotta go. Come by around nine tomorrow?"

"I'll be there."

"Bye, Ring."

"Bye, Princess."

I toss my phone towards my purse, let out a groan, and force myself to my feet to face whatever disaster I'm going to find in the kitchen. With luck, it'll be something that will take time to clean up so I can further ignore the new changes in my life for a little bit longer. Because sooner or later, this will all blow up in my face. I just know it.

eleven

Ringer

IF I SAID that my dad and Ghost took the news of my and Lilah's marriage well, I'd be lying.

Pops took it pretty damn well. He was obviously shocked as fuck, but fine nonetheless. It was Ghost who was a fucking douche about it.

Never once in my life did I ever imagine getting into a screaming match with my older brother about who I married. I guess I can understand it was a shock. Fuck, it was a shock to me when I woke up and realized that the whole fucking thing wasn't just a drunken dream.

I haven't had any freedom in nearly eight years, and within two weeks of being told when to piss and where to step every second of the day, I'm reprimanded like a child again because of my choices.

I walked away from the conversation before I punched my brother in the fucking face.

Now here I am, lying on the cement floor of the garage, tinkering with my bike. After storming out of Pop's house, I sulked into the garage and called Lilah. As soon as she hung up, I threw all my energy into my bike.

It doesn't really need shit done with it. The guys took great care of it while I was away, but the mindless activity helps.

Boots crunching against gravel pull my attention away from where I'm tightening a bolt, and when I look up, I come

face to face with the object of my frustrations.

I cast a glance sideways as Ghost kicks a shop stool out and drops his big frame down onto it. We stare at each other for a beat before he lets out a loud sigh. I refuse to be the one to break the silence. He fucking pissed me off, and I won't give him the satisfaction of speaking first. He may be my big brother, but I don't fucking care.

Getting sick of waiting for him to say something, I turn my attention back to my bike.

After another sigh of frustration, Ghost breaks the silence. "You know I'm just trying to look out for you, yeah?"

"And?" I ask without looking his way.

"You just got out of fucking prison, Em."

"I'm well fucking aware, Kelan. As you and every other fucking person keep fucking reminding me." I shake my head, irritated. "You aren't the one that was locked in that fucking joint for eight years. *I* was."

"What I'm trying to get at is think of the reason you were there in the first place."

"Again, I am well aware of why I was there. Thought about it every day for 2,864 days."

"You know I love Lilah like she was blood, but why the fuck would you want to go and marry the reason you were arrested?"

"Did Lilah arrest me?" I ask, looking my brother directly in the eye.

He shakes his head.

"Did Lilah force me to beat the shit out of that kid? Did she hold me at gunpoint? Did she call the cops on me? Did she come behind me and kill the kid when I wasn't looking?"

Ghost continues to stare at me, his eyebrows scrunching in with my rhetorical questioning.

"Let's pretend for a minute that it wasn't Lilah I was protecting that night. Let's pretend it was some other girl at

that party that I saw getting taken advantage of, and it had the same outcome. Would you be so pressed to give me shit about marrying Lilah?”

“But it *was* her, Em.”

“I don’t give a fuck, Kelan.” I toss the wrench down with a clang and push myself off the floor before glaring at Ghost. “Are you telling me that you’ve blamed Lilah all these years for me going away?”

His slight hesitation is all the answer I need. My brother, the guy who is always so sure of himself, who I’ve always looked up to until right now, stumbles over his words. “No.”

At my glare, he pushes out another sigh, dropping his head back.

“Not on fucking purpose. But I’d be lying if I said I didn’t blame her in the back of my mind. I never treated her any differently, Emmett. It’s fucking Lilah. I could never. But yes, I do blame her.” Kicking the chair out from under himself, he pushes to his feet also. “How the fuck could I not? What the fuck was she even doing at that party in the first place, Em? She was fifteen, for fucks sake.”

“Which is exactly why we followed her there.”

“Exactly my fucking point, Emmett! If you never would’ve followed her there, you never would’ve fucked up your life.”

I shake my head at my brother in exasperation. “My life isn’t over, Kel.”

“I’m not going to apologize for being worried about this.”

“That’s fine. But you are going to respect it. And you aren’t going to treat her like shit for it,” I growl.

“You know I’d never mistreat her.”

“That’s absolutely fucking right. You’re going to treat her like your brother’s ol’ lady.”

His eyes widen at the term, and he looks like he’s going to say something. He must think better of it because he snaps his

mouth closed and gives me a curt nod.

His ringtone blaring from his pocket breaks up the tension in the garage as he excuses himself to answer.

I turn back to my bike, cleaning up the small mess I made as the events of the weekend flow through my mind again.

Do I regret getting smashed and marrying the club princess? Regret is a big word. I decide I don't regret the act of marrying her. I regret the way it happened.

Lilah is the kind of girl that deserves the world. She deserves the white dress, the flowers, the party, and all of the attention that comes with it. She deserves more than some tacky Elvis on the second floor of a flashy casino.

My chest tightens at the thought that she deserves more than me. Better than me. What the fuck can I offer her?

I have no job, no house, nothing to fucking show for myself but a shitty record.

Fuck.

We may have made a mistake.

If I were a respectable man, I'd go over to Lilah's right now and offer her an out. Offer her an annulment if that's what she really wanted.

Good thing I'm not fucking respectable. Because if there's one thing about me, I'm fucking selfish.

twelve

Lilah

“WHAT THE HELL IS THAT!” I cackle as Ringer shows me a picture of an ugly werewolf thing on his phone.

“Seriously, babe. You really think I’d get that tattooed on me?” He throws his arm around my shoulder as we walk from the bakery to Flame’s tattoo shop. “I’m just fucking with you.”

“What are you getting? For real?” I whine. I hate surprises. When he said his tattoo was a surprise, I had a strange feeling it would be something that had to do with me. And that makes me fucking nervous.

“I’ll tell you. As long as you don’t say shit.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“You’re not allowed to try to talk me out of it. Or bitch about it.”

My eyebrows pinch in confusion.

Ringer sighs, stopping in his tracks and pulling his phone back out. He turns the screen to me.

I gasp.

“How did you get a picture of that?” I ask, seeing the picture of the small scrap of notebook paper taped to my mirror.

“When you asked me to run back upstairs to grab your jacket the other day, I saw it and took a picture.”

“Why would you want a tattoo of this?”

Ringer shrugs, shoving his phone back in his pocket.

“I want it too.”

“You do?”

I nod. The saying is something I say to myself in his voice every single day. It’s silly, really, but it’s always helped whenever Renee’s negativity slinks into my head.

“Does this count as a date, then? Matching tattoos?” Ringer jokes. I roll my eyes and push him to keep walking down the sidewalk.

The last few weeks have passed in a blur as Ringer and I have gone on date after date, if you can even call them that. We’ve been on no less than fifteen motorcycle rides into the city to do nothing other than just be together. We usually stop for dinner or ice cream before heading back home, where Ringer respectfully drops me off in the driveway, waiting for me to go inside.

The first day we went out for a ride, Ringer sent me an SOS text that he was nervous about seeing my dad in person.

For as long as I live, I will never forget the look of terror on his face as he walked up the driveway. You could see the sweat dripping off of him from down the block.

I almost peed myself when my dad made it seem like he was going to kill him. Ringer’s entire body almost fell to the floor when Dad burst out laughing.

I could have cried at the sight of my dad pulling Ringer in for a man-hug before shaking his hand.

Ringer and Dad both refuse to tell me what words were exchanged, but whatever was said allowed them to come to a mutual understanding.

To my disappointment, Ringer hasn’t stayed over yet. I haven’t flat-out asked him why, but I’m starting to get

impatient.

Ringer dropping his arm from my shoulder and lightly squeezing my ass through my leggings brings me back to the present.

He guides me through the glass door of the tattoo shop, and my eyes land on one of my newest best friends. My lips pull into a huge smile.

Bunny rushes forward, throwing her skinny arms around my neck.

I squeeze her back, vaguely hearing Ringer's deep chuckle in the background. "Hi to you too!"

Bunny pulls away, smiling so big her cheeks swallow her eyes. "I wasn't expecting to see both of you!"

Nerves bubble in my belly as Bunny looks at me, her gaze sweet yet curious. "Surprise! I was just wondering if you had time for another tattoo, after Ringer's, of course."

Bunny's eyes widen in excitement, and her smile gets wider. "I always have time for you! What's up?"

Anxiety creeps up my throat as I second-guess my decision. I glance over at Ringer. What if she catches on and thinks it's weird that Ringer and I get vaguely matching tattoos?

"Just tell her, babe," Ringer encourages with a gentle hand on my shoulder.

I roll my eyes at how silly I'm feeling.

"Well, the quote you're doing on Ringer, it's kind of like our thing. I was just wondering if you could put it on me, too?"

Her questioning eyes and next words immediately cause my anxiety to rise. "Like a matching tattoo?"

I tackle a deep breath and explain that I want it in a different font. Ringer loves the masculine one she's already drawn up on her tablet.

“Can I go first?” I ask, afraid that I’ll chicken out in the time that it takes her to tattoo Ringer.

“Of course,” Bunny agrees with a smile. She returns to the front desk and fiddles with her tablet for a few minutes.

I’m thankful for the loud music blaring Godsmack through the surround system. No one can hear the thundering drum that is the rapid beating of my heart.

Ringer drops onto the stool in the corner of what I assume is Bunny’s section.

A pink drawer set is pushed up against the wall and sits next to a small sink and counter space. A fluffy pink stool is pushed against a sizeable tattooing table covered in pink disposable paper.

I smile at the space and know this was every bit of Flame’s doing. It’s not surprising that he knows his girl is obsessed with pink and designed the space to fit her perfectly.

Bunny shows me a pretty cursive font that I love and positions me facedown on the table so she can access the back of my neck.

Ringer slides his stool flush with the side of the bed, and I jerk in surprise as he takes my hand and brings it to his lap.

From my position, I can tell that our linked fingers aren’t visible to anyone but us, but still, the thought of someone catching my hand in his draws butterflies into my gut.

As soon as Bunny starts in on the tattoo, her small voice pulls me out of my head. “Are you two going to tell me what this means?”

Ringer chuckles as I say, “Nope.”

“Well, that’s rude,” she giggles. “I guess I’ll still do it, though.”

Ringer chuckles before explaining to Bunny that it’s just always been our thing. He evades the question very well, if I do say so myself. As soon as he started talking, I was worried he was going to lay all of my insecurities about Renee out for her to see.

I don't like being vulnerable. Yes, I consider Bunny one of my closest friends, but I don't want her pity when she learns about my mommy issues. I don't like to be seen as weak.

Bunny is done with my tattoo in no time, and since it's on the back of my neck, Ringer has to take a picture of it for me to see it.

A pesky tear escapes my lid as I study the beautiful font. I turn to my friend and pull her into a tight embrace. "I love it. Thank you so much, Bunny."

She smiles with giddiness before she pulls away. When I look at her in question, she rolls her ankle and waves my concern off. "My legs just bother me after a while ever since, well, you know. I'll be fine!"

Flame finishes with a client just as Bunny finishes Ringer's tattoo on his forearm. He gives us both weird looks, grinning slyly as Bunny wraps his forearm up.

After leaving the tattoo shop, Ringer leads us back to my bakery. We closed hours ago, and the last of the bakers left a bit ago, so the place is empty apart from us.

I lead him into my office. When I turn to grab my purse, Ringer's strong hand wraps around my upper arm, stopping me from pulling my bag onto my shoulder.

I gasp in shock, dropping my bag to the floor as Ringer pushes his soft yet firm lips against mine.

I moan, leaning into his kiss. His lips brush against mine in the most delicate caress.

Talk about fucking butterflies. All of those anxious emotions have nothing on the feeling his gentle, teasing touches are stirring up inside me.

The most action I've gotten from him since getting home from Vegas has been a quick goodnight peck to the lips. To say I'm caught off guard is an understatement, but I'm not complaining in the slightest. Because *yum*.

Ringer lets out a grunt as I grab onto the openings of his cut, yanking him against me. It seems we both have a need for

control. He bites my bottom lip a little harder than usual, fighting for dominance before I nip back.

I whimper as he backs me up against my desk. The featherlight caress of his hands on my outer thighs has need pooling in my belly. Strong hands grip my thighs, and a second later, he's lifting me onto my desk, settling between my legs.

I break the kiss with a gasp and look down to where he's pressed against me. His jeans bulge deliciously. I drop my head back, rolling my eyes and moaning as he rolls his hips against my center, hitting me in just the right spot.

My thin leggings create no barrier between us. If he doesn't stop rubbing against me, I'm going to come in my pants.

"Fuccckk," I groan.

He drops his lips to my exposed shoulder, kissing gently before running his teeth along my flesh as he grinds his hips again and again.

My entire body trembles as he toys with me.

"Ringer," I moan.

"Princess?" he asks with the sexiest bedroom voice I think I've ever heard.

Fuck. When did he get so hot?

That's right. He's always been fucking delectable.

Ringer seems perfectly content to continue rubbing himself against me without going any further. Well, newsflash, buddy, goodnight kisses and dry humping in my office aren't enough for me.

Pushing my top half away from him, I rip my tank top over my head and throw it in the corner. I watch in amusement as Ringer's eyes sparkle in appreciation as he takes in my barely covered breasts through the thin lace bra.

"Touch me," I whisper.

I wait patiently for him to make the next move. He carefully caresses each breast with his fingertips, causing goosebumps to pebble my chest.

I can sense the second whatever reservations were holding him back give way. It's like a dam has burst when his lips attack mine forcefully, causing me to moan into his mouth. Parting my lips, I allow him entrance as his tongue curls around mine.

His fingertips clutch my hips almost painfully, and I moan against his lips.

He places openmouthed kisses down my neck, leading a trail between my breasts before sucking a nipple into his mouth, lace and all. I gasp as he takes the other one between his lips. Wanting to feel the heat from his mouth unobstructed, I rip my bra down and let a loud moan out as he latches on.

A strong hand wraps around my waist as he lifts my hips off the desk, pushing my leggings down with his free hand. Setting my bare ass back on the wood, he wastes no time running the tips of his fingers through my folds. We groan simultaneously, me because he's finally touching where I so desperately need him, him when he realizes how wet I am.

"Fuck, Princess. So wet for me," he purrs as he sucks in a breath. He pushes one finger inside me, sliding right in without protest.

My toes curl as he slowly works his digit in and out of me, adding another before curling inside, rubbing that special spot just right before taking my nipple back between his lips.

Every time I let a moan out, Ringer responds with his own intoxicating groans as if he's getting pleasure simply from *giving* me pleasure.

Each time I feel close to shattering, he eases his fingers out of me. I could smack the little smirk right off of his face with every interrupted orgasm.

"Not yet, Princess." he kisses my shoulder again, licking a path up to my ear. "You don't come until I say you can."

"Please," I whimper as his thumb brushes my clit.

Before I know what's happening, Ringer drops to his knees in front of me, and I let out a scream as he latches onto my clit, my eyes rolling to the back of my head.

Fuck, I could get used to this.

thirteen

Ringer

EATING LILAH'S pussy has easily become one of my favorite activities. She blossoms under my touch so beautifully. Her chest blushing and the satiated look that crosses her features as she comes down from her orgasm are enough to have my own release seeping out of me.

I don't dare come before I'm inside her, though.

Licking her juices from my lips, I push off the ground and settle between her legs once again.

Lilah's eager hands reach out to release my dick from my jeans. I groan as she pushes them down and chuckle at her impatience when she tries to jerk me forward by wrapping her legs around my hips.

"You want my dick, baby?"

Lilah whimpers, biting her lip. I love the innocent look she tries flashing my way through her lashes. That shit isn't working with me. I know the vixen is hiding deep inside.

Wrapping my hand around her neck, I guide her lips back to mine. Her breath hitches as I nudge the tip of my cock against her pussy.

"Please," she cries.

"Please, what?"

Digging her heels into my ass, she groans loudly. "Ringer! Just fuck me already!"

I chuckle, squeezing the base of her neck. “Yes, ma’am.”

I jut forward, effectively impaling her on my cock. Our mutual sounds of satisfaction fill her small office.

Lilah drops her head back to reveal the smooth skin of her neck. I can’t control myself as I reach forward, latching onto the skin at the base of her throat. I suck, and her pussy convulses in response, leading me to do it again.

I release her as I start to thrust in and out of her to the hilt. I smirk in satisfaction as I notice the purple-red mark taking real estate at the base of her throat.

I’ve marked her, and the thought of that has something primal rising up inside me.

I continue to fuck her as she moans and screams each time I stroke deeply into her.

“Ringer,” she whines.

Latching onto her nipples, I suckle them as I run my thumb along her clit in tandem with my strokes.

“You want to come?”

“Please!” she screams.

Lilah is always beautiful, but there is something to be said about her features twisted in pleasure. I want to take a picture and keep it forever.

I smile to myself as I feel the ring I put on her finger dig into my wrist as she squeezes me.

She must have put it back on sometime between the shop and here.

I like that.

Thinking of her wearing that ring and *belonging* to me makes me thrust into her harder. Her short whimpers turn into panting breaths as her tight pussy squeezes the shit out of my cock.

“Come for me, Lilah.”

My words have her exploding against me on my next thrust, her walls milking my own release out of me.

I hold Lilah in my arms silently, our breaths fighting to return to normal.

I drop a kiss against her forehead as I slowly pull out, groaning at the sight of my come dripping down her slit. Lilah moans as I use my finger to scoop it up and push it back inside her.

A small thought in the back of my mind gives me pause. We've fucked quite a few times now, and there's really no telling how many times I finished inside of her on our wedding night. But never once have we had the condom discussion.

“Babe?”

“Yeah?” Lilah answers, her gaze fluttering up to mine through her lashes.

“Are you on birth control?” I wince as her eyes widen, and she sits up a little straighter. “I never even thought to ask, and I obviously haven't wrapped up.”

Even with the thought of her not being on anything with no protection between us, I continue to push my release back inside her.

“I have an IUD, so we're okay.”

I let out a relieved breath and kiss her again. “Good, because fucking you raw feels way too fucking good to stop.”

Her giggles have me relaxing further. After a small sigh of relief, I grab a tissue from the box on the corner of her desk and clean her up.

Hopping off her desk, she collects her panties and leggings from the ground. I smile at her like a loon as we both dress in silence. As soon as she settles her tank over her stomach, I lean down and kiss her lips one last time.

Grabbing her hand, I tap her ring. “I like this.”

“The ring? I sure hope you like it. You spent a small fortune on it.”

“I don’t give a shit what the ring looks like or costs. I like that you’re wearing it.”

“Oh,” she blushes, looking at her outstretched hand. “I like it, too.”

“Come on, let me feed you before we have to head to the club.”

“The club?”

“It’s Wednesday,” I say as I take the keys from her and lock the bakery behind us.

“Oh, I didn’t know we were going.”

“Pops asked if I was coming, and I don’t want to go without you.”

I look up as she stops short in front of me on the sidewalk. I almost plowed right into her.

“You don’t want to go without me?” she asks with furrowed brows.

“Why would I want to go to a strip club without you? It’s not like I’m going to fuck any of them.”

Lilah rolls her eyes with a slight smirk on her lips. “You’re such a romantic.”

I’m careful not to get overly touchy with her on the way to the diner since I’m not sure who could be watching around the plaza, and I fucking hate it. Everyone would know that Lilah belongs to me if it were up to me. She would wear my ring every day without fear of who would see it on her finger, and I could kiss her whenever the fuck I wanted.

I frown as I watch Lilah slip said ring into her pocket as I open the door to the diner. I’m trying my fucking hardest to respect her wishes, and I school my features, not showing how irritated that simple act makes me.

A young girl bounces back to the hostess stand, and Lilah smiles at her sweetly. “Hey, Lucy! It’s just the two of us.”

Lucy eyes me up and down, and I smirk as a blush lights her cheek.

I pretend to ignore the whole situation as Lucy drops our menus on a booth against the front window. Lilah lets out a squeak of surprise when, instead of sitting across from her, I slide into the booth next to her.

Lucy smiles before scurrying back to her post.

I drop my arm across the back of the booth and smile down at my wife. She stares back at me inquisitively. “Problem?” I ask, raising one eyebrow.

She shakes her head before dropping her eyes to the menu. I know for a fact that she already knows every item on the menu by heart. It’s been the same exact menu since she was a baby. But I’ll allow her the reprieve.

I don’t even bother opening mine as I finger through the soft chunk of her hair that rests on my outstretched hand. I strum my other fingers along the table.

Claire ambles up to us and smiles widely when she realizes who is in her booth. “Well, well. What can I do for you two?” she smirks knowingly.

“You know what I want,” I say, flashing her a boyish smile.

“Yes, yes, roast dinner.”

Lilah snaps her menu closed and smiles at Claire. “I’ll have the same.”

“Alright, sugar. I’ll be out with your drinks soon.”

Lilah loosens up under the light graze of my fingertips across her shoulder, and when she turns to face me, I groan with a wince at the hickey I’ve left on her neck.

I know for a fact she isn’t going to like that shit, but fuck if it doesn’t make me happier than hell to see that I’ve marked her for everyone to see.

Even if no one knows we’re really together, they’ll know to back the fuck off because someone else has a claim on her.

It isn’t until we’re done eating when Lilah comes back from the bathroom, face scowling at me, that I know she’s

seen the purpling bruise on her neck.

I smile playfully, tapping her ass as I follow her out of the diner to my bike.

“Relax, babe. You’re 23. People know you fuck.”

“Okay, but no one knows that *we* fuck!” she shrieks, causing me to belly laugh as we come to a stop next to my ride.

“Is it so bad if people knew we fuck? It may ease them into the whole marriage thing eventually, yeah?”

Lilah contemplates what I said as she quickly braids her hair and lowers her helmet over her head. Settling down behind me and wrapping her arms around my waist, I feel her sigh. Before I can kick over the engine, her silky voice makes me pause. “I guess it wouldn’t hurt to let people assume. But I don’t want you openly telling people.”

I bring her knuckles to my lips and kiss them before putting them back in place against my abs. “Deal.”

With that settled, I start the bike and take off.

An hour later, we’re sitting in the club, and it’s fucking killing me not to be able to have her in my lap. It’s hard not to address the sexual tension with naked women parading around the room. It isn’t that I want to fuck any of them. In fact, that’s the furthest thing from my mind. No, it’s because the woman I want to be fucking at all times is practically acting like I don’t exist for fear of someone figuring us out.

It pisses me the fuck off.

I shove myself off the chair and head towards the bar as Lilah laughs and carries on with Sasha and Razor near the stage. Lilah hasn’t had a sip of alcohol to drink, but I can’t say the same for me. The alcohol helps to soothe the possessive demon inside of me that rages when it comes to Lilah. Or maybe it’s making it worse. Who fucking knows. Regardless, I order another round.

While waiting for my drink, I watch as Ghost walks over to the group and socializes. I can feel Lilah’s tension from all

the way over here as her eyes follow my brother.

Collecting my drinks, I push my way back across the club to where she sits.

Lilah jumps with a start when I drop down to squat in front of her.

“What’s wrong?” I ask. The music is low enough that I don’t have to scream for her to hear me.

“Nothing,” she says, taking the glass of ice water I offer her.

“Bullshit, Lilah. You’ve been smiling since we walked in, but the second my brother sat down, you looked like you were about to cry.”

Her gaze snaps over to Ghost before settling back on mine. The moisture in her eyes has me feeling murderous. “He hates me now, doesn’t he?”

Her question has my jaw clenching, and I push up from my spot in front of her. Stepping around the back of my brother’s chair, I tap him on the shoulder. “I need a word.”

I follow behind him as he strides toward the bar. I don’t give a fuck how fucking pissed my brother is at me. I don’t give a fuck if he hates the idea. But I will *not* sit back and allow him to disrespect my fucking woman.

Lilah

I was fine when Ringer led me into the club.

I was fine when I sat down with Sasha and Razor.

I was fine watching all of the beautiful women parade around and gyrate on stage.

I was fine when my dad, Sasha, and Bones gave Ringer and me knowing looks as we walked up to the group.

I was fine when Ringer threw a minor fit due to my neglect of attention towards him.

I was *fine*.

Until I wasn't.

Nervousness and anxiety annihilate my system as Ghost joins our group. His deep voice sends chills wracking through my body. I can see him out of the corner of my eye from where I'm sitting. First, he drops his overly large paws on his dad's shoulders. Then he makes his rounds of the group, just like any leader should.

I avert my gaze back to the stage as he comes to a stop at Razor. Ghost drops down into the seat on the other side of him, and my heart pounds as he strikes up a chat. He obviously has no plans of leaving anytime soon.

At one point in time, I may have looked up to both Ringer and Ghost like big brothers. Obviously, that didn't last long with Ringer, but Ghost has *always* been my unofficial brother.

One of my main protectors.

For the entire time that Ringer was away, Ghost was there for me if I needed help, and my dad wasn't cutting it.

Ghost helped me build my bakery. Ghost helped me start my business. Ghost has been my cheerleader and my confidant for eight years.

And what have I done for the last three weeks since I came home from Vegas after marrying his brother?

Ignore him.

Avoid him like the plague.

I am *terrified* of the disappointment I just *know* I'm going to find in his gaze. I'm not used to a disappointed Ghost. I'm used to a big teddy bear with a dorky smile on his overly handsome face.

When Ringer drops down in front of me, I'm forced to look up as he questions me about Ghost. When I do, I'm mortified as I realize Ghost's hardened eyes are locked straight

on Ringer and me. My eyelids flutter closed, and I let out a nervous sigh as I run my fingers along the condensation on my glass.

Ringer pushes up and takes a few steps to his brother. I can't tear my eyes away.

He left me here alone to worry over what he's saying to his brother in my defense.

Get a grip, Lilah.

Lyric's beautiful body is dancing on the stage right in front of me as she slowly removes her clothing. We could be the only ones in this club, but I still wouldn't be able to focus on her curves.

The toe of my Doc Marten sticks against the floor as I bounce my knee up and down. I'm a bundle full of nerves. Nearly seconds away from bolting out of here.

An internal scream fills my mind as a large body drops into the chair on my other side. My gaze whips over to a stern-faced Ghost.

I drop my gaze down to my lap and freeze.

After what feels like forever, I work up the courage to bring my eyes back to his. My body immediately relaxes when I find a soft smile pulling at his lips.

"I'm not mad at you, Princess," Ghost says, reaching over and taking my small hand in his. "Whatever the fuck Ringer told you about what was said that day had absolutely nothing to do with you."

"Oh," I grunt. I don't really believe him, but I decide to listen to whatever he has to say.

"Look at me, babe."

I bring my eyes back to his and search for the sincerity in his voice to match.

"I just don't want to lose my brother again," Ghost says, the pain clear as day in his voice.

Ghost blames me for his brother going to prison.

I get it. I blame myself too.

A knot forms in my throat, and no matter how hard I try to force it down, it won't leave.

My head jerks in a small nod as I try to settle the tremors threatening to wrack my body.

Don't cry.

I knew people blamed me, even if no one admitted it out loud. For years I've felt like, deep down, everyone blamed me for going to that party. If I wouldn't have gone, Ringer wouldn't have followed me there and, in turn, wouldn't have gotten in that fight that accidentally killed that kid.

Ghost must recognize the panic in my demeanor because he pulls me closer to him. "I'm not mad at you, Lilah. Look at me."

If I look at him, he'll see the tears in my eyes. If I look at him, he'll see right through me, like he is able to see through everyone. It's his gift. It's why he's so good with people. He can read anyone.

Not giving me a choice, Ghost draws my face to his with a ringed finger nudging my chin.

He winces at what he finds in my eyes, cursing under his breath.

"What's wrong, Lilah?"

"I just don't want you to hate me." I throw my hands up in front of my face. "I don't want *anyone* to hate me for this."

"Do you regret it?"

"What, marrying your brother?"

"Going to the party."

My eyes widen in shock at the question. "Every single day of my life, Ghost."

"Okay, do you regret marrying my brother?"

I pause, but not because I regret it. No, I pause because I *don't*.

I turn a large smile at my husband's big brother. "No, I don't."

"Then I'm happy for you." I can sense a but coming, and I don't like the anxiety it causes. "And I'm happy for him, but I'm not going to go easy on him, Lilah. Think about it. You were just a kid when he went away. I know you guys were thick as thieves, but you are two different people now. I don't want to see either one of you getting hurt. *Especially* you."

Now I really am panicking. "You think Ringer will hurt me?"

"I think with the way you feel about him, he's more than capable."

"But you think he *will* hurt me?"

"I hope he proves me wrong, Lilah. I don't want to be forced into picking sides because you know who I'll have to pick."

"So that's why you're so upset? Because you know he's going to fuck up?"

Ghost shrugs, and for the first time in my life, I feel anger at him.

"I think you aren't giving him enough credit. If he hurts me, so what. That won't change the fact that I'm a part of this family. If Ringer hurts me, I will give you the full satisfaction of telling me you told me so, but I'm going to laugh in your face when it doesn't happen."

His eyes squint, probably because I've never spoken to him the way I just did. I've never raised my voice. I've never had to.

I push off the chair and turn towards him, steeling my spine. I lean down, squeezing him in a bear hug, and pinch his ear. "I love you, Ghost. But do me a favor? Unless I come to you for help, stay the fuck out of our marriage."

I pull back and nod in satisfaction when Ghost's shoulders shake with his laughter. "Love you too, kid. For all that it's worth, I think you'll make him happy."

“I sure as shit hope so.”

fourteen

Ringer

“FUCK, LILAH, PICK UP YOUR FUCKIN’ phone,” I growl, listening to her ringback.

This afternoon, we were all gathered around one of the current projects taking up space at Dad’s garage when Horse left to go eat lunch with his wife. This led me to the idea of heading to the bakery to see if Lilah possibly wanted to grab something to eat with me.

I didn’t realize until after I left the diner with her that I had left my phone at the garage. We left in different directions, her to go back to the bakery and me to my bike.

When I got back to the garage and realized that the only ones that were left there were guys that weren’t a part of the club, dread immediately pooled in my gut.

If I had been paying better attention, I would’ve noticed that fuckwad Beau’s facial expressions changed when I walked up to the open bay. An older guy that my dad has known longer than I’ve been alive, Gus, meets me at the entrance.

“Ring, your dad and the guys all left and headed toward the hospital twenty minutes ago.”

“The hospital? What happened?” I start searching for my phone and find it lying against the workbench I was using.

When I flip the device over, the screen lights up, and I notice all of the missed calls and texts. Panic sets in.

I hit the latest call, who happens to be my brother, and press it to my face.

I nod back to Gus, taking off in a jog towards my bike, waiting for Ghost to answer.

“Ring,” Ghost answers, sounding out of breath. “Where the fuck are you?”

“I’m on my way. I forgot my phone at the shop. Is it Dad?” The thought of something happening to my pops has me feeling murderous. I just got my family back, and I can’t fucking lose them now.

“No, Dad’s fine. It’s Horse.”

“I’m on my way.”

I don’t wait for an explanation. I hang up the phone and take off towards the city.

The events of this morning have led to me pacing in front of the hospital, trying desperately to get ahold of Lilah.

I get her voicemail once again and kick the rock I was toying with. “Fuck!”

“Still not answering?” my VP asks from behind me.

“Nah. Tried calling her five times.”

“Sasha’s not answering either.”

“I left lunch with her right before I rushed here.”

He nods, worry twisting his whole face. I know it’s not his daughter that Reaper’s worrying about, but rather one of his best friends.

Reaper may be a little bit younger than my dad, Tank, and Horse, but that doesn’t mean the four of them aren’t as close as real brothers.

On his way home to eat lunch with Maggie, Horse got into an accident. He's currently in surgery to relieve some sort of internal bleeding. The rest of the club family is in the waiting room, waiting for news about our brother. Trigger took Pebbles home after she had a small panic attack being in the hospital again, and Lilah isn't answering her phone. They are the only ones missing.

"I'm going to head over there. I don't like that she isn't answering," I admit.

Reaper nods, sliding his palms over his cheeks. "She's probably in the middle of decorating a cake. She gets into a trance, and the whole world escapes her."

"I'll bring her when she's ready."

I turn to head toward the parking lot before Reaper's deep voice calling my name stops me. "Be careful, brother."

"Always," I call back.

"Not just because my daughter will be with you either, kid. Be careful."

I nod with a wave.

The roughly thirty-minute drive from the city back to Desert Rose only takes me fifteen minutes as I fly down the highway. I don't even bother parking in the parking lot at the other end of the plaza and instead stop my bike along the street in front of the bakery.

I let out a breath as soon as I enter the kitchen through the back. Lilah's eyes whip up to mine from her place on the other side of the counter as she draws intricate flowers on a large cake.

"Ringer, what're you doing here? I thought you were going back to the shop?"

Lilah puts the frosting bag down on the counter, and if I wasn't so worked up from the emotions of the day, I'd eat up the fact that she strolls right up to me, greeting me with a kiss and a smile.

Wrapping my hands on both sides of her face, I press a kiss to her forehead, holding her against me and breathing in her intoxicating scent.

I'm thankful that she works her arms around my waist so I can hold her when I give her the news.

"There was an accident, babe."

Lilah pushes back from me, meeting my eyes. "What do you mean?"

"Horse got into an accident, and everyone's at the hospital."

Lilah's brows furrow, and she stammers over her words. Pushing the rest of the way away from me, she scurries around her kitchen.

"Why didn't anyone call me!" she yells tearfully.

"I called you seven times, Lile."

"What? No, you didn't!" she accuses.

I don't fight her as I realize how startled she is. We all are. I make my way around her kitchen with her, looking around for her phone.

"Your dad called Sasha too, and she wasn't answering either."

"I sent her home early because she wasn't feeling good." Lilah's small voice has my heart constricting in my chest.

Lilah stops short, and I almost run into her back as she spins around on me. "My office!"

I follow her to her office where she finds her phone lying on top of a stack of paperwork.

I wait for her as she runs to the front to let her employees know she has to leave.

On the way out to my bike, she turns to me. "Why didn't anyone call the bakery phone?"

"Honestly, babe, I don't think anyone thought of that."

“We need a better system for emergencies,” Lilah says, forlorn.

I wait for her to settle on the bike and secure her helmet before taking off towards the hospital.

Once we’re there, it’s like, once again, we don’t exist. Lilah leaves me to flank her dad’s side. He holds her in his embrace while she softly cries.

I want to fucking hold her.

I roll my eyes when I catch Ghost’s gaze as he watches me stew over my anger at being unable to comfort my wife.

This idea of not telling anyone fucking blows.

The whole club remains at the hospital until well after midnight, when Horse finally pulls out of surgery. The docs tell us he’s nowhere near being out of the woods.

There isn’t much for us to be doing in the waiting room. The only one allowed back to see him is Maggie.

After listening to Dad explain what is going on, I drop down in front of a sleepy Lilah. “Ready to go home?”

She nods with a yawn, turning to give her dad a kiss on his cheek. “Love you, Daddy.”

“Love you too, baby girl.”

Once out of the waiting room, Lilah allows me to wrap my arm around her shoulder, pulling her body into mine. I gather her small body in my arms and kiss the top of her head, breathing in her scent.

This is how it fucking should be. All the time. Not just when we turn corners and are free from others seeing us.

“You okay, Princess?”

“Hmm?” she asks, looking up at me sleepily.

My lip twitches at the gorgeous creature that has captured all of my attention. Even half asleep, dead on her feet, Lilah is breathtaking. “I asked if you were alright?”

Lilah's shoulder shrugs under my arm, and she lets out a sigh. "As long as Horse is okay, I will be."

Isn't that the fucking truth.

Pulling my bike into Lilah's driveway, I hold the bike steady with my booted feet on the ground. As Lilah's boots hit the pavement, she turns to me and presses a chaste kiss against my lips before pulling away and smiling down at me.

"Want to come up?"

I nod without a word. Lilah opens the garage, and I put my bike into park right next to one of Reaper's extras.

We make our way upstairs into her small apartment. I promise myself that, one day, I'm going to buy her the home of her dreams. Whatever it takes, I'll make it happen. But I don't dare say shit about it because it would just lead into her rant about whether we'll even work out or not.

I follow Lilah into the bathroom and invite myself to join her in the shower as we both shed our clothes before stepping under the steamy water.

Lilah looks up at me through her dripping lashes, her face full of emotion. I gather her in my arms and pull her head into my chest.

I try my best to ignore the steel rod that presses between us as I comfort her. Even though the timing is inappropriate as fuck, my girl is standing naked in front of me. That shit isn't going away.

"Turn around. Let me wash your hair," I tell her with a kiss on her forehead.

Lilah turns wordlessly, reaching for a purple bottle of shampoo on the shelf in front of her. She squeezes a dollop in my outstretched hand, and I go to work, massaging her head until every inch of her hair is covered in a soapy mountain. I guide her head back into the stream of water as I rinse the soap

out. Once her hair is clean, I wash her body, working her muscles just like I did her hair.

The moans and sighs coming from her lips really aren't helping my situation whatsoever.

"Thank you," she murmurs with glazed eyes. Lilah tries to return the favor, but I shake my head. That was all about her.

I quickly wash myself, keenly aware of Lilah's piercing gaze on my every movement. When I get to my dick, I take my time washing it. Her bottom lip disappears between her teeth for a brief second, and when she catches me watching her, she blushes.

"I can't look at my husband?"

"Baby, you can look whenever the hell you want." I shake my head with a soft chuckle. "Shit, for that matter, you can touch it whenever you want."

She rolls her eyes, turning to shut the water off. "I tried, and you said no."

"I never said you can't touch me. I just wanted to take care of you. I didn't do it because I was looking for something in return."

"Can't I take care of you too?" she asks sassily as she saunters out of the bathroom.

"Touche."

I dry off and toss my towel into the laundry basket in the corner.

I stop dead in my tracks as I step into Lilah's bedroom. The sight that greets me is one of my all-time favorite fantasies.

Lilah lays on her back, knees bent and spread wide, feet planted on the edge of her bed, displaying her entire body for my hungry eyes to devour.

How the fuck did I get to be the one to see her this way? How did we get here? I'm fucking obsessed with her. There's no way in hell I will ever let her go.

I take my time inspecting every delectable inch of her flawless skin. When I eventually stop on her eyes, the lust I find staring back at me nearly brings me to my knees.

Lilah leans up on her elbows, and I can tell she's worried about my lack of movement. Hell, I don't even know why I'm still standing here.

She cocks her head to the side, waiting for me to make a move. When I still haven't budged, she brings her hand to her center and spreads herself, giving me a better visual. As soon as her small finger rubs her little nub and she drops her head back in pleasure, I'm across the room.

I drop to my knees in front of her, swatting her hand out of the way. The little vixen giggles as she drops down to her back with a bounce.

The laugh dies on her lips as I run my tongue along her slit, releasing with a loud pop. I throw her legs over my shoulders as I place kisses along the lips of her pussy. Lilah squeals as I flick my tongue along her clit over and over. I smile against her as she starts to squirm under my touch. The flavor that is only her is easily becoming my favorite taste in the whole fucking world.

I push up, hovering above her as I look into her eyes. "Do you want to come?"

Lilah's eyes roll to the back of her head as I run my fingers through her folds. "Please!"

"Are you sure?"

"Ringer! Please!" she begs, her legs beginning to shake against their place on my shoulders.

I take my hand away, massaging her thighs as she groans in frustration. "I don't think you're ready yet."

"What!" she shouts.

I chuckle as I drop back down and swirl my tongue all over her, avoiding her clit. The hitch in her breath every time I get close to it sends satisfaction coursing through me.

“Ringer,” she begs. Trailing my eyes up her body, I catch her watching me.

I run one hand up her taut stomach, gliding my fingertips over her pebbled nipple. Her fucking tits are perfect. She shudders against me as my hand engulfs the full globe.

Her cries are music to my ears. With one hand at her breast, I finally appease her by nudging her entrance with a thick finger. Stroking it in her tight embrace, I add a second digit as she relaxes.

“Fuck, Ringer. Please,” she whimpers.

“You’re beautiful when you beg,” I smirk up at her. “I’m going to ask you again. Do you want to come?”

“Fuck! Yes!”

Pinching her nipple in one hand, curling my fingers inside her with the other, and latching onto her clit, my ears are met with the most beautiful screams as her body seizes and trembles beneath my touch.

Her thighs clamp down on the sides of my face as the aftershocks of her climax die down. I press gentle kisses against her skin as I work my way up her body. Her eyes remain closed from her pleasure. I hover above her and nip at the silky skin on her breasts. The beaded tips of her nipples beg for attention, and I am just the fucking guy to give it to them. I circle my tongue all over her before sucking the tips into my mouth.

“Mm,” I groan against her as I feel her small hand wrap around my cock.

Kissing my way up her neck, I can’t control my hips as they grind into her clutch. She peeks up at me through her lashes, and blush stains her cheeks. “You’re way too good at that,” she whispers with a moan as I suckle her skin.

“What’s that?”

“Going down on me,” the tremble in her voice is cute as fuck.

“You mean eating your pussy?”

I chuckle as she rolls her eyes and swats at my chest. “Yes, that.”

“Best meal I’ve ever had.”

She peers through her eyes at me as if she doesn’t believe me, and my thoughts are proven correct when she rolls her eyes again. “Whatever.”

“I’m serious.” I take hold of her hand that is loosely wrapped around my cock and squeeze it, causing her hand to squeeze me. “Feel that?”

At her nod, I smirk. “That should prove to you that I’m not fuckin’ lying.”

She nods again, and I lean down to her, taking her mouth in a searing kiss. For once, she doesn’t fight me for control as she lets me dominate the kiss. I guide her hand to skate over my hardness just the way I like as I swallow down her small moans.

“Fuck,” I groan as she drags her thumb over the head of my cock, gathering the small bit of precum settled at the tip.

“Mm,” she moans, enticing me further as she teases her fingers down my length to my sac. I almost come in her hand as she fondles my jewels, massaging them softly.

I break the kiss and swat her hands out of the way, causing her to look up at me. Taking my cock in my hand, I smooth the head through her slit, bumping into her clit, causing her to moan and tremble beneath me.

Her hands cling to my upper arms as she anticipates the intrusion into her pussy.

I bring my mouth back to hers, feeling her fingernails digging into my skin as I nudge her entrance. Pushing in only the head of my cock at first, I tease her opening until a hitch in her breath hits my lips, urging me to sink into the hilt.

Our mutual groans fill the room. “Fuck.”

“So full,” Lilah wheezes.

Pulling out a few inches and fucking her ever so shallowly, I develop a rhythm that I can tell is driving her crazy as her hips try to meet my slow thrusts from underneath me.

Lilah's small fists release my arms and come up to my chest, pushing her weight against me. I lift up, only for her to catch me off guard by spinning us completely and landing me flat on my back.

I let out a small grunt as Lilah drops herself down, swallowing my entire length inside her. "Fuck!" I shout. She doesn't give me any time to adjust to the new position as she grinds her hips against mine, effectively holding me captive.

The control she possesses over my pleasure is hot as fuck. I catch my breath and relax back against her pillow as I watch the hunger in her eyes turn molten as she chases her release.

Taking her hips in my hands, I dig my feet into the mattress as I fuck into her from beneath. Her moans reach a deafening level. I watch in triumph as her entire body stills, and she gasps as release crashes into her.

The muscles of her pussy constrict against me in waves, drawing out my own release. Clutching onto her hips, I grunt and pull her down as far as I can on top of me while every single drop of my come bathes her insides. Pushing off of the bed, I wrap my arms around her small waist.

"Holy hell." Lilah gasps for breath as she returns my embrace by dropping her arms around my shoulders. I press a kiss between her cleavage and hold her as our breathing returns to normal.

After cleaning both of us up, I gather Lilah back into my arms, rolling us so her back is to my front. Lilah giggles as I lift my arms and clap to turn off the lights, bathing us in darkness.

"Goodnight, Princess." I press a kiss on the back of her head.

"Goodnight."

fifteen

Lilah

THE WEEKS FLY by in a blur of spontaneous dates, Wednesdays at The Castle, and motorcycle rides.

It's hard as hell acting as if we're just friends around the club. I'm starting to regret being the one to decide to hide our relationship. I can see Ringer's eyes drift to my ring finger every time we're together, and I damn well know he's hoping I just leave it on one day for everyone to see.

I screwed up royally and forgot to take it off one morning. Luckily, Sasha was the only one to see it. It happened one morning when it was just the two of us at the bakery. All it took was a smirk from her in the direction of my hand, and I knew.

I wouldn't have even been wearing my ring if Ringer hadn't stayed over the night before. We got into a small argument about my wearing it. Out of respect for him, and for me trying to see if this whole thing with us will actually work, I always wear it when it's just the two of us.

Although we still aren't telling anyone about our Vegas marriage, we have given up trying to avoid each other at the club. I'm pretty sure most people have caught us either in a corner making out like teenagers or dropping each other's hands a little too late.

Ringer and I have also discovered our insane need to fuck in the most outlandish of places. I was mortified when my dad almost caught us in the bathroom at the club. I would have

died if he had walked in just a moment earlier when Ringer had me bent over the sink, plowing me from behind.

This leads us to today. Brenna called me for lunch, and I'd been so preoccupied with 'dating' Ringer I haven't had much time to hang out with my friends. I instantly said yes.

"You're going to the studio for Pebbles' surprise today, right?" Brenna says from across the booth from me at Maggie's diner.

Bunny, a.k.a. Brenna, decided she didn't want to go by her fake name anymore, taking us all by surprise. I find it particularly hard to keep my relationship with Ringer a secret from her, and as we sit and chat at the diner, I yearn to tell her. It kills me every time we talk not to blurt the words.

"Yep! I'm actually going to finish some desserts to bring when we're done here. Trigger asked me to make a bunch."

"Do you think they're going to be okay?" Brenna asks, her eyes falling to the table in front of her.

Brenna told me what happened to her and Pebbles over lunch shortly after that awful night. My heart broke for Pebbles, who has such a big heart and just wanted to help her new friend out, and for Brenna, since she has to live with what happened. Even though no one blames her, and she wasn't at fault in any way, you can tell in her eyes that she will always point the finger of blame solely at herself.

"I haven't seen her at all. Ringer said she was at the hospital but left before I got there," I say before blowing on a steaming spoonful of French onion soup.

"Have you talked to her?" Brenna asks, meeting my eyes in curiosity.

I nod. "We text once in a while. We send each other Tik Toks mostly. I send her anything with twins, and she sends me a lot of baking videos."

Brenna nods, once again dropping her eyes. I reach across the table and take her hand in mine. "Just give her time, yeah? You guys were instant BFFs. It'll all be okay."

A tear leaks out of her eye, and she swats it away. “Ugh! Look at me. I’m acting silly. I thought I’d feel better with my sister and grandma here, but I don’t think the guilt will ever leave.”

“Is having them here going okay?”

Brenna was raised in a cult and was to be married to the sixty-something-year-old leader at the age of 16. The psycho that kidnapped Pebbles, thinking she was Brenna, was his son. His father had died, and he had gotten the insane idea that Brenna now belonged to him.

Long story short, that psycho blew up and killed the entire cult, and the only survivors just so happen to be Brenna’s grandmother and her sister. Luckily, they were in the right place at the right time.

Flame surprised Brenna a few weeks ago by going to get them and bringing them here to live near her. They’ve moved into a small cottage behind Tank and Maria’s while they get settled and decide if they want to stay.

Brenna nods at my question with a genuine smile. “It is! I work a lot, so we do dinner with them whenever we can. They’ve met me here for lunch a few times. My sister even came to sit at the shop with me one afternoon. She wants me to give her a tattoo.”

“Brenna, that’s awesome! I’m so happy for you!”

She blushes, taking a drink of her soda. “Thank you.”

When I’ve almost finished my soup, Brenna’s voice breaks me out of my spicy daydream about how Ringer took me in the shower this morning. “Can I ask you a personal question?”

“Of course.”

“What’s really going on with you and Ringer?”

“Wha-”

Brenna cuts me off. “I’ve seen you guys, you know. You don’t have to lie to me. I won’t tell anyone.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about...” I try my best to hide my smile, but she catches it, pointing her finger at me.

“Ha! I knew it!”

“Shh! Keep your voice down!”

I cringe at how many onlookers around the diner have snapped their gazes to our small table.

Brenna grins knowingly, shrugging her shoulders. I’m happy that her sour mood has disappeared, even at my own expense.

“Tell me everything!”

I don’t. I can’t. So I tell her enough to placate her.

“We’re seeing where things go,” I shrug.

“But not telling anyone?”

“Absolutely not,” I tell her, looking straight into her green eyes. “You can’t say anything, even to Flame. We don’t want anyone to know yet.”

“Hmm,” Brenna says with a smirk, leaning back in the booth to cross her arms over her chest. “Is it going in that direction?”

“In what direction?”

“The good one,” she says while wagging her brows. I roll my eyes at her.

“You could say that.”

“Wait!” Brenna sits up straight and points at my neck. “I gave you guys matching tattoos! What do they mean? I knew something fishy was going on that day!”

I shake my head quickly. “No, ma’am. That’s between him and me. And I guess you could say we’ve been back and forth since he came home.”

“What! That’s been forever now! How have you been hiding it all this time?”

“I don’t know,” I shrug. “Like I said, we’re kind of keeping it low-key for now.”

“Have you talked about when you’ll tell people? Is it getting serious?”

If only she really knew *how* serious it already is. You can’t get much more serious than being married.

I internally cringe as I watch Ringer and Flame push through the door of the diner. As soon as Flame’s eyes land on his woman, he saunters in our direction.

“Hey, baby,” Flame greets Brenna, leaning forward and giving her a kiss as he slides into the booth next to her.

A small feeling similar to jealousy takes over. For just a moment, I curse all the secrecy surrounding Ringer and me. If we were out in the open, Ringer would be able to press a kiss to my lips in greeting just like Flame does Brenna.

Ringer drops into the space next to me, causing me to scoot over to give him room. His arm comes down to rest on the back of the booth behind me, and his fingers fiddle with my hair in the back of my ponytail.

Brenna looks like the cat that got the canary as she watches Ringer’s fingers.

I try to pull away from his hands to no avail. He slides further into the booth, settling right next to me so our sides are plastered together. Leaning down, he presses his lips to my ear.

“Chill out, Princess. Flame already knows, and based on Brenna’s face, she knows too.”

I pull away to search his eyes. Ringer looks around the diner before turning swiftly back to me and pressing his lips firmly to mine. It’s like he read my mind and knew that I needed his lips on mine. The kiss takes my breath away. I’ll never know whether it’s simply because it’s him and he takes my breath away every time or because I’m finally at peace with at least Flame and Brenna knowing.

Ringer pulls back, pressing two more gentle pecks against my lips before turning back to our friends.

I roll my eyes with a smile when I turn back to Brenna, who has the tips of her babydoll pink fingers pressed against

her mouth. Her eyes are shining with joy.

“You guys are so cute!” Brenna exclaims excitedly.

Ringer drops his arm, this time over my shoulder completely, bringing my head in for a kiss against my hair. “Aren’t we, though?” Ringer says with a shit-eating grin, earning another eye roll from me.

His unapologetic affection towards me has my heart threatening to break through my ribs.

Flame hasn’t said anything, and I’m almost scared he feels the same way as Ghost, but when I look up into his eyes, I find nothing but happiness for his friend as he looks at us.

Looking down at my watch, I curse when I see that only an hour and a half until the studio party. “I don’t mean to cut this whole thing short, but unless you want your brother and Trigger to murder me for ruining the party, I need to get back to the bakery and finish up.” I tap on Ringer’s abs, signaling him to move so I can get out of the booth.

“I’ll see you guys in a little while?” I turn to Flame and Brenna and roll my eyes again, smiling at the giddiness consuming Brenna’s face. “Bye!” I call, leaving the diner.

I drown myself in work over the next half hour, stuffing cannolis with cream and icing bite-sized cupcakes when the door to the kitchen swings open. I look up and smile as my husband strolls through. *Bring Me to Life* blares through the speakers, and Ringer must know by now that I work best with the loud music surrounding my environment.

I cock an eye at him when he jumps up to sit on the counter across the kitchen as he watches me.

The music is too loud to chastise him. I finish the tedious task of putting the finishing touches on all of the desserts for today.

“Wake me up and saaaave me,” I sing along.

Every so often, I look up towards Ringer and find him watching me. His eyes on me have heat pooling in my lower

belly. But I don't have time for a quick romp in my office, so he and his smoldering stares are going to have to wait.

Once I frost the last cookie in the purple metallic frosting that Ghost picked, I meet his gaze and hit pause on the remote to the stereo.

“Watching you work is mesmerizing.”

I laugh. “Why?”

“You're beautiful when you focus. I could watch you all day.”

I can't control the blush that hits my cheeks. “Thank you.”

Ringer nods towards my flour-covered tank top. “Go change. I'll help you load all of this.”

Scurrying to my office, I change into the pair of jeans and top I brought specifically for this occasion. Ringer meets me at the doorway to my small office. “Ride with me?” he asks. Hooking a finger in my belt loop, he pulls me towards him, dropping his head down to seal a kiss against my lips.

“Let me just make sure Sasha is okay driving the van over.”

“Your dad is already here to ride with her.”

“Oh?”

I round the corner back into the kitchen and find my dad pressing Sasha into the counter with his head in her neck. Soft giggles come from Sasha, and I clear my throat before either one of them does or says something I don't want to witness.

I feel Ringer's body pressing against mine from the back as we stand in the opening of the hallway, watching my dad maul Sasha's neck.

He pulls away from Sasha and turns to us. “Hey, baby girl. I just came by to see if Sasha wanted a ride to the studio.”

“You wanna take her and all the pans so I can take Lilah for a ride?” Ringer asks my dad from behind me.

“Yeah,” Dad says with a genuine smile.

Ringer helps my dad load up all the desserts as Sasha, and I quickly clean up after them. Once everything is packed up, we make our way outside. Ringer holds a helmet out to me as Dad honks the horn of the van and pulls out.

Sliding on behind Ringer, I snake my hands around his waist and giggle when he groans as I stroke my hand down the bulge in his jeans. I hold him against my palm as he takes off in the opposite direction of the new plaza the club bought.

“Where are we going?” I yell over the wind.

Ringer ignores my question. I lean back and cackle as his body vibrates with every stroke and tease of my hand against his jeans. I know messing with him as he drives us down the road is dangerous, but I can’t help it. Teasing him is one of my favorite pastimes.

Ringer pulls up to an abandoned warehouse and pulls his bike into a small alleyway behind it.

Ripping his helmet off, I shriek as his strong arms wrap around my waist, and he hoists me in front of him. I have no choice but to straddle him in this position and let out a moan as he presses the length that was just in my hands against my center.

His hardness presses against my jeans in the perfect spot, causing my eyes to roll back. “Shit,” I breathe.

“You know how dangerous that shit is, right Lilah?” Ringer’s hard gaze catches my eye, and I nod, not giving a shit about anything as long as he keeps pressing himself against me.

“I’m supposed to keep you safe,” he says, pressing featherlight kisses against the exposed skin on my chest.

“You’ll always keep me safe.”

“You think I can control this beast when my wife has my cock in her hand?”

Ringer loves calling me his wife when it’s just us. I won’t admit it out loud, but I fucking love it too.

I love when he calls me his in general. But there's something to be said about a man calling a woman *his* wife.

I haven't decided how or when I want to tell him, but I sent off our paperwork to officially change my name to Lilah Mack.

"At least I didn't do this while you were driving," I say as I pop the button to his jeans, dragging his cock out of the tight confines of his boxers and stroke him back and forth.

"Fuck, Lile," Ringer groans.

He's been busy the last few days, his thoughts elsewhere as he focuses on the club. He works with his dad at the shop by day, and in the evenings, he's been with his brother or the other guys doing whatever it is that they do. I don't pretend to know what goes on within the club. Unless it directly has something to do with me or someone tells me, I'm oblivious to it all. I know there is more stuff going on than the little that he actually does tell me.

Somehow, the guy that attacked Pebbles got sent to the prison where Ringer did time. Luckily, he's allowed, but he has had to go back to the prison a few times to visit his old cellmate. He doesn't know that I know, but I overheard him and my dad talking about a plan involving his old cellmate and the psychopath that hurt our Pebbles.

I try to ignore the fact that he has lied to me about why he's going to visit every time, but I know he's only doing it to protect me.

Every time he leaves to visit, a pit forms in my stomach, and the intrusive thoughts of them keeping him there and locking him back behind bars for another eight years infiltrate my mind.

These are just some of the things that have led me to accept that I could never live without Ringer like that again. It would destroy me.

Aside from this morning, I haven't been intimate with my husband in over a week because of how busy he has been. And I don't fucking like it.

I squeeze Ringer's cock in my hand and grasp the hair at the back of his head with my other hand, dragging his lips up to mine.

"I've missed you," I confess against his lips.

"You just saw me this morning," he chuckles.

"You know what I mean," I pout. I force away the bubbles of insecurities inside me at the thought of him at the clubhouse with the club girls instead of with me. "You haven't really stayed over at all."

"I don't want to come over late and keep you up when you have to get up so early."

I rest my head against his chest and take a breath. Of fucking course, he would have to come at me with something sweet, like not wanting to keep me up late.

"I don't care," I confess.

"Well, I do, babe. I don't want you not sleeping because you're waiting for me and then waking up at the ass crack of *before* dawn to get to work."

"I don't sleep when you're not there, so it doesn't even matter how late you get there," I blurt. My brain catches up with the words I spouted a moment later. I avoid his eyes as I know he isn't going to be happy that I'm not sleeping properly.

His eyes squint as he searches my face. "You aren't sleeping?"

I shake my head repeatedly, not wanting to lie to him. "Why didn't you tell me?"

I scoff. "Because I didn't want to come off like some immature little girl that can't sleep because she's lonely." I wave him off, resuming my movements at his length. "Forget about it. It's silly."

Before he can interrupt, I press my lips to his.

He lets out a moan, gripping his rough hands at my hips. "This conversation isn't over."

Ringer pulls me off the bike, ripping my jeans and panties down in one go before jerking me back into his lap. His strong thighs hold the bike steady as he impales me on his cock.

It's quite impressive how he is able to fuck me so earnestly and possessively without dropping us and the bike in a heap on the dusty road.

"Kiss me," he growls. The tension in his shoulders ripples under my fingertips. I can sense his release coming, so I press my lips to his. I slip my hand between us and rub my clit to encourage my own climax.

Ringer and I come in unison against the seat of his bike in an abandoned alley. "This will be a fun one to add to our list of weird places," I purr.

Ringer chuckles against my mouth, giving me another swift kiss before letting me up.

He pulls a bandana out of the pocket of his cut, and I roll my eyes with a laugh as he uses it to clean us both up. "You turning into your dad on me?"

He laughs, shoves the messy fabric into a saddlebag, and secures his jeans.

"Back to earlier," he says, causing me to groan.

"Forget I said anything. I was just being stupid. We need to get going."

"Lilah Jane, look at me."

"Oh God, you sound like Renee when you call me that."

"Do you want me to sleep at your house?"

"Like, always?" I ask, panic creeping into my chest. I'd been fiddling around with the idea of asking him to move in, but like the last name thing, it just never came up.

Ringer nods, and a lump settles in my throat, not allowing me to speak. I take a deep breath, and the words just sputter out of my mouth before I can stop them. "I sent in the paperwork and changed my name. As soon as I get a new social security card, my name will be Lilah Mack. I also was

kinda wondering if you wanted to move in. Or not. We could find a new house. Or not. Whatever you want—”

My rambling words are interrupted by Ringer’s soft yet firm lips pressed against mine, effectively silencing me.

Ringer grabs both of my cheeks in his hands, deepening the kiss before pulling back and searching my eyes. The intense smile overtaking his face has the panic inside me settling. “I would fucking love to live with you.”

He presses one more kiss to my lips, then presses kisses all over every inch of my exposed skin, causing me to giggle from the tickle they cause. “You changed your name?”

I nod with a blushing grin. I wasn’t sure how he was going to feel about that little fact, but the smile on his face tells me I did the right thing.

“I did. Is that okay?”

“Is that okay? Of fucking course it’s okay!” he shouts, engulfing me in a suffocating hug. “Lilah Mack,” he tests the name out on his tongue. “I fucking love it.”

He kisses me again, then leans back against his bike.

It’s on the tip of my tongue to say the three little words that have had me in a chokehold since I was 13, but those types of confessions are for another time. Instead, with one last smile in my direction, Ringer guides me back onto the bike, and we’re once again on our way to Pebbles’s new studio.

sixteen

Lilah

IT'S like an unspoken mutual acceptance passed between us back in that alley. Once we're at the party, Ringer doesn't take his hands off of me. Whether it's a simple hand at the small of my back or his arm wrapping around my waist with his thumb hooking through my belt loop, he's constantly touching me in some way until Sasha asks for help setting out all of the baked goods. It's only then that he unhands me, which seems to make him rather grumpy.

Dad and Sasha were the only two to comment on our tardiness as we walked in. Sasha gave me a wink and a thumbs up, and my dad just shook his head in exasperation. I laughed and pressed a kiss to Dad's cheek.

As we wait for Pebbles, the guest of honor, to arrive, we hang out against the mirrored wall and listen to Ringer tell my dad all about the gym he wants to open in one of the vacant spaces at the other end of the plaza. Sasha stands next to my dad and offers her input into bits of their conversation as I take in the room.

Pebbles used to be a stripper, or *dancer* as they all used to say, at The Castle. She worked there to save money to make her dream of owning her own studio a reality. Unlike me, she didn't want to ask the club for help. She wanted to do it herself, and I respect the hell out of it. But unfortunately, I didn't have that option. I can't dance for shit, and I could never saunter naked around a room full of peering, beady eyes. I have nothing but respect for the hustle.

Even before the attack, Trigger and Ghost wanted to do something nice for her to show her how much she truly means to the family. As soon as the club bought this strip, they knew this corner storefront was perfect. They remodeled the entire thing, even knocking down the wall and using the empty business next to it as extra space.

They've been working for months behind her back to make this into the perfect studio for her. Luckily for them, I follow her on Pinterest and was able to send them her mood board. Poor guys were so confused when I sent it to them, but they must have figured it out and paid attention based on how this place turned out.

This room is going to be for her more adult clients and classes, where her pole fitness classes will be the main attraction. We're surrounded by two walls painted such a dark purple that they're almost black, but the room is lightened by the reflection of the overhead lights in the floor-to-ceiling mirrors on two of the walls. Twelve shiny silver poles litter the room with space between each one, giving the ability for the person using it to stretch out.

All eyes jump to the door as it pushes open to reveal Pebbles, who is clearly completely shocked, and a grinning Trigger.

Pebbles's eyes are lined with tears as she scans the faces of her loved ones around the room. Even though not one person here is her blood, we will always be her family. Her dad was a very important member of the club and an even more important person in all of our hearts. He was one of my dad's closest friends and a damn awesome guy.

I watch as Lyric and Bones greet Pebbles near the door, and I see the panic rise in her eyes before she turns and excuses herself from the room in a hurry. No one blames her, this is the first time she's had to be around the entire group in weeks, add a brand new studio on top of that, I don't blame her for freaking the fuck out.

Brenna follows behind her shortly after she ducks out of the room, and the rest of the crowd's conversations resume.

Lyric saunters up to us a few seconds later and drops her skinny arm around my neck. “What in the motherfuck is going on here?” she asks with her perfectly shaped brow raised, nodding between me and Ringer.

I take a deep breath before answering her, but Ringer beats me to it. “What can I say? Girl’s got me hooked.”

Warmth settles low in my belly at the possession burning in his eyes as he looks down at me. I let a sigh of relief loose and turn to smile at Lyric. I’m thankful as hell he didn’t throw out our marital status in the middle of Pebbles’ party. This is her night, not ours.

“Sure looks to me like it’s the other way around,” Lyric laughs, pointing at the finger he has looped through my jeans.

Ringer shrugs, bringing me closer to his chest as he kisses the side of my head. “Either way.”

“Huh.” Lyric studies us again before smiling at me. “You go, girl.” Getting closer to me, she whispers in my ear, “If he’s anything like his brother, all I have to say is congratulations. Also, witch hazel and ice packs do wonders for a bruised pussy.”

My eyes widen at her confession as she winks, sauntering away in her towering heels.

What the hell? That was way more information than I was ever wanting when it comes to Ghost. Unwanted images flash through my brain of Ghost and Lyric going at it. As attractive as the two of them are, I don’t ever want those visuals of a man I consider a brother, ever again.

“If you’re visualizing my brother naked, we’re going to have problems.” My eyes snap to Ringer’s and the playful smile on his lips. I exhale in relief.

“You heard her?”

“Of course, I heard her. You’re pressed up against me, and she doesn’t whisper too well,” he chuckles, pulling me tighter into his chest. “Good for my brother.”

I elbow him in the gut and earn a satisfied grunt as the air escapes him. “Quit looking at her ass.”

“Babe, how many times have we been to The Castle? I’ve seen much more than just her fucking ass.”

I roll my eyes, swatting his stomach and lowering my voice. “Yeah, but you don’t need to remind your *wife* of that fact.”

“Ah. So we’re claiming to be my wife in public now?”

“No. Yes. Maybe,” I huff out a breath and turn to face him. “Not yet. I’m okay with people seeing us together, but I’m not ready for all that yet.”

“Fair enough. So if you’re okay with people knowing we’re together, does that mean I get to do this?” he asks as he presses his lips to mine.

Ringer

“Did you fucking know Claudia drives a fucking bike?” Razor grumbles, interrupting the comfortable silence Lilah and I are in.

Lilah’s eyebrows hit her hairline as she turns to him.

“What kind of bike? Like a beach cruiser around campus?” Lilah asks, confusion twisting her features.

“A fucking Suzuki GSXR 1000, dude,” Razor deadpans.

I let out a whistle, impressed. Little Claudia handling that type of machine? Damn. “That’s fucking awesome, man. Good for her.”

Razor rears back like I just slapped him. “Good for her? She’s going to kill herself on that thing!”

“Pot, meet kettle,” Lilah giggles, laughing even harder when Razor’s scowl grows deeper.

“She’s way too fucking young and inexperienced to be driving something like that!”

“You’re speaking to the wrong brother, man. Does Bull know?”

“Bull bought her the fucking thing! I know if Horse knew, he’d agree with me.”

“So you’re a tattle tale now?” Lilah asks, mischievously lifting her brow.

“I thought y’all would be on my side,” Razor grumbles.

“Why do you even care, brother?” I ask, chuckling at the incredulous look on his face.

Razor cools his scowl and shakes his head, clearing his thoughts. “Look what just happened to her pops. Then I find her on the back of that damn thing driving over a hundred miles an hour. Just worried,” he shrugs.

“Is she at least wearing a helmet?”

“Yeah, neon fuschia, just like the fucking bike.” He rolls his eyes, shaking his head, causing us all to laugh.

“Where are Claudia and Bull?” Lilah asks, searching the party surrounding us.

“They left to head back to the hospital.”

They pulled all the sedative meds from Horse and allowed him to slowly wake up. He sleeps a lot still and is in a fuck ton of pain, but he is healing. Ghost and I went by yesterday and were able to talk to him for a while before he got tired again and asked us to leave. We still don’t know the full fucking story, and it’s eating at all of us. It’s especially taking a huge toll on my brother, who takes everything to heart. Ghost has always been the type of guy to think that he can stop bad things before they happen, so he’s not taking these hits on the club too well.

I’ve tried telling him he isn’t Superman. He usually just tells me to fuck off.

“I can’t believe you guys aren’t as concerned as I am,” Razor shakes his head.

“Do you have a crush on Miss Claudia, Razor?” Lilah’s lips lift in a knowing smile.

“I’m almost thirty, Lilah. We don’t have crushes,” Razor scoffs, and I can’t help the chuckle that escapes my lips when my wife scolds him with just a lift of her brow.

I watch as Razor’s ever-present, easy-going demeanor flashes for just a second before his scowl returns.

“You can still have a crush on someone at thirty, Razor.”

“She’s 18, Lile,” Razor grumbles.

“Actually, she’s 19. Her birthday was last month.”

Razor frowns. “What?”

“Yeah, Maggie had me make her a cake. They just did something small since Horse was still in a coma.”

“I missed her birthday?” Razor asks out loud to no one in particular.

I look down at Lilah and catch her eye. It seems our friend Razor has caught feelings for a brother’s daughter.

Don’t I know how that feels.

Except not only is Claudia the daughter of a brother, but she’s also the sister of another.

I slap him on the shoulder and squeeze. “Good luck with that, man.”

The gesture must startle Razor, who appears to have been stuck in a daydream about Claudia. He jumps and asks, “Good luck with what?”

“Feelings.”

Razor scoffs at my one-word response and turns on his heel to stalk out of the room.

“What the hell was that about?” Lilah mutters.

“Who fucking knows,” I answer.

“I hope he doesn’t actually have feelings for her.”

“Why not? Razor’s a good dude.”

“I love Razor. He’s amazing.”

I let out a growl at the sound of her sweet voice admitting that she loves another man. I know she means it in a friendly way, not in a romantic way, but I can’t control the possession that overtakes me.

Her small giggle has my tense muscles relaxing as she runs the palm of her hand across my stomach. “I don’t mean it like that.” She rolls her eyes and pats my stomach again. “I just meant because he’s been around town if ya know what I mean.”

“Meaning?”

“Let’s just say I can’t even count on two hands the number of times I have walked into the clubhouse and seen him with a woman on her knees in front of him or with someone bent over something.”

“You better not have looked.”

“Oh, I looked. It would have been illegal for me not to have.”

Lilah lets out another bubbly giggle as I scowl at her. “Not funny.”

“You look like you just stepped in dog shit. It’s very funny.”

“You want me to watch someone fuck one of your friends?”

Lilah’s smile drops, and it’s her turn for a scowl to befall her features. “I’ll cut your dick off.”

I wince, grabbing hold of my prized jewels at the thought. I lean forward and kiss her, shutting down this conversation. It makes me happy as shit to know that she seems to be just as jealous and possessive of me as I am of her.

“Only got eyes for you, babe.”

“Good,” Lilah says, crossing her arms over her chest.

Ghost and Trigger make a toast to Pebbles with her new place, and the whoops and hollers echo throughout the room as we all cheer for her.

“It’s fucking Wednesday, so let’s go party!” my brother yells.

I press my lips to Lilah’s ear as she sips on the purple plastic cup in her hand. “Wanna go to The Castle?”

At her nod, I lead her out the door by her hand, following her dad and Sasha.

Right after getting her situated behind me, Ghost steps up next to my bike. I watch in amusement as he reaches toward her, helping her buckle her helmet.

My lips lift in a satisfied smirk as my brother shows a small sign of truce. It may not be acceptance, but I’ll take what I can get at this point.

seventeen

Lilah

“QUIT IT!” I giggle as I slap Ringer’s wandering hands away. “I’m already late!”

“Tell them you got busy. Stay here with me,” he pouts as he runs his palm down his deflating erection.

“You just came! How can you want to go again already!” I swat at his chest, pushing him back with one last kiss to the lips before slipping out of bed and skipping to the bathroom.

“Ugh,” Ringer groans. “Bunch of fucking cockblockers.”

I let out a cackle as I step into my closet. I pull on a lace bandeau followed by a cream-colored Harley Davidson shirt that I tied a knot in the front to make it a crop top. Ringer saunters in behind me as I’m pulling up frayed denim shorts. I find his hungry eyes creeping along my body, causing my skin to pebble.

Even though we’ve spent the last hour devouring each other, my body still responds to the appreciative gleam in his eye.

I glance down at his hardness and smirk at him. “Am I not satisfying you, Mr. Mack?”

I drop the light denim jacket down on the back of my chair and stop in front of him. Grinning, I press my hand against his

bare chest and look up at him. His electric blue eyes burn into me as he runs his fingertips along the outsides of my arms.

“You satisfy me just fine, Mrs. Mack.”

“Just fine?” I say saucily. “Well, that just won’t do.”

His brows furrow as he looks at me in question. Surprise twists the lines of his face as I press a barely there kiss to his jaw and drop to my knees.

I waste no time taking his length into my mouth, swirling my tongue all along the head. Ringer’s groans spur me on as I take him to the back of my throat.

Satisfaction snakes through me as I watch his eyes roll to the back of his head when I fondle his balls in one hand and massage his shaft in the other. His fist tightens at the base of my skull as I flick my tongue along the tip, the flavor of his precum exploding on my tongue.

He gathers all of my hair in his big hand and we lock eyes as he thrusts against my face.

He lets out a loud groan but thrusts too hard, causing me to gag. He curses and pulls out gently. “Sorry, baby.”

“Don’t be,” I smirk up at him, taking him back into my mouth. “I liked it.”

The carnal look that flashes in his eyes excites me as his fist tightens in my hair. I move my hands to his hips and allow him to use my mouth for his pleasure. I slide one hand down to his balls and tighten my grip just slightly the way I know he likes.

“Fuck, Princess,” Ringer moans. I can tell he’s close, so I bring my hand back to the base of his cock and pump until the first splash of his release hits my tongue. I fight the urge to gag as it hits the back of my throat and swallow everything down as he smiles down at me in euphoric content.

Cupping my cheek in his large palm, he runs the pad of his thumb along my lip as he pulls out of my mouth. “You are amazing.”

I blush. Pushing up off my knees, I come up to his chest and press my lips to his sweaty skin. “I know.”

“Cheeky shit,” he grins, kissing my lips.

I look down at my watch and groan. “Now I really am fucking late, Emmett.”

“Don’t you *Emmett* me. You shouldn’t look that fucking edible and maybe I wouldn’t be so ravenous for you.”

“Who’s being cheeky now?” I giggle, kissing him again before turning to grab my shoes.

After pulling my shoes on and grabbing my bag, I give him one last kiss before rushing out of the house and jumping into my car. I was supposed to leave for the city to meet the girls for breakfast twenty minutes ago, but my husband is way to fucking needy in the mornings.

Well, him and me both. But I’ll blame this one on him.

Traffic’s a breeze as I make my way to the cafe where the girls and I planned to meet to make plans for Pebbles studio opening party.

I get lucky and find a parking spot along the street out front. Rushing inside, I look around and spot Lyric, Pebbles, Brenna, and Winnie at a table to the left. I wave at them and motion the hostess away when she asks if I need help.

Fuck! The light hits my ring, and I have a momentary panic attack as I pull it off and shove it in my pocket.

Good thing I noticed it now and not after I took my seat.

I slide in next to Pebbles and press a kiss to her cheek. “Good morning, bitches!”

“Someone is in a good mood this morning,” Lyric smirks at me, winking devilishly.

I shrug with a more than satisfied smile on my face as I lift the menu to peruse the choices. Lyric and I both order peach mimosas while Brenna, Pebbles, and Winnie all stick with plain fruit juice.

After clinking our glasses together, Winnie steers the conversation towards Pebbles's new baby, *Dance with Me Academy*.

While we wait for our food, I write down all of the desserts that Pebbles wants in my notebook while the girls discuss decorations and how to get business.

"I'm so happy for you, Peps." I lean over, squeezing Pebbles's arm and hugging her to my side. "Your dad would be happy too."

Pebbles's eyes meet mine and she smiles. A small tear makes its way out of the corner of her eye and she hurriedly wipes it away. "Love you, girlfriend." I squeeze her arm again.

Winnie's excited chatter pulls our attention across the table as she talks about flowers and balloons with over-the-top animation.

"You guys are crazy! Thank you so much," Pebbles says. Emotion clogs her throat.

Ringer

"Princess?" I call, entering our apartment through the kitchen. I saw her and Sasha's cars parked out front, so I know she's home.

"In the closet!"

I enter the room and into the closet to find her buried under a stack of clothes as she and Sasha sort through a huge pile of fabric.

"What in the hell are you guys doing?" I ask. Lilah's beaming smile hits me right in the fucking gut as I'm once again reminded that this woman is all mine.

"Making magic happen!" she cries happily.

Lilah holds up a pair of jeans that look like they belong in the '90s, and her smile toward Sasha gets even bigger. "These will be perfect for you!"

Sasha takes them from her grasp and tosses them into a small pile behind her.

"What's up, babe?" Lilah looks back up to me as I lean against the doorway, just watching her.

"I was just letting you know I have to head back up to the clubhouse. Ghost called church."

She nods, looking back down as she sorts through more clothes. "Okay, ride safe. Love you."

I suck in a breath and search her face. Her widened eyes turn to meet mine. I push off the door frame and stalk over to her, not giving one shit my dirty boots are stomping over all of her clothes. I lean down to take her face in my hand. I gently squeeze her cheeks to force her to look at me. I can tell she's retreating in on herself. Even if she didn't truly mean to say it, she still did.

"I love you too, Princess." I crash my lips to hers and vaguely hear Sasha squeal behind me.

I press a few more firm kisses to her lips before letting her go. "I'll be back later."

I leave before she makes a big deal about her verbal diarrhea. I know she didn't mean to let the words slip. But fuck, if that doesn't make me one happy fucking man.

I love this girl more than any goddamn thing in this world.

I walk into the garage happier than a pig in shit. Reaper's curious smirk meets mine as he follows me out to the driveway, where we both straddle our bikes. "Think you can beat me there, old man?"

"You're on, kid."

Taking off down the road behind my father-in-law/VP, I hit the throttle, effectively maneuvering my bike past him. I look in my rearview mirror and laugh as he shakes his head. I let off the throttle when I notice a cop ahead. Reaper pulls up to the

light next to me and shakes his head again with a smile. “Almost got ya,” he calls over the rumble of the pipes.

The rest of the ride there is an easy cruise, riding next to each other instead of racing. I let him pull into the lot before me, rolling my eyes as he flicks me off when we park.

“See how I didn’t speed once, yet still won?”

“Fuck off,” I laugh. “If that cop wouldn’t have been there, I woulda been here ten minutes ago.”

“Alas, the cop was there, and I still won.” He smiles.

I wave him off with a chuckle and follow him into the clubhouse. We drop our phones into the bin on our way into the back room where we hold church.

Ghost sits at the head of the table, and Reaper heads to the empty seat on his left. Tiny, Razor, my dad, Trigger, Tank, Flame, and Texas all surround the table. Seems the VP and I were the last to get here.

I pull a chair out and drop my large frame into it. Leaning back, I bring my ankle up to rest on my knee.

“So what’s this all about?” Tiny grumbles crankily.

Ghost looks across the table at him, and his face breaks into a smile. “We have a visitor.”

Just then, the door opens, and a smiling Maggie pushes Horse into the room in a wheelchair.

“What the fuck,” Tank pushes back from the table and rushes over to help Maggie settle his chair against his usual spot at the table. “What are you doing here, fucker? You should be in bed!”

“Fuck off with that shit,” Horse grumbles with a cough. “No way I wasn’t going to be here for this.”

“What’s going on?” Tiny asks again.

“I’ll be waiting in the kitchen for you,” Maggie says, pressing a kiss to her ol’ man’s head.

“Love you, baby,” Horse says as his wife leaves the room, the door clicking shut behind her.

“Goddamn, old man. It’s so fucking good to see you,” Texas says from his seat right next to Horse.

Ghost clears his throat and sits forward in his chair. “Patch,” is the only thing he says.

We all look at my brother and wait for him to continue. Pressing his finger against his lips, he seems lost in thought for a moment before continuing. “He’s been a prospect for almost 15 months now. Reap and I decided it’s time to bring it to the table.”

A smile breaks my stoic face. This is the first patching I’ve been able to attend as a member at the table, and hopefully, it’s not the last.

My eyes jump around the room to all of my brothers’ smiles. Horse, even as weak as he may seem, smiles brightly at the knowledge of what’s happening today.

“All in favor of Patch earning his patch today?” Ghost asks, meeting each brother’s eye.

The ‘yays’ around the room are unanimous. Cheers ring out around the table as a few of us bang our fists against the wood. “Fuck yeah!” I call.

“Ring, go grab him.”

I nod at my brother and smile as I see Reaper grab a box from the shelf in the corner, dropping it to the table.

With an extra bounce in my step, I head to the main room. I don’t find Patch, so I head outside and find him leaning over his bike tinkering with something.

“Patch,” I call out.

His head whips around, and he smiles. “Sup, Ringer?”

“Follow me,” I say, turning back to head inside.

Patch silently follows behind me as I head back into the room. I hold the door open and close it behind him.

It's funny when a brother earns his patch. The prospect either knows without a doubt what's about to happen, or they're shitting their fucking pants because they think they're in trouble. I remember trying to think of what I could have possibly fucked up when I walked through these same doors before receiving mine.

I kick my seat back, dropping down into it again.

"Know why you're in here?" Ghost asks, looking straight into Patch's eyes.

Patch shakes his head.

"I have a question for you, Patch."

"What is it, Pres?" Patch asks. I watch in amazement as his eye contact never falters.

Shit, I'm 30, and my big brother's intimidating gaze gets me all the fucking time. This kid is no older than 21, and he holds his own.

"Why do you wear an eye patch?"

Patch sighs, cracking his knuckles in some sort of nervous gesture. "When I was a kid, my pops liked to toss me around. Hit me a little too hard one night. I lost my eye." He lets out a small laugh. "Few years ago, my mom's shitty fucking dog ate my prosthetic. Can't afford a new one."

Ghost nods, gesturing to the empty seat to my left. "Take a seat."

Patch looks down at the chair as if he doesn't know what to do. "Sit at the table?"

Only patched members can sit at the table. The kid isn't stupid.

"Sit down, Patch."

As soon as his ass hits the chair, Reaper tosses the box towards him and everyone around the table's hard gazes break into smiles.

Patch lets out a gruff breath as the lid of the box is lifted, and his patches are on clear display for him to see. "Fuck," he

grunts, emotion lacing his voice.

“Welcome, brother,” Ghost says with a smirk. “First order is to use your first cut of profits to fix your fucking eye.” Ghost tosses a wad of cash at the kid and claps his hands.

“Seriously?” Patch looks around the room at each brother individually as if we are about to rip the patches away from him.

“Seriously, kid. Although, we’re still calling you Patch. That shit’ll never change.”

Patch chuckles and shakes his head, not taking his eyes off the patch in his hand.

It’s a pretty emotional thing when you earn your patch. It’s what you work for the entire time you’re here. To be accepted into the brotherhood is overwhelming. You’ll never be alone again. You’ll never have to worry about no one having your back ever again. You have a family.

“Maggie’ll get that all sewed up for ya, kid.” Horse smiles at the newest member.

Now I know why he’s here. No way in hell would Horse allow someone to be patched in and not be here for it.

“Now that that’s settled, everyone’s free to go. That’s all I needed,” Ghost announces with a smile.

Before we leave, Tiny updates us on his search to find out what could have happened to Horse. The entire time, my eyes stay settled on him to assess his reaction. Trigger’s Bel Air was also trashed to shit, and the cameras at the plaza were conveniently turned off at the time of the incident.

I can feel Ghost’s anger rather than see it. His face remains cool and calm, but if anyone can tell when my big brother is upset, it’s me. The smallest tick of movement in the muscle below his eye shows me everything I need to know.

My brother is absolutely livid.

With no new updates, Ghost finishes out church, and we welcome Maggie into the room to fix Patch’s cut as a new member. No more prospect patch for him.

We celebrate with a shot and beers at the bar, with him on this side of the bar this time.

Wes is manning the bar tonight and pours another shot, pushing it towards Patch. “Congrats, man.”

“You’re next, kid. Keep it up,” my dad says from next to me. I smile to myself, remembering what Ghost told me about how Dad found Wes.

“You getting sensitive in your old age, Pops?” I joke, bouncing my arm off my dad’s weathered one.

“Fuck off, kid. Where’s the wife tonight?” he asks quietly, only loud enough for me to hear.

“Home with Sasha.”

“Reaper’s lady?”

I nod, gesturing toward Reaper. “You think Reaper will finally take an ol’ lady?”

“Fuck if I know, kid. You live with him. You’d know better than me.”

“I don’t live with him, Pops. We’re practically neighbors. I don’t see what goes on inside his house.”

“Fair enough.”

Reaper must sense we’re talking about him because he stops next to us, tapping his beer bottle against my dad’s and then mine. “What’s going on?”

We gain the attention of the other guys surrounding us.

“Ring here was just wondering if you were gonna take an ol’ lady or not?” my dad chuckles.

Reaper’s eyes settle on mine with a smirk. I can feel everyone’s eyes on us as they wait for his answer, like a bunch of little old ladies waiting for juicy gossip. “Are you?”

“If that’s what she wants, yeah,” I admit.

“Only if she wants?” Lilah’s dad asks me, his playful gaze burning against my skin.

“If you ask her if she’s my ol’ lady, she might kick you in the fucking balls. Not my fault, man. If you ask me, fuck yes, she’s my ol’ lady.”

Reaper chuckles, his shoulders shaking from his laughter. “That’s why she and Sasha make such good friends. Sash’s the same fucking way.”

“Another one bites the fucking dust!” Razor cheers.

We celebrate with another round of beers before Reaper, and I say goodnight and head back home in the same direction to our respective ol’ ladies.

eighteen

Lilah

WAKING up with Ringer's head between my legs this morning was the best wake-up call I've ever had.

Now I'm blowing up hundreds of balloons to decorate the dance studio, and I'm shamelessly still thinking about it.

"Earth to Lilah," Winnie sing-songs, snapping her fingers in front of my face.

The balloon I was in the middle of blowing up with her machine pops in my hands, and I realize I must have let it fill up with too much air while I was daydreaming. "Shit! Sorry," I giggle.

"Damn."

"What?"

"I can honestly say I've never had dick so good that I can't focus on something as simple as blowing up a balloon," Winnie giggles.

"What?" I stammer. "No, that's not it. I was just thinking about something."

"Yeah, your boyfriend's dick," Winnie cackles.

I roll my eyes and join her laughter. "Just you wait, Win. One day some man is going to come along and leave you in a trance, pining after his long shlong."

Winnie bursts out laughing, crossing her legs dramatically and holding her stomach. “Oh my god! I’m going to pee myself!”

“Ew! Keep your piss to yourself,” I joke.

“I’m fucking pregnant, you asshole. I can’t control my bladder when I have this big ass baby pressing on it all damn day!” Winnie is out of breath as she continues to laugh.

We finish blowing up all the balloons, and I man the ladder to put up the arches where she wants them. Winnie can be pretty damn bossy when she wants something done a certain way, but it turns out so beautiful that I forgive her attitude as soon as I’m done.

When I’m done with the arches, I let her and Brenna finish with the rest of the decorations while I find Maria and Lyric in another room setting up tables.

“This is all so amazing. Trigger and Ghost did such a good job.” I spin in circles around the large dance room, catching my reflection in the floor-to-ceiling mirrors on one side.

Lyric scampers over to me on her hella-high heels and grabs me. We laugh as we dance around the room, pretending to be proper and poised.

“Girl, you have no rhythm!” Lyric laughs as I let her lead me all around the space.

“Bitch, I know! Why do you think I came to Pebbles’s class all those months ago? I got not one dancing bone in my body!” I say with tears of laughter pouring down my cheeks.

“Jesus hell, this is painful to watch,” Maria laughs as we mess around.

Over the next hour, people pour through the doors. Adults, teenagers, kids, and people of all ages come to check out the new studio. Ringer and Flame find Brenna and me in one of the rooms watching Clara, the dancer Pebbles hired to teach, and her mom as they dance with a handful of kids.

I follow them out to the front before heading to the bathroom. I run into Pebbles in the hallway with a face full of

panic.

She stops me, grabbing onto my arm. “Have you heard from Trigger?”

“What? No, why?”

“He was supposed to go by the bakery and then come straight here. He isn’t answering his phone.”

“Ringer and Flame just got here. They’re out front with Tank and Ghost. Maybe ask them?”

I finish up in the bathroom and then find myself back in the room, watching Clara move fluidly across it. The young girl is great with the kids. I eventually make my way back over to the table to help Maria sign people up.

I’m taking information from a little girl named Emery when Ringer rushes into the room, his eyes ablaze as they search the room and eventually land on my face.

Unease churns my belly as he strides my way. I grab Maria’s attention. She takes over, and I apologize to the little girl and her mom as I excuse myself, meeting Ringer in front of the table.

“Fuck, Princess. I am so goddamn sorry.” Worry laces Ringer’s tone, and a cramp pulls at my belly. He pulls me into his chest, gripping my hair tightly as I shake in his embrace.

“What’s going on, Ringer?”

Pulling away from me so he can look into my eyes, he says the words that break my heart into tiny pieces. “We have to go, babe. The bakery’s on fire.”

I rip out of his hold and take off for the front of the studio.

I have to get to my car.

I have to go to the bakery.

I have to save it.

The environment around me is a blur as I vaguely feel a strong arm wrap around my waist, and another pulls my legs out from under me.

I can hear someone screaming too.

I don't know what's going on, but I need to get to my bakery *goddammit!*

Something latches around my front, and I fight the piece of material holding me restrained. My eyes drop to my lap, and I realize I'm buckled in a car. I think it's Pebbles's car.

Yes, and Pebbles is sobbing next to me.

If she's crying, who is screaming?

Pain radiates through my throat, and I realize it's me. I'm screaming.

The car eventually stops moving, and I'm frozen in place as I see my baby engulfed in flames across the street.

I can't pull my eyes away. Tears threaten to blur my vision, but I refuse to let them mar the view of my livelihood as I watch it burn. Tall, thick flames and black smoke consume the building.

My bakery had been my dream since I was a little girl. I used to tell my nana all about it. I made it exactly the way we talked about it. She never lived to see it, but it didn't matter because it was the exact image we both had. I did it for her.

For us.

The car door in front of me opens, and I wish it wouldn't have. The smell of burning lumber fills my lungs as emotion equally fills my throat.

Ringer's body blocks my view of the burning building, and I want to scream at him to fucking move. I need to watch.

I force myself out of the car and push him out of my way. I round the car and drop my ass to the curb across the street as I watch all of the firefighters and cops surround the building. I can see everyone from the other businesses on the sidewalk out of the corner of my eye, but I refuse to look away from the flames.

Ringer presses a kiss to my head before jogging over to where Tank and Flame have a sobbing Pebbles secured.

Why was she running towards the fire?

Why would she do that?

At Pebbles' agonizing scream of Trigger's real name, I'm pulled out of my daze.

Shit! Trigger was supposed to be at the bakery.

Fuck! Is he in there?

I can't force myself to get up. My legs won't listen.

Ringer heads back towards me and drops down next to me. "It's going to be okay, Princess."

"I know," I whisper. "They are just things."

"Trigger was taken to the hospital. Shaye and Eddy said he was burned up in a couple of spots pretty badly. He was awake when they took him."

"What happened?" The sob that has been sitting in my throat, waiting to escape, pushes out as I look up at Ringer's forlorn face.

"I don't know, babe. But we're going to figure it out." He pulls me into his body and holds me as I silently cry over the destruction in front of me.

"We're going to take Pebbles up to the hospital to see what the fuck is going on. You stay here with her. The cops and fire marshall need to talk to Lilah," Flame's deep voice breaks through the fog I'm in.

Ringer's arm tightens around me. "I've got her. Let me know what's going on with Trig as soon as you find out."

"Got it. Open lines at all times, brother," Flame calls out behind him as he helps Pebbles back into her car.

We sit on the curb for what feels like hours as the fire is controlled and put out. Eventually, Shaye and Eddy from Flame's tattoo shop, as well as a few people from the diner, make their way toward us. We all sit in agonizing silence, waiting for the all-clear.

It's determined that the bakery is the only business to sustain damage, so everyone else eventually goes about their business while Ringer and I wait to talk to the cops.

The sun has already set when a middle-aged man comes up to us, introducing himself as Clark, the fire marshall.

"Anything?" Ringer asks.

"Well, we're going to need a closer look at some things, but it almost seems as though there was a small explosive put into the microwave. When someone used the microwave, it exploded."

I start to shake in Ringer's arms. "An explosive? Like a bomb?"

The guy nods with a somber expression. "We checked the rest of the perimeter, and it seems like there were three different devices within the bakery. None of the other businesses were tampered with."

Oh my god.

"Does that mean that they were there for me?" I ask no one in particular.

"No way in hell, babe. Who the hell would want to hurt you?" Ringer soothes me, rubbing his palm along my shoulder.

"We have the place cleared out. Everything checked out, and it's safe if you guys want to enter the premises."

I nod, letting Ringer pull me to my feet. I lean on him heavily and let him guide me across the street and into the bakery.

We get to the front. It seems the only damage is blown-out windows and soot caked on every surface.

I don't even know who, but someone hands me a mask to protect me from the soot as I make my way inside.

Tears track down my cheeks as I take in the room. The wall between the storefront and the kitchen is completely burned, and the only things remaining are the metal support beams. I can walk straight through what used to be a wall. I

throw the stupid mask to the side and kick the first thing in my way. Pain radiates through my leg from the impact, and I realize I've taken my frustration and anger out on one of the large, heavy stools.

“Fuck!” I scream. Dropping my head down into my hands, I lace my fingers in my hair, pulling at the roots as I scream in agonizing emotion.

A warm hand lands on my back gently before I'm taken into his strong embrace. His cologne engulfs me, and I'm thankful to smell something else instead of this horrible, charred mess.

I let Ringer lead me out of what once was my beautiful bakery and into a waiting car.

In the blink of an eye, I'm being pulled from the car and taken into another set of large arms. At the familiar smell of my dad's aftershave, my entire body racks with sob after sob. I scream in frustration, and words tumble out of my mouth about my nana and how hard I worked for it only to be taken away from me.

My dad lets me beat against his chest as I work through the aching in my soul.

The fight leaves my body as I look into my dad's green eyes.

“You done, baby girl?”

I sniffle one last time and nod. Deep down, I'm embarrassed about the way that I just acted, but at the same time, I'm a girl whose safe space has always been her dad. What other kind of response did anyone expect?

I wordlessly let Ringer lead me upstairs and straight into the shower, where he washes the tiny bits of soot off us and tenderly washes my hair.

Once we're lying in bed, I roll over to face him. “I'm sorry.”

He pulls back, searching my face. “What are you sorry for?”

Now that the shock of everything has calmed down some, I'm truly embarrassed that he had to witness me acting like a child. "I may have overreacted."

"No, you didn't, babe. You've worked your whole life for that bakery. You're allowed to be upset. We can fix it."

"I think I'm upset because I don't think it'll ever be the same. That bakery was her dream."

"Whose dream, babe?"

"Nana's."

Ringer's arms tighten around me, pulling me across his chest. "I think you're wrong."

I pull back, searching his eyes. What does he mean, *I'm wrong*?

"Your nana loved to bake, sure. But not as much as you. She did it because you loved it so much. That is *your* dream, babe. Don't take it from yourself."

I nod, laying my head against his chest, listening to the beat of his heart through all of the bone and muscle.

"I love you, Emmett Mack."

"I love you, Lilah Jane Mack."

My lips twitch in a smile, and I press a kiss to his chest before allowing my eyes to close in exhaustion.

nineteen

Ringer

“PLEASE TELL me you can tell me what the fuck is going on?” I lean against the bar at the clubhouse next to my brother as he nurses a beer. He turns a frown my way and shakes his head with a sigh.

“I wish I could, Ring. I’m just as lost in all this as you.”

“They blew up her fucking bakery, man.”

The fire marshall ruled the bakery fire as arson. The small explosives weren’t bomb grade, but they were dangerous enough paired with the appliances they were placed in, which caused all of Trigger’s injuries. He has a nasty gash on his face, and the skin on his left arm has some pretty brutal burns. Luckily, that’s all that happened to him that day. He could’ve been much worse off. I’m thankful, not only because he’s one of my brothers, but he has Pebbles and the twins depending on him.

Just like the cameras in the streetlights when Horse was in his accident, and when Trigger’s Bel-Air was vandalized, the cameras on our entire street were down until Tiny got them back up and running. Just like those instances, none of the cameras were working again on the day of the bakery fire. Trigger even let us know last night during church that he saw some down wires when he got there.

Tiny is beside himself, trying to figure out who the hell is outsmarting him and his security measures.

“I fucking know, Ring. Don’t you think I want to figure out who the fuck is messing with my club? My family?” He sighs and finishes his last swig of beer. “I want to figure out who the fuck is doing this, and first and foremost, find out why, and then I want to fucking kill them,” he says with a growl.

I nod, stuffing my hands in the pockets of my jeans. Ghost scowls at me as he takes off in the direction of his office.

I left Lilah at home in bed this morning, and I’m starting to think I should’ve never left her. It’s been a week since the fire, and yet I still haven’t seen a true smile on her face. It’s starting to eat at me.

The only time she seems even remotely happy, or maybe content is a better word, is at night, right before bed, when I hold her in my arms. If I could put her in my pocket and protect her from the entire world, I would. It fucking sucks that she’s hurting, and there isn’t a goddamn thing I can do about it.

Reaper drops down into the seat that Ghost just vacated. I greet him with a chin lift before turning to take my own beer off the bar.

“How’s she doing?” he asks.

I let out a sigh. “Not good, Reap.”

Reaper frowns. “What can I do?”

I force out a chuckle. “I’m asking that same damn question, brother.”

“Fuck.”

“Yeah,” I agree, draining the rest of my bottle. “Fuck.”

Trigger steps up next to us, nodding in thanks at the club girl that hands him his own drink.

“Is she at least getting out of bed?” Reaper asks.

“Not much, man. I’m almost to the point of dragging her out by her feet.”

Reaper and Trigger chuckle. “Tried that eight years ago, Ring. It only makes it worse.”

Even though part of me knows he’s referencing when I went away, I tell myself it was for another reason, reminding myself that her nana passed and Sparrow moved that same year. Imagining that I wasn’t to blame for her depression is the only thing that’s keeping me going. I don’t know if I could handle taking responsibility for that on top of everything else that’s happening right now.

“Any tips aside from that?”

Reaper shrugs. “I didn’t do too good of a job back then.”

“Who did?”

Reaper huffs out another laugh, looking to Trigger. “Believe it or not, it was Pebbles.”

“No shit?”

His brows lift, and Reaper nods. “Pebbles came over one day, and next thing I knew, Lilah was finally smiling again and left her room. We all knew Renee was no fucking help.”

“I’ll have to give Pebbles a visit then,” I say, looking at Trigger.

“I think Pebbles is in a good spot mentally right now. She’s still trying to get in her groove, but she loves Lilah. I know she would do anything to help her if she knew she was hurting.”

“Will you talk to her for me?”

Trigger nods, pulling his phone from his pocket.

“Let’s fucking hope Pebbles knows how to help.”

Reaper nods, looking more like a tired father than the VP of a motorcycle club as he leans his elbow on the bar.

“Let me know how it goes?”

I slap a hand on his shoulder and squeeze. “Of course.”

Before heading home, I stop by Ghost's office. Rapping my knuckles on the wood, I wait a few seconds before pushing the door open.

I roll my eyes and flick off my brother as I'm met with a sight I don't particularly care to see.

The same girl, that hit on me at my party, Demi, is currently on her knees between my brother's legs with his tattooed cock down her throat.

"Fuck off," Ghost grunts.

"Don't have to tell me twice, fucker."

I shut the door noisily behind me, laughing to myself when I hear the girl throw a small fit at being walked in on. She chose the wrong fucking place to come if me walking in and seeing what she's doing bothers her.

I'm a little irritated that I didn't get a chance to talk to my brother about what I originally walked in there to say, but I shake it off easily and head for my bike to get home to my wife.

"Princess?" I call out to the empty room. Lilah isn't in the kitchen or living room, and she isn't twisted up in the sheets like I left her this morning.

"In here." Her small voice comes from what I'm assuming is the closet.

I push through the bathroom and enter the closet to find her at her small desk with fabric laid across her lap.

"What're you up to, babe?" I press a kiss to her exposed shoulder and watch as she guides the fabric through the sewing machine.

She shrugs and continues sewing the shiny nylon fabric together. "Just had an idea for a Halloween costume."

"Halloween is like a month away."

“Not like I have anything else to do,” she says snarkily.

I step to her side so I can see her face and frown at her.

She closes her eyes and sighs, dropping her hands to her lap. The whining of the machine stops, causing the room to go silent.

“I’m sorry,” she whimpers, and I catch a small tear as it tracks down her cheek.

I squat down next to her so I’m on her level. “You don’t need to say sorry. Just know I’m on your side, Princess. Whatever you need me for. If you need me to be your punching bag, I can do that.”

She shakes her head, more tears falling down her face. “I don’t want you to be my punching bag.”

I take her hand in mine and bring it to my lips. “Whatever you need, Lilah. I mean it.”

She forces a smile. “You’re the best.”

My phone beeps with a text in my pocket. I pull it out and smile.

Pebbles is on her way.

“Are you feeling up for some company?” Lilah’s brow furrows, and she wipes the wetness from her eyes. “A friend is coming to see you.”

“A friend?”

“Yep.” I push up and pull her up by the hand. “Why don’t you get dressed?”

Lilah looks down at herself and then back up to me. “I am dressed.”

I eye her ratty yoga pants and tank top with a huge bleach stain on her stomach and a hole right next to her nipple.

“Lilah,” I say, crossing my arms over my chest and frowning at her. “You and I both know if you look back on today and remember I let someone come over and see you wearing that, you’ll murder me in my sleep.”

She turns and studies herself in the mirror before turning a scowl my way. “Fair enough. Now go away.”

Fifteen minutes later, a knock sounds on the front door. I let Pebbles in and call out my goodbyes to them both.

I hope Reaper and Trigger are right. Hopefully Pebbles is mentally up to the task of helping Lilah. Hopefully, after all these years, Pebbles will know how to make her okay again.

twenty

Lilah

“LILAH!” I frown at the voice calling my name from the other room.

Out of all of the people that Ringer could have been talking about when he said that a friend was coming to visit, Pebbles is the last fucking person I expected.

Brenna, maybe. Hell, even Lyric. Sparrow, *possibly*. Pebbles never once crossed my mind. She has so much going on in her own life to worry about me and my problems.

Pebbles meets me at the doorway of my room, and I’m glad I took Ringer’s advice and changed into a normal pair of leggings and an oversized sweater.

I pull my knee up to sit on the edge of my bed and wave to the bench at the foot of my bed for her to sit. Her pregnant belly looks heavy as fuck to carry around.

“How are you, Peps?” I ask.

Pebbles smiles softly, rubbing her belly. “I’m not here to talk about me, Lilah. But I really am doing well.”

A genuine smile hits my lips. I’ve been worried about her. “That’s good. I’m so happy for you.”

“Thanks, Liles.”

I fiddle with a loose string on the hem of my pants and take a deep breath. “What are you really doing here, Pebbles?”

“I wanted to check on you.”

“You wanted to? Or Ringer asked you to?”

She lets out a laugh, and I know the answer immediately. “Does it matter?”

I shrug and smile with her. “I guess not. He probably thinks that, if you helped me once, you can definitely do it again.”

“Men.” We say in unison and laugh.

“Talk to me, Lilah.”

I clear my throat. There is so much to unpack with just the small command of *talk to me*.

What do I say? Do I say I feel like a failure? Do I say I’m fucking heartbroken that my entire dream went up in flames? Do I say I’m fucking terrified that I am in love with Ringer, and I’m pretty sure he is in love with me too? Do I cry about the fact that, even though Ringer says he isn’t, I’m almost positive that Ghost hates me and blames me for Ringer going to prison? Do I talk about the fact that I can see how much his brother’s disapproval guts Ringer?

What do I say? Where do I begin?

I’m head over heels in love with Ringer, but yet part of me feels like his life would be so much simpler if we never would have gotten married.

But selfishly, I refuse to give him up.

“The bakery made me feel closer to her,” is what I settle with, and once the words are out, I realize that is the root of all of my turmoil. Tears burn my eyelids.

Being in the kitchen of the bakery and baking everything that she ever taught me how to make made me feel like she was always with me. She was in the kitchen with me, whipping up butter and frosting cookies while she told me to

be careful pulling the next batch out so that I didn't burn myself.

Pebbles's hand lands on my leg, and she squeezes. "It's perfectly normal to feel close to her there. That's what you guys did the most. But Lilah, you can bake anywhere. Go bake a batch of brownies in your kitchen, and I bet you'll feel her. It's not the bakery, it's baking in general."

I worry my lip between my teeth, not wanting the tears threatening to fall let loose. Once they start, they usually don't stop. I'm not used to being such a crier.

"Your nana passed away way before you opened the bakery. She was never even in the building. Don't let the bakery burning kill the memory of her in your head. It's baking that brings you closer to her. Whenever I'm missing my dad and want to be close to him, all I have to do is go to the clubhouse. I know it's a little different, but the majority of my memories of my dad are in the clubhouse. What are your memories of your nana? In your bakery? Or in the kitchen of your dad's house, baking?"

"In my dad's kitchen," I admit in a whisper.

"There you go."

It kills me to admit it, but she's right. It almost feels like everything's been a lie. I've told myself since I can remember that the bakery was *our* dream. But that isn't even remotely true. Since the fire, homemade movie tapes have circled through my mind with different memories from my childhood. My nana's dream wasn't baking, it was photography. But because baking is what we did together, somehow I convinced myself that baking had been her true passion.

I push off my bed and unlock the tall chest on the other side of the room. I have all of Nana's cameras, a few large photo boxes, and scrapbooks stuffed inside.

I grab the box I know contains most of the photos of the club in it and bring it over to my bed. I pat the spot next to me and plop down on my stomach with the box in front of us.

Pebbles can't lay on her stomach because it is the size of a beach ball, so instead, she sits on her hip right next to me.

Pulling off the top of the box, I let out a belly laugh at the first picture on top.

Reaper, Tank, Horse, Bones, and Triton all have their arms around each other. What has Pebbles and us both in a fit of giggles is the costumes they are all sporting. The Halloween party is in full swing in the background of the photo, and all of the guys are dressed in their best costumes.

My *very young* dad is in a Hulk Hogan yellow onesie with an absolutely atrocious blonde mustache and *no tights*. Pebbles dad is wearing what I can only describe as a white cotton diaper. He's flicking off the camera with a pacifier hanging off his pinky finger.

"Jesus," Pebbles groans when her laughter dies down. "How old were we? I don't remember this, and my dad looks so young."

I flip the picture over and see the year. Doing the math, I realize I was only two when this was taken.

The next picture answers our question, and I burst out laughing at the irony. Renee is dressed up as Cruella de Vil, while I'm dressed like a small Dalmatian. So she's always been the devil. Nice to know.

The sad part about the fact that my nana was the resident photographer? She's hardly in any of the images we flip through.

My heart breaks even further when I reach into the box and pull out an older photo of my nana and grandpop. Reaper as a teenager stands smiling in front of them, leaning against what must have been his first motorcycle. Nana looks like a stunner in her tank top and tight jeans, while my dad and Pop both have on leather vests. Dad's is plain black, but Pop's is littered in various patches.

"Oh my gosh! I forgot about this!" Pebbles cries excitedly, shoving the picture in my face.

Triton has Pebbles up on his shoulders in the pool, and right next to him is Reaper with me on his shoulders while Pebbles and I play chicken. The rest of Pebbles's backyard filled with people everywhere.

"I used to love going to barbecues at your house. Renee and your mom didn't get along, so she never came."

"Is that why she never came?" Pebbles's brows raise.

I nod with a laugh. "She said your mom was a bitch."

Pebbles throws her head back and laughs. "Robin said the same thing about Renee!"

Our laughter dies down as we look through more pictures. The next one is what allows the tears to finally spill over my lids. "This is what I mean, Lilah," Pebbles says as she looks at the picture over my shoulder.

I'm standing on a stool mixing some sort of mixture in a large bowl with a huge smile covering my face. Nana stands beside me with her arms crossed over her chest with a small smile as she looks down at me.

"See that smile?" Pebbles asks, pointing to me in the picture. "Baking was *your* passion. She just helped you find it. Don't let the fire kill your passion, Lilah."

"You're right," I say with a smile as I press the picture close to my chest.

I wipe the tears off my cheeks, and Pebbles lightens the mood by pulling more pictures out of the box. She smiles wistfully every time she comes across one with her dad. I secretly start a pile of all the photos she finds with Triton and tuck them away to give her later.

My cheeks flame when she turns a picture around with a knowing smirk. Ringer is probably 20 or so, and right next to him? Me, staring up at him like a lovesick child.

I let out a groan and grab for the picture, reaching across the bed. Pebbles is quicker than me and holds it out of reach. She turns back to study the image with a smile. "Huh."

"What?"

“You really have always been in love with him, haven’t you.”

My spine stiffens, and I turn back to the picture of Tank and Maria I’m holding. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Pebbles reaches over and slaps my ass, hard.

“Ow!” I scramble to sit on my knees. “What was that for!”

She narrows her eyes at me. “Don’t you lie to me!”

“I’m not!” *Yes, I am.*

“Does he know?” she asks giddily.

“Does Trigger know you’re in love with him?” I throw back at her.

It’s Pebbles’s turn for her smile to drop. “We’re talking about you here, Lilah!”

“I don’t care!”

She waves the picture in my face. “You were *always* following Ringer around when we were kids. He had to have known.”

“It wasn’t like that,” I cringe, thinking of all of the times I did, in fact, follow him around like a puppy. Thinking back on it now, as an adult, is very fucking embarrassing.

“You aren’t a kid anymore.” She wiggles her eyebrows at me.

It’s so nice to have this Pebbles back. She’s nowhere near what she was six months ago, but I can tell she’s getting there.

“I am painfully well aware of that fact,” I laugh.

“Oh?” she narrows her eyes with a devilish smile at me. “What’s going on?”

I roll my eyes. “Like you don’t already know, you’ve always been the queen of knowing literally everything.”

“It’s true, yes. I do have eyes in the back of my head. But I want you to tell me.”

I force out a very audible exhale of frustration. “Yes. He knows.”

She eyes me gingerly, not pushing me farther than that. “Good. He better know how good of a woman he has.”

I narrow my eyes at her. It doesn’t escape me that she completely evades asking directly if something is currently going on between Ringer and me. But I respect it. Once upon a time, she and Trigger’s relationship was completely behind closed doors. Not until she was kidnapped and Trigger went berserk did anyone truly know that they were an item. Sure we all *suspected* it. But no one knew for sure.

I clear my throat. “Thank you, Pebbles.”

“Anytime.” She reaches over and squeezes me in a hug. “I never thanked you for all your texts and lunches over the last few months. You’ll never know how much they truly meant to me.”

“You’d do the same for me,” I say, and at her smile, I chuckle. “That’s what you’re doing right now.”

I pull her into another hug and squeeze. “You’re like the sister I never got.”

“Ditto, kid.”

“Whatever, I’m literally two years younger than you.”

Pebbles cringes as she grabs her stomach.

“You alright?” I frown down at where she’s holding herself.

“Fucking braxton hicks. I’m good.” She smiles, the pain still showing in her eyes.

“Thanks for coming over today. Do you have to go to the studio?”

“Yeah, I’m heading there from here. You should come by soon.”

“No offense, but I think I have a little PTSD.”

Pebbles giggles. “None taken. I get it. I still can’t drive by the coffee shop.”

I cringe at the reminder of what happened to her a few months ago.

“Don’t feel bad,” she says quickly, shaking her head. “I’m getting over it. I’m healing.”

“When you have the twins and can start up your pole classes, I’ll be there.”

She giggles. “Fair enough. Alright, I have to go teach a group of 5-year-olds how to plié and relevé.”

“You lost me at 5-year-olds. Bye, Pebbles!” I let out a laugh as she heads for the door, and I head back to my closet.

twenty-one

Ringer

JUST AS POPS is handing me the wrench I need, phones throughout the garage begin to ping. A group text has just come in.

Church. 15.

“What do you think that’s about?” Dad asks after reading the text Ghost has sent to the entire club.

Tank tosses his tools on his bench and comes over to where we’re standing. “What’s going on?”

“No fucking clue,” Dad says. “Let’s get over there and find out.”

Dad turns to check in with the rest of the guys who work in the garage before heading out.

I straddle my bike out front and scroll through the text thread between Lilah and me from this morning while waiting for him to finish.

Ever since her chat with Pebbles, she has been in much better spirits. When I’m not working in the garage, I’ve been gutting the bakery with the help of Lilah, Reaper, and Sasha. It

will take a lot of work and time, but it makes me happier than hell to see the smile back on her face.

At times, it looks like Lilah is still upset that we won't be able to restore it exactly as it was. While I understand that pain and frustration, I know that, in the end, it's going to be so much fucking better.

When the three of us pull up to the clubhouse, I take stock of all the other bikes lining the sidewalk. There are still a few missing, so it's nice to know I won't be on my brother's shit list for being late. I'm already on his shit list for enough as it is.

Wes nods at us as we enter. I throw him a chin lift in greeting and follow my dad toward church. We drop our phones in the bucket, and I drop down into my seat, giving Patch a hardy pat on the shoulder. Of course, the kid's already here.

He hasn't gotten to participate in many Church meetings yet. When the President called church, he sure as shit raced over here to make sure he wasn't late.

Ghost glares at me from his seat at the head of the table. *Huh*. What the fuck did I do this time?

Texas and Razor are the last two to amble into the room, only a few minutes late, and take their seats at the table.

Ghost slams his gavel right in the middle of the Desert Outlaws insignia carved into the table.

"Please tell me someone can tell me what the fuck is going on," my brother roars. He leans back in his chair with his elbows on each armrest, bringing his steepled hands to rest against his mouth. The way he taps his pinkies against each other tells me he's overwhelmed.

When he was a kid, his pinkies twitched whenever he had too much emotion. Anger, excitement, sadness— when it becomes too much, his pinkies are his tell. The fact that his right pinky is tap, tap, tapping against the other tells me that my brother isn't as calm as some may think he is as he sits before us, his face showing indifference.

Tiny leans forward in his chair, his fingers clicking softly against the keys on his laptop. “The Ace’s have been a little too quiet since all of this shit started happening. I, for one, am starting to get a little fucking suspicious.”

“I’ll try to set a meeting up with Power to see if I can find anything out,” Razor pipes up from my other side.

“I was able to get footage of an all-black van with no plates leaving the grocery store about fifteen minutes before Maria called Tank.” Tiny clicks open a screen, and after pressing a button, the large flat screen on the back wall mirrors his screen. “I lost it after it turned down this alley behind the gym.” Tiny points to the screen he has playing in slow-mo.

A couple of days ago, while we were working on one of Dad’s restoration bikes, Tank got a call from Maria. She was pissed as hell that she came out with a shopping cart full of groceries to find all four of her tires slashed.

Tank flew up there like a bat out of hell after yelling over the phone for Maria to go back inside, afraid that whoever caused Horse’s crash and the fire at the bakery was after her now. She was only mildly shaken up about it, which blows my fucking mind. It sure as hell made me go home and tell Lilah to watch her back at all times.

“Fuck,” Ghost growls. He goes around the room and ensures that everyone has someone in place to protect whatever family they need help with. When he gets to Reaper, I narrow my eyes at him.

“Lilah?” my brother says to his VP.

“Lilah’s fine. I’ll be with her until we can get the bakery fixed and running,” I glare at him.

It pisses me the fuck off that he turned to Reaper. I get it; he’s her dad. But she’s *my* fucking wife. My woman. My fucking ol’ lady. And he fucking knows it. The fact that he doesn’t acknowledge it is real fucking disrespectful.

He isn’t acting like my club president when it comes to recognizing Lilah’s role in my life now. He’s acting like a big

brother, which, when we are in this building, should not fucking matter.

I grind my molars together and sit back in my chair. At the beginning of this meeting, I actually felt bad for him and the burden of the weight he has to carry.

But that doesn't give him the excuse to be a fucking prick.

My anger causes me to zone out until Ghost says my name again sometime later. "Ring, you think you can go with Razor to meet with Power and see if he knows anything?"

I nod while glaring at him. His chuckle in response makes the hair on the back of my neck raise.

The only time that happens is when I'm in the ring and about to fight. I can feel the adrenaline rising through my system.

At the end of church, when Ghost bangs the gavel again, I'm out of my chair faster than hell. I slam the door to Ghost's office open and stand in the open space, clenching my fists together, waiting for him.

I grin sinisterly and shake my head when my dad and Reaper walk in behind Ghost. Reaper pulls the door closed quietly behind him.

"You're so scared you had to bring Daddy in with you?" I sneer.

"Shut the fuck up, Ringer," Ghost scoffs. "You're acting like a child."

"I'm acting like a fucking child?" I yell. "How about the fact that you are blatantly disrespecting me and my fucking *wife*. In front of every goddamned member of this club, Kelan!"

"Watch it, Ringer," he scowls.

"No. Fuck that, Kelan. You want to act like my big brother? Fine. When you start treating me like I'm a fucking *brother* to this club, not your fucking baby brother, I will act like you are my president."

Ghost's glare normally scares the fuck out of me. But at this point, I am too fucking pissed to let it affect me.

"What the fuck is your problem with me, Kelan? I spent eight goddamned years in prison! Every fucking day I couldn't wait to get out of that fucking shit hole and be with my brother again!"

"You're with the club every day, Ringer."

"You aren't fucking listening to me, Ghost!" I scoff. "I said *my brother!* You! You fucking pigheaded fuck."

His brow furrows as he studies my face.

"All I fucking wanted was to get out of prison, come home, and live my fucking life. With Dad, you, the club."

"And Lilah?" he adds.

"Jesus fucking Christ, Ghost. Lilah and I have been close our entire fucking lives. Is she why I went to prison? Fuck no. Did Lilah hold my hand and make me throw the punch? No. Did she hold me at gunpoint? Get it through your thick-ass skull! No, she didn't!"

"Why'd you go to the party, Ringer?"

I roll my eyes. "I've told you before. Flame and I went to make sure Lilah was okay. When she told me where she was going, there was no way in hell I was letting her go alone."

"You went to a party and killed the person hosting the fucking party, Ringer."

"It was a fucking accident!"

"I know that!"

"Then what the fuck is your problem!"

"Do you know where Michael Truden is?"

"What?"

Ghost leans against the back of his desk and drops his head, crossing his arms over his chest. "Derek's older brother."

"Why does that matter?"

“He’s a deputy now.”

My head whips back, and I crack my thumb, which just so happens to be *my* nervous tell.

“You know how many times I’ve run into him over the last eight years, Ringer?”

My eyes jump to my dad’s, whose expression matches my own confusion. That makes me feel a little better.

I turn back to Ghost and wait for him to continue.

“It’s like he gets off on putting himself in my path, threatening what he’d do to us when you got out and stepped one foot out of line. Over the years, he’s tried catching me at every fucking turn. He’s always fucking there.”

When I look at Reaper, I find his eyes downcast. Did he know about this?

“What the fuck does that have to do with Lilah and why you’re being such a prick about me and her?” I ask, shaking my head in frustration.

“It has nothing to do with Lilah, Ringer.”

“Well it sure as fuck seems like it. It’s like you were good with me being out, and then the second I came home from Vegas and told you about us, you started acting like you’d rather me be back in fucking prison.”

“Ringer, just leave it alone.”

“No. Tell me why.”

“Lilah is like a little sister to me, Ringer. You are my fucking brother. See how that could go wrong?”

“Enlighten me, Ghost.”

“Think back, eight years ago. You were 23. She was 15.” The way he enunciates her age makes me feel sick.

“I never once touched or thought about her like that back then, if that’s what you’re implying.”

Ghost shakes his head. “What? No.”

Reaper coughs uncomfortably from his spot against the wall.

“That’s not what I mean. Think about the before, Ring. That girl *idolized* you. She was in love with you as a kid.”

“Okay?”

“I just don’t want to see either of you getting hurt.”

“Why do you assume one of us is getting hurt?”

“You’ve never been in a relationship before, Ringer. And then five seconds after getting out of prison, you’re married! To Lilah! A brother’s daughter. The club princess. The girl you went to prison over.”

“See, you say you don’t blame Lilah, but then you say some shit like that. Fuck this.” I spin on my heel and slam the door open once again, stomping over to the bar where Trigger and Flame are already nursing some drinks.

“Ghost is a fucking cocksucker.” I throw myself into the stool right next to Trigger.

“What the fuck did he do now?” Flame asks with a laugh.

I glare at him. “He needs to butt out of my fucking business.”

“You’re his little brother. He’s just looking out,” Trigger offers.

“I’m thirty fucking years old, Trig. I’m a big boy, and I don’t need my big brother telling me what I can and can’t do.”

“What the hell is he telling you to do?”

“It’s what he’s telling me not to do. He’s too fucking late anyways,” I grumble under my breath.

I can feel their eyes on me. “Lilah.” I sigh before ordering a drink.

“Ahhhh,” Flame chuckles. “Big brother finally discovered you’re shagging the Princess?”

I growl as his large hand lands on my back, rolling my eyes. “The only person’s opinion I give even the smallest shit

about is Reaper, who doesn't give a fuck.”

“Woah there, son, I never said I don't give a fuck.” Reaper drops his hands to my shoulder behind me. “Although, I may start caring if you talk about fucking my daughter in front of me.”

I let out a sigh and drop my shoulders with the weight of his hands.

“Don't let him get to you. He's only looking out for you. Think about it. It's a brother's job to protect their younger brother. He wasn't able to do that for years, kid. Give him a break.”

I shake my head.

Trigger conveniently has an excuse to head out, and Flame isn't far behind him. My sour mood probably pushed them out the door.

“He wants to talk to you. But you need to calm down first.”

“It doesn't bother you?” I ask, turning to look at him since he's now sitting on the stool next to me.

“Which part?”

“That he blames Lilah for me going to prison.”

“No, he doesn't. If anything, he blames me.”

My brow furrows in confusion.

“Lilah's *my* daughter. He said it right. If Lilah wouldn't have gone to the party, you would have never been there.” He shakes his head, reaching across the bar for a new beer. “Lilah was 15. She should've never been allowed to go to the party. I let her *knowing* that you and Flame were going to follow her.”

I pinch the bridge of my nose between my fingers. “It's not your fault.”

“Maybe. Maybe not. Had I been wrong, and you didn't go? She would've gotten hurt.”

Reaper looks deep into my eyes, and I can see the genuine gratitude in his green eyes. Lilah's eyes.

"I don't regret it," I admit, looking down at my clasped hands on the bar.

"I know. That's why no matter what anyone in this world says, you deserve her. You both deserve each other. No one will protect her the way you will."

His words shock me into silence. Never in my life would I ever say that I *deserve* someone as good and pure as Lilah. She deserves way more than someone like me, and I deserve way less than the goddess that she is. But Reaper got one thing right; no one will ever be able to protect her like I can. Like I will. Til the day I die.

twenty-two

Ringer

“I CAN HEAR you breathing out there, Emmett. Come in here,” my brother’s deep voice grumbles from the other side of his door.

After our chat at the bar, Reaper convinced me to try talking with Ghost again.

He’s my brother, after all. I have to try.

I’ve been standing outside his office for probably ten minutes now, staring at the gold plate that has *President* engraved into it, right above *Ghost*.

I’ve been trying to work myself up to pushing the damn thing open and going to talk to him. I’m not going to yell. I’m going to tell him how I feel. If he wants me to leave so he doesn’t have to look at me, fine. I will.

I’m having a hard time figuring out how I can live in a world where I can have both my wife and my brother. I fucking hate being torn like this.

I push his door open. Ghost is sitting behind the desk with his black, wide-frame glasses pressed to his face.

“You look like a dork,” stumbles out of my mouth to break the ice.

Ghost chuckles, taking the glasses off and dropping them and the papers he was looking at onto his desktop as I take the

seat across from him.

“I’m sure one day Mom’s horrible eyesight will catch up to you too.”

“Nah. I have Dad’s 20/20.”

“Whatever you need to tell yourself, Em.”

I lean back in the chair and study my brother’s face. He does the same to me.

Even though he visited me in prison often, so it’s like no time went by as far as aging goes. It’s still a different ball game out here in the real world. I’ve been out for months now, and looking at him, it’s like I’ve only been home for a week at the same time.

Reaching forward to a tin on his desk, Ghost pulls out two cigars. He holds one out to me, and a smile pulls at my lips.

When we were kids, our dad always said that sharing a cigar with someone was a good way to call a truce. Sharing a cigar can be an intimate thing if you want it to be. Or it can just be business. But the softness in my brother’s eyes that reminds me of when we were kids tells me that this is it. This is Ghost calling a truce.

Just like our dad taught us.

I let him prep it for me since Ghost and Dad are the big cigar smokers in the family. I never really had time before going to prison to become one.

I take the cigar from him and take a puff of it while he gets his own ready and lit.

We sit in silence, puffing on our cigars as the delicious smell consumes the room around us.

Ghost heaves a sigh and taps his ring against the wood of his desk. “I’m sorry.”

“Gho-”

His raised hand stops me from speaking.

“Let me finish.”

I shove the cigar back in my mouth to figuratively keep my mouth shut.

“I apologize for making it seem like I did not respect your marriage to Lilah. I would like a chance to explain myself a little better. But I am also going to take responsibility that the blame falls onto my shoulders. I need to respect that you are an adult. Not just my little brother. You’re right.” He takes another puff of his cigar. “I haven’t been acting like your president when it comes to you. And for that, I apologize. I still see you as a kid, and I am going to try my best to fix that.”

I nod, accepting his apology.

“As far as the Lilah thing, I’ve just always had a hard time when it comes to you going to prison. That shouldn’t have been you, Ringer. You should have *never* gone to prison. I’m your big brother. I’m supposed to protect you. I should have fought harder. Got you a better lawyer. I should have sent someone else, a prospect, to the party with her. You were supposed to have such a good life.” Ghost looks away from me when his voice cracks. “After Mom died, I promised myself I would make sure you had the best life. When you got arrested and they sentenced you to eight years, I blamed myself every day. I never blamed Lilah. She just somehow got mixed up in all of this.”

He scrubs his free hand over his bald head. “When you came home from Vegas and told me and Dad you and Lilah got married, I panicked. Not for the reason that you’re thinking. Maybe I said things that hinted towards it, I don’t know.” He shrugs. “But honestly, I was scared. I ran into Michael the day before, and he was sniffing around, no doubt trying to rile me up since he has to know you’re out. But also because it would fucking kill me to see you get hurt when I just got you back. I would’ve reacted the same way had it been Lilah or literally anyone else.”

“Why do you think Lilah is going to hurt me?”

“Let me ask you this. If Lilah told you tomorrow she wanted a divorce, or she would’ve told you then that she wanted an annulment, what would you have done?”

My gut twists in hurt and anger just at the thought, and I know my face must show it.

Ghost points at me. “Exactly. I’ve watched you go through two absolutely horrible things in your life, Ring. First, when Mom died, I held you while you sobbed yourself to sleep for *weeks*. And then I watched as the tears dropped down your face in that courtroom when you were sentenced. I didn’t even get a chance to console or support you then. They ripped you away from me before I had the chance. I don’t ever want to see you like that again.”

“You can’t protect me from everything, Ghost.”

“Probably not. But I’m sure as hell never going to stop trying, Emmett.” His solemn stare tears at my heart.

Ghost and I were probably closer than most other brothers once upon a time, but we weren’t big on talking through our feelings. Had he just told me how he felt after Vegas, this entire thing could have been avoided. But he isn’t all to blame. I could have handled this entire thing differently as well.

“Aside from Dad, and hell, probably more than him, you are the only fucking person on this earth that I love. Yes, I love this club. But there is not one single thing that I wouldn’t do to make sure that you are happy in this life, Ring. And I truly am sorry that the last few months have been so fucked up because of me.”

“Lilah’s struggling with all this. She blames herself, and hell, up until twenty minutes ago, I really thought it was because of her too. I love her, and honestly, I would choose her if it came to it.”

Ghost’s face falls, and he takes a deep breath. “I’ll need to fix that. I would never expect you to choose. And the fact that you would choose her means all the more. I’m happy you have her, Ring.”

I nod. “Even if she hurts me?”

“I won’t want to, but I’ll hold you while you hurt for any fucking reason, Ring.”

“Thanks, Booger.”

Ghost rolls his eyes with a smile. “Fuck off.”

I chuckle, relaxing back in my chair while playing with the cigar in my fingertips. “I saw your pinkies in church.”

He sighs. “I don’t even fucking realize it anymore.”

“Neither do I.” I crack my thumbs to show him what I mean.

He chuckles. “Nice to know we both have our tells. You ever figure out what Dad’s is?”

“I’ve been in prison for eight years, remember?”

“Nah, I forgot. Thanks for the reminder,” he rolls his eyes.

“You alright?”

“Just want to figure out what the fuck is going on.”

“You and the rest of us.”

“Seriously, you and Lilah good, or do you need someone else to help watch out?”

“Between Reap and I, I think we’re good.”

“You’ll let her know I’m sorry?”

I nod, stubbing my cigar out on the ashtray at the corner of his desk.

“Alright, get the fuck outta here. I gotta get back to work.”

Lifting off of the chair, I salute him sarcastically. “Aye, Aye, captain.”

“Fuck off.”

I laugh as I exit his office.

Turning back to the open space, Reaper’s eyes catch mine, and when he sees the smile I’m sporting, he lets out a relieving breath. Next to him at the poker table, the tension visibly leaves my dad’s shoulders and I feel like a piece of shit because there is no telling how upset the riff between me and Ghost has made him.

I stroll over to them, wrapping my arm around my old man. “Love you, Pop.”

“You too, kid. All good?” he looks up at me, and I nod. He hands me a beer while turning back to the conversation and game in front of him.

“I’m going to head out. I’m sure Lilah’s wondering where I’m at.”

“Drive safe, son.”

“See ya, Pop.”

On the back of my bike, flying down the road the wind feels different. Freer. Clearer.

In no time, I’m parking my bike in the garage and taking the steps up to our apartment two at a time.

As soon as I unlock and push through the front door, I let a grunt out as a small but strong body knocks into me.

Lilah jumps up and wraps her legs around my waist and her arms around my neck. She presses a kiss to my lips, and before I can even respond, she pushes her little tongue between my lips. I let out a groan and press my palms to her ass, grabbing a handful in each as she takes advantage of my mouth.

“Hello to you too, Princess.”

She smiles, her chest heaving with air. “I found a house.”

I pull back and search her eyes. “I didn’t know you were looking at houses?”

“I don’t really have much to do during the day while you and Dad are working, so I’ve been doing some research.”

“Research.”

“Yes.”

“What kind of research?”

“The house hunting kind of research.”

“And what did you come up with?”

She hops down, and I shamelessly watch as her luscious asscheeks bounce in the too-small linen house shorts she has on as she walks over to the coffee table.

She shoves a stack full of papers into my chest.

I take my cut off and drape it over the back of the couch before plopping down on the velvet cushion. Straightening the pages out, I look at the first one. “Why does this house look familiar?”

She bites her lip and worries it between her teeth.

“What’s wrong, babe?”

“Is it weird if I tell you I don’t want to move away from my dad?”

I look down at the house again, my brows furrowing over where I’ve seen this house before. Until it dawns on me. This is the neighbor’s house.

I chuckle. “You want to move next door?”

Her cheeks lift in a breathtaking smile, her white teeth shining in the light. “Yes?”

“Is that a question?”

She shakes her head, her blonde curls bouncing against her face as she goes. “No.”

“I’ve never seen a for sale sign before.”

“That’s because it’s not for sale.”

“Babe,” I chuckle, “how are you going to buy a house that isn’t for sale?”

“There hasn’t been a person living in that house in *years*, Em. I already contacted a girl I went to high school with who is a realtor now, and she’s going to see if we can find out who owns it to see if they would even be willing to sell.”

It’s sappy as fuck, but my heart constricts when she calls me Em. I smile at her.

“What?”

“You called me ‘Em.’”

“Oh?” Her lips twitch. “Should I not call you that?”

“No, babe. I like it.”

“Oh. Okay.” Her smile widens. “I was scrolling through all of those house-hunting websites, and I was able to find old pictures of it. Look!”

She plops down next to me, grabs her laptop from the coffee table, and rests it on her lap. I lean over and wrap my arm around her back, resting my head against her shoulder while she pulls the site back up.

As Lilah flips through each picture, I flip my focus between the screen and her face, watching how excited she is gets with each click. I’m happier than hell she is finally focusing on something rather than worrying over the bakery.

She flips through pictures of the backyard, and once she starts going into the bedrooms, she points at different things in the pictures that can be remodeled.

“This one can be my studio-slash-closet, and we can turn this one into a home gym for you,” she says excitedly.

“How many bedrooms is it?”

“Three.”

“So the master, a closet, and a gym?”

“Yeah. That’s all we need,” she shrugs.

“I may be getting ahead of myself here, since we haven’t even had the whole marriage talk yet, but what about kids’ rooms?”

“Kids’ rooms?” her voice comes out in an uncomfortable squeak.

“Do you not want kids, Lilah?”

I straighten when Lilah clears her throat and returns the laptop to the coffee table.

She bites her lip again, and I can tell she’s uncomfortable since she’s blatantly avoiding my eye contact. That wasn’t my intention. It’s just a subject we’ve never really talked about before.

I sit forward, resting my elbows on my knees. “Let’s backpedal for a second.”

She nods, turning to stare directly into my eyes, but her face is blank. I can't get a read on her emotions.

"When you tell me you love me, you mean it?"

"More than anything," she murmurs so softly I strain to hear it.

"You changed your name to Mack. Does that mean you want to *stay* married to me? You want to be my wife until death do us part? You don't still feel like you did before, that you don't know me and need to date me?"

"I want to be your wife."

"Then you need to be honest with me here, babe. Do you see kids in our future?"

She sucks in a breath. "Do you?"

I sigh, scrubbing my hand on my jaw. "Up until five minutes ago, yeah."

Her eyes fall to the coffee table in front of us. "Oh."

"But..."

"But?" her wide gaze whips back to mine.

"But I'm getting the feeling you don't want them. And now it's making me second guess."

"It's a deal breaker then for you? Wanting kids? You're second-guessing us because I don't want kids."

She moves to stand up and walk away, but my grip on her arm stops her from retreating. I pull on her arm, and she lands with a huff in my lap.

"I didn't say that, so don't put words in my mouth, Princess." I press a kiss to her forehead. "I'm not second-guessing *you*, baby. You're mine. Kids or no kids."

"How can you say that?" she shakes her head, her hair getting tangled in my fingers from where I'm holding her head in my grip. "That's not something that people just get over with a snap. It's a deal breaker for most people, and if that's what you want, we should just quit this now."

I growl at the mention of us ‘quitting this.’ I flip us on the couch so she’s under me, my knee between her legs to hold my weight. “Quit putting words in my mouth, Princess. I’ve never really thought about having kids. Until you. And I’d be lying if I said I haven’t pictured what our kids would look like, but that doesn’t mean I have to have them or even necessarily want them. I *want* you.” I nip at her bottom lip. “Do I need to remind you why there is no way in hell that we could ever *quit* this?”

Her breath hitches, pressing her chest up into my welcome embrace. I wrap one hand around the back of her head at the base of her skull and use my other hand to tickle my fingertips along the hem of her cropped t-shirt. At her nod, I lick my lips before lowering my head to hers. Her lips meet mine in the middle and I smile against hers as she tangles her fingers in my hair.

“You’d give this up?” I ask as I drag my tongue along the side of her neck, her pulse pounding against my tongue.

She furiously shakes her head.

“No? That’s not what it sounded like to me, wife. Sounded to me like you’d so easily say goodbye to all of this.”

I grind my throbbing cock against her center. The flimsy linen shorts she has on provides no protection from my hardness. I take her lips in mine again, the flavor of the fruity energy drink I know she prefers exploding on my tongue.

“No, no. Never,” she pants against my mouth.

“Sure about that?” I ask, grinding my cock along her again.

Her breath hitches and she moans as I thrust against her clit.

“What do you need for me to remind you?” I run my nose along the shell of her ear and press a kiss against her throat.

I pull back to search her hooded eyes. She taps my lips with her fingertips.

“You need a kiss?”

She shakes her head.

I cock my head and watch as she works her finger into my mouth. She taps my tongue lightly. I let out a chuckle.

I run my tongue along her neck first. “Is this where you need it?”

She shakes her head again.

“Hmm.” I press an open-mouthed kiss to the cleavage poking out above her shirt. “Here?”

“No,” she says breathlessly.

I sit up, pulling at her shirt, and the sports bra she’s wearing comes off with it. Latching onto her nipple, I swirl my tongue around it before letting it go with a pop. “Here?”

“N-no,” she moans and squirms under me.

I lick a trail down her ribs and to her belly button. “What about here?”

“Closer,” she whispers.

I chuckle as I press a kiss to her hip bone.

She lifts her hips so I can pull her worthless shorts off.

“What do we have here?” I press a kiss to the small wet spot on her cotton panties. “Mmm.” I moan against her center as she squirms.

“It’s here, isn’t it?” I ask, licking the crease that connects her thigh to her center.

Her moan hits me straight in the dick. “A little to the left.”

I sit up, take a handful of her underwear, and rip them from her body. “Let’s get one thing straight, baby,” I drop back to my stomach and lap at her juices before swirling my tongue around her clit. She screams, her fingers almost ripping the hair out of my skull. “I don’t need any help finding it,” I chuckle against her.

I flick my tongue across her clit, applying more pressure when she needs it, and right when I feel her about to come, I pull away and press a kiss to her hip bone.

Running my fingers along her slit, I press soft circles against her nub before slowly entering her. She is so fucking wet my fingers glide in effortlessly. I cup her entire pussy in my large hand, with two fingers still inside her and my palm pressing against her clit. I watch as her face contorts in pleasure, each moan and sigh flowing through my ears like music.

“You’re so beautiful,” I tell her. Her eyes snap open to mine, and the way she holds my gaze as I hit the right spot over and over again, causing her to combust in pleasure, is so fucking intoxicating.

The aftershocks of her orgasm cause her pussy to contract around my fingers, but I refuse to remove them. Her chest rises and falls as her heavy breathing slowly returns to normal. “Are you convinced yet, my love?”

“I don’t think so,” she says breathlessly.

“Hm. Let’s see what else I can do to convince you.”

I pump my fingers in a few more times before pulling out. The sound of her juices against my hand makes a loud pop as I pull free. I bring my hand up to my lips, licking off her juices. I wink at her as she watches the act with eyes full of unabashed desire.

twenty-three

Lilah

“I’M ON MY WAY DOWN,” I tell Brenna, who I have on speakerphone, as I hobble around trying to get my shoe on.

“Lyric and Pebbles are already there, and Winnie is meeting us there.”

“You’re sure Maria isn’t going to be mad at us?”

“She can’t be mad when she refuses to take money from us anyways. Besides, I talked to her. She’s fine. She knows there’s too many of us for her to handle on such short notice.”

I grab my purse off the counter and lock the door behind me. “Okay, if you’re sure.”

“I’m sure. See you when you get here.”

I round the corner into the garage and run into my dad and Ringer. “Hey,” I chirp.

“Good morning, Princess.” Ringer rises to his full height when I stop next to him. He presses a kiss to my lips, his newly grown-out beard tickling my face. I catch my dad smiling at us from his spot by his bike.

“Where you off too, Princess?”

“Girls and I are going to the spa in the city. Winnie got some vouchers for some treatments, so we’re making a day of it.”

“Sweet.”

A smile pulls at my lips as a sleepy Sasha comes into the garage from the kitchen door. “Hey, Sash.”

“Morning,” she says with a smile.

It seems like Sasha is here more than she isn't. I even caught my dad taking her little shih tzu, Charlie, out to use the bathroom a few mornings ago.

My dad opens his arms for her to walk into. I smile at them, happy for them both. I really hope they work out. It would be heartbreaking for everyone involved, me included, if they didn't.

I rest my head against Ringer's arm while he and Dad explain their plans for the day with the bakery. Apparently, just the last of the demo that is a little too difficult for me and Sasha.

I press another kiss to Ringer's furry cheek as soon as Brenna pulls into the driveway. I wave to her and toss goodbyes behind me as I skip down the drive and drop into the passenger seat of her car.

“Hi!” she greets, smiling so sweetly behind the too-big-for-her-face sunglasses.

“Hi,” I say back, buckling my seatbelt.

I sit back and let the ice-cold A/C cool my skin down. September in Desert Rose is tricky. Sometimes it's chilly, mostly at night, but during the day, you could easily suffer from a heart stroke while frying an egg on the hood of your car.

“It's hot as hell today.”

Brenna nods, turning the dial on the dash to cool the inside of the car even more.

“Thanks!” I giggle. “How are you?”

She wiggles her eyebrows at me, causing me to roll my eyes. “I should be asking you that question.”

“I'm perfect, actually.”

Brenna turns a surprised look my way with her eyebrows halfway up her forehead. “Oh?”

I nod. “I’ve been working on Halloween costumes in my spare time, and I’m just about done with mine and Ringer’s.”

“Ah! You should make Flame and me some too! You have the time, right?!”

Brenna watches the road as she drives us toward the city. I turn toward her and study her side profile. She is an entirely different person than when she came to Desert Rose.

Gone is the shy, reserved girl, and in her place is a beautifully confident woman who walks with her spine straight and her head held high. I admire her so much.

“Of course. I would love to. It will give me something to do in all my free time,” I reply and force a chuckle.

Brenna turns to me, and her brows frown over the rim of her aviator sunglasses. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean it that way.”

I wave her off. “You’re fine. It’s true, though. It honestly will work out well for me. I can’t sit still for long. I get antsy.”

“I feel you there, sister. I am the exact same way. I cannot even believe how satisfying tattooing has made me feel. I constantly have something that I could be doing.”

I nod. “That’s how I feel about baking, but I obviously can’t do that right now. So instead, I’ve turned to my second love. Clothes.”

“I am so jealous of your style.” Brenna eyes my outfit choice of the day and smiles in approval.

“My style of old shirts and ratty pants?” I laugh. I’ve always gotten compliments on the pieces I combine, and I’d be lying if I said it wasn’t an ego boost.

We pull up to the spa and wave through the windshield at Lyric, Pebbles, and Winnie, who are waiting on the sidewalk.

Pebbles wraps me in her skinny arms first before moving on to Brenna. Winnie looks beside herself with excitement as we walk into the chic spa. The mood in this place is fun.

Upbeat music is playing from the speakers in the reception area. It definitely isn't the playlist I was expecting for such a relaxing atmosphere, but it works. Behind the reception desk is a waterfall wall. The cliché makes me chuckle.

A gorgeous redhead is behind the counter, and when we walk up to her, her blinding smile beams as she takes all of us in. "Welcome to Body and Soul! How can I help you?"

I stand back as Winnie checks all of us in and continue surveying the spa. The reception area is blocked off from the rest of the spa by two large frosted glass doors on each side of the desk. One door is etched with the word '*staff*,' and the other door, in gorgeous calligraphy, says, "*Let us take care of you Body and Soul.*" Cute.

The redhead, whom we've discovered is named Ollie, guides us through the right door and into a locker room of sorts. We all chuck our clothes into assigned lockers and change into plush, forest-green robes.

"Damn, this place is snazzy!" Lyric sticks her tongue out playfully and wiggles her eyebrows at Winnie, who has had a permanent smile plastered on her face since we pulled up. Someone's excited to get pampered today.

I hold in my laugh at Pebbles and Winnie, whose bellies stick out of their robes, as we walk into the next room. Another gorgeous employee brings a tray over and offers flutes of champagne and juice for the mamas-to-be.

One by one, we are pulled into another room for massages. I then go from a blissful full-body massage to a small salon where I almost forget I have a husband and offer to marry a 60-year-old woman who washes, massages, and brushes my hair to within an inch of my life. Who knew you could die from the satisfying pleasure of someone playing with your hair?

We all meet back up in the main area for manicures and pedicures. My eyes almost burst out of their sockets when I see Pebbles. Her hair is curled, and she must have gotten eyelash extensions. She looks amazing, just like she used to.

“Damn, girl!” I whistle.

She bows theatrically, bending in half over her big belly and laughs as we all rush her with compliments.

She drops down at the station right next to me and offers her left hand forward to the technician.

“What are you getting?” she asks me.

I nod at the bright red gel polish next to me and roll my eyes with a smile. “Like I’d pick something different.”

Pebbles laughs and flips through the color samples with her free hand.

Over the next hour and a half, we switch between the manicure station and the pedicure chairs, talking, laughing, and, most importantly, relaxing. It’s just what I needed after all the drama since the fire at the bakery.

After the spa, we end up at the cafe we all love and spend another hour and a half chatting. It’s been decided that I am going to be making all the couples’ Halloween costumes. We make plans to meet at the fabric shop I love so that I can get all of the supplies and materials to make this one of the best costume parties yet.

Brenna drops me back at home, and I can already see my dad and Ringer still in the garage tinkering around.

I lean my hip against the workbench and watch them work on my dad’s bike in tandem.

They are so focused on their task that neither one of them noticed Brenna’s car dropping me off or heard me walk into the garage. Now I’m standing less than four feet away from them, and they are still clueless.

“Don’t you think you guys should pay more attention to your surroundings?” I finally pipe up after about five minutes of watching them.

Ringer’s eyes find me, and a smirk pulls at his lips before he turns his attention back to the bike. “Princess, if you think for one second that I didn’t know you’ve been standing there

for the last few minutes, you're not as bright as I thought you were."

I frown at him. "That's rude."

"Com'ere, babe."

I huff and walk over to him, stopping when my knees hit his thigh. He snakes his big hand up the back of my thigh and massages my leg.

"I had my finger on a bolt and knew damn well I'd have dropped the whole thing if I would have stopped and looked at how sexy you are."

Dad clears his throat and rolls his stool away. "That's my cue. You guys comin' out tonight?"

Ringer turns his gaze on mine and waits for my call, which I add to the long list of things I love about him. He doesn't just assume that I want to do things. He makes sure I'm cool with them first.

I nod at my dad.

"See ya later, then."

After Dad disappears inside, Ringer squeezes his fingers into the flesh of my thigh again. Looking down into his eyes, goosebumps pebble my skin at the heat I find in them. His eyes flick between mine and my lips.

He wraps both arms around the back of my legs and pulls my legs to the outsides of his. I let out a giggle when it becomes impossible to resist him, and I end up in his lap, straddling him on his stool.

Wrapping his arms around my waist, he pulls me flush to his chest and lets out a satisfied groan. "Mmm."

A full body shiver hits me as he tucks his face into my neck and breathes me in. Who knew such a simple act could be so hot?

His large hand glides down my back and lands on my ass. Gripping it in his palm, he pulls me in even farther. I could already feel his growing erection pressing against his jeans,

but now that you can't even squeeze a tissue between us, I can *really* feel how aroused he is.

“Em?”

“Hmm?” He hums against my neck, dragging his lips along the bare skin at the side of my neck and down to my collarbone.

I hold in the moan fighting to break through. “You okay?”

“So fucking perfect, Princess.” At the feel of his tongue tracing a line up the column of my neck, I finally let the moan slip free.

His fingertips continue to trace lightly along my sides and, every so often, work their way down to grope my ass cheeks. Each time, his teasing touches get closer and closer to my center, and I would give anything for him to speed this up and just get there.

“Want to go upstairs?” I ask breathlessly as the tips of his teeth glide along the delicate skin of my neck.

“Nope,” he taunts with another flick of his tongue.

“My dad could come back out at any second.” I pull back to look into his eyes.

His hooded eyes meet mine, and it's in this exact moment that I know I am an absolute goner for this man. I may have been in love with him since before I even knew what love truly was, but it's at this moment that I can admit to the core of my soul that I will never love another man in my entire life the way that I love him.

The affection in his eyes staring back at me tells me that he feels the same. Does he look like a man that wants to have sex with his wife? Yes. But the deeper I look, I find the warmth held only for me. I find the small impurity in his left eye, the smallest speckle of green that shines brightly through the blue.

He drops his voice and guides my hips to grind against his erection. “Can you be quiet, baby?”

I bite down on my bottom lip and feel the warmth hit my cheeks. I whisper in response. “I can try.”

“You better, because if you make too much noise, your dad is going to come back out here.”

“Be quick,” I scold as I push up from his lap to get rid of my pants.

Ringer helps free me from them and, in the next breath, pulls his own jeans down just far enough to pull himself out.

“Come here, Princess.”

I raise my leg back over his lap and settle down, causing my bare ass to rub against his jeaned thighs.

I let out a gasp as Ringer rubs and squeezes the flesh of my legs, moaning at the contrast of his grease stained hands against my pale skin. I *love* it.

Using one hand, he pinches my chin to guide my gaze back to his. Using that same hand, he brings his thumb to his mouth, and I’m captivated as I watch him gather saliva on the digit. A moment later, my eyes fall closed at the electrifying feel of his strong thumb pressing against my sensitive clit.

“Look at me,” his gruff voice commands, and I pry my eyes back open. Biting his bottom lip, he watches me with so much intensity that I crumble under his stare. I shiver as he rubs his thumb in perfect, synchronous rhythm between my folds. His eyelids drop, and he flips his hand so he’s able to push two glorious fingers inside me.

Fuck.

My eyes flutter closed. There’s no way in hell I can keep them open now. I drop my head back and let out a feral moan as his fingers hook inside me, and he starts to move.

“Fffuck!”

“Shit, babe. Hang on.”

Ringer quickly slides me off his lap and grabs a remote from the workbench. He points it towards the stereo system. *When Worlds Collide* begins to blare through the speakers. Without another breath, he is back with me, pulling me onto his lap.

Using his free hand, he guides my mouth back to his. “Now you can be as loud as you fucking want.”

Just as he speaks his last word, he hooks his fingers back inside me, eliciting a blood-curdling scream to erupt from my throat as my body gives me no warning before I come all over his hand. “Shit,” I groan.

Ringer doesn't stop there and starts to rub circles against my clit. My leg starts to shake, and I use all of my strength to force his hand away. He doesn't give me any time to catch my breath before switching gears and running the tip of his cock along my slit. He glides along my opening, wasting no time before slamming home, causing my eyes to roll to the back of my head.

He groans against my neck. “Fuck, I love being inside you.”

“I feel so full.”

“Full of me, Princess.”

“Fuck me, Ringer.”

His chest vibrates against mine from his chuckle. “You don't have to tell me twice.”

I let out a yelp as Ringer stands from the small bench. I hold on for dear life as he spins us, squatting down and as he presses my back to it. The position creates an entirely new sensation within me. If I felt full before, fuck. Now I feel like I am *overflowing*.

Once Ringer is confident that I'm secure in our position, he pushes my legs apart and holds them at his shoulders. This position gives me the new advantage of being able to see all of him.

His shirt is ridden up, and the delicious muscles of his lower stomach peek out at me. I have an intense urge to bite him there.

I make a mental note to do that later.

Propping one of my legs on his shoulder, he brings his fingers back to my center, expertly drawing circles around the

sensitive nub.

“Can you come for me again, Princess?”

I shake my head, too overcome by all of the intense stimulation surrounding us.

Any second now my dad could storm through the garage door from his kitchen. He could be wondering why the music is so loud. Between the blasting music, the fear of being caught, and the tantalizing things Ringer is doing to me, my senses are in overdrive. I feel like I could explode at any second.

“Give it to me, Princess.”

I shake my head harder, letting out a shuddering moan as he switches his angle and, if it's possible, fucks me deeper.

Ringer cocks his head, eyeing me through his long lashes. “Are you saying I can't make you come?”

I bite my lip and shake my head again. I know damn well he now sees it as a challenge.

Grabbing under my armpits, he picks me up. I throw my arms around his neck and lock my legs around his back just in time for him to slam my back against the wall.

Dipping his lips to the shallow indent behind my ear, he says, “Challenge accepted.”

Prying my legs from behind him, he threads his arms under my knees to hold me wide open. I barely have time to blink before he pistons his hips in rapid fire, fucking me like never before.

“Shit!” I scream when, once again, my entire body is overtaken by the earth shattering release. My thighs shake against his biceps as the wet sounds of our joining overpower the radio.

I whimper as Ringer shows no signs of slowing as he hits me with thrust after thrust.

The back of my head thuds against the wall in exhaustion. I've gone limp, succumbing to his assault on my pussy. My

eyes feel like lead weights, but I'm able to pry them open to set sights on the angelic demon that I call my husband. The smirk lining his lips causes goosebumps to line my skin.

"I want another one."

My eyes widen, and I groan. Whether it's of pleasure or defeat, I'll never know. Probably a little of both.

After not one but two more orgasms, equaling a total of *four*, he guides me up the stairs and helps me clean up ever so sweetly.

We eat leftover pizza on the couch for dinner, and I won't lie that I feel entirely fucked and stuffed.

I roll my head along the back of the couch and find him already watching me. "What?"

"You're so fucking beautiful," he says, pushing a wayward curl behind my ear with his middle finger.

A blush heats my cheeks. "You're beautiful too."

He points to himself, the corner of his mouth pulling up into a small smile. "This ugly mug?"

I playfully slap his hand away and giggle. "Stop. No such thing as you and ugly in the same sentence."

Ringer bites his lip with a chuckle and kisses my forehead. "Whatever you say, Princess."

I almost said no when Ringer asked if I wanted to go to The Castle tonight.

I should've.

Even though Ringer assures me that he and Ghost are all kosher, I still feel insanely awkward around him. And I fucking hate it.

Especially when Ringer pulls me into his office and, no more than twenty seconds later, announces he forgot

something, slipping from the room and leaving Ghost and me alone.

I don't want to just stand here like a fucking weirdo, so I make my way over to the wall of photos lining the far wall of Ghost's office. Some of the pictures are old as hell, some possibly older than Ghost. But some are as recent as right before Pebbles's accident.

There's a photo of Brenna and Lyric sitting on the edge of the bar with their arms wrapped around each other, smiling at the camera.

"Pebbles took that picture the night before she was kidnapped." Ghost's deep timbre breaks through my thoughts.

"It must be weird without all of them here."

"I'm not going to lie, and I'll never admit it outside of this room because I don't want to make anyone upset, but I fucking miss it. I hate it here now."

My brows dip in question. "You hate it?"

He shrugs. "It's not the same."

"Why not? You still have all the same girls, minus two. You still have Lyric."

"Nah. I don't." He smiles softly to himself, looking down towards where his boots are rubbing a hole in the carpet.

"What do you mean?"

"I don't have her anymore. She met somebody."

I rear back in surprise. "You and Lyric are done?"

He turns to me with a soft smirk. "Were we ever really *on* though?"

My lips lift in a smile, and I shrug. "Touche."

Ghost runs his hand along the back of his neck. "In all honesty, I'm happy for her. She wanted things I wasn't willing to give. I'm happy as fuck she found someone that is willing to put her above everything and be who she needs them to be."

I nod. "Wow."

“What?”

“That shit is deep.” I punch his shoulder playfully. “Who knew you had it in you?”

Chuckling, he grabs my hand and holds it in his. His lighthearted demeanor shifts into something much more serious. “You know I love you, right Liles?”

A lump forms in my throat, making me unable to swallow, let alone speak, so I nod.

“I never wanted you to be the one who got hurt in all of this. Shit, I didn’t even mean to hurt Ringer in it, either. I was just having my own issues in my fucked up head and took it out on you guys when I shouldn’t have. I didn’t admit it to Ringer, and would appreciate it if it stayed between you and me, but it was more than an overprotective brother tantrum.”

My brows furrow, and I squeeze his hand, hoping to encourage him to continue.

“I was honestly fucked up over the whole Lyric thing. Then you guys came home married, and I kind of just lost it. I’m sorry.”

“What do you mean you were fucked up over Lyric?”

He shakes his head, rubbing the palm of his hand over his mouth and down his beard. “I’m not and have never been *in love* with Lyric. Fuck, I don’t even know if I’ve ever even been in love. Scratch that. I *know* I’ve never been in love. I wasn’t upset that she broke things off, and I know she wasn’t in love with me either. Her breaking off whatever it is was we had because she met someone that *could* give her more really hit me hard. The nail in the coffin was when you guys came home hitched. It put it into perspective that I’ll never have that.”

“You’ll never have what? A marriage?”

He shrugs, and my heart breaks for him. “Marriage. Someone to love the way my brother loves you. Someone that loves me as much as you do him. All of that”

I squeeze his hand harder as my heart shatters for someone I've admired my whole life. "Why count it out? You never know what will come along. Someone may come along one day that will knock your entire world off its axis, and you'll have all of that."

"Nah. If it hasn't happened in 34 years, babe, it probably isn't gonna happen. I let my jealousy almost ruin a relationship between my brother and sister-in-law, and pretty much my dad, too. I don't have time for that shit."

I smile at his quick change in mood back to the normal, upbeat Ghost I'm used to. "You never know. I'd put money on it. Your someone is out there just waiting for you, just like you're waiting for her."

"Next, you're going to tell me I'll also win the lottery next Monday night."

I hold my hands up. "Woah, woah. I'm not a miracle worker. Calm down now."

Ghost holds his hand up. "Truce?"

I smile at him, flinging my small body into his large one. "Truce."

I tuck my face into his chest and smile against him as his chuckle tickles my hair before he presses a kiss to the top of my head. "Love ya, Lile."

"Love you, Ghost."

twenty-four

Ringer

“PRINCESS, WHAT IN THE ACTUAL FUCK,” I gripe, walking out of the closet and stretching the material against my thigh.

The complaint falls from my lips as soon as I lay eyes on her. She’s wearing what I could only describe as a bikini. Her tits are pushed up so high above her top that I’m afraid she’s going to show everyone her nipples tonight. Her bottom half sports the tiniest shorts I’ve ever seen in my entire life.

Fuck, I love slutty Halloween costumes.

Ring girl, meet cage fighter.

Luckily, the only thing I have to wear are regular workout shorts and a pair of small hand wraps, but the shorts she got me are too fucking small.

“You look like a fucking smoke show, Princess.”

She’s already wearing blush, but her cheeks turn a shade darker at my compliment as she threads an earring through her lobe. “Thank you, handsome.”

I step up behind her and kiss her bare shoulder. “You ready?”

“One sec,” she says, jogging over to the desk in the closet to grab her match sign.

“Went all out, did you?”

“When I commit, I commit,” she deadpans.

I chuckle, shaking my head. “Let’s go.”

The clubhouse is packed, and we weave through the crowd, holding hands amidst the chaos. People in costume seem to close in left and right. Ghost must have invited every damn person in the county.

“I’m going to find my dad and then grab us some drinks!”

“I’ll be out by the fire. There are too many people in here.”

Her eyes meet mine in question. I wave her off with a reassuring smile and head for the side doors.

I find my brother, Dad, Flame, Brenna, and Lyric around an already lit fire, so I take an empty seat and chuckle at my brother’s ghost costume. “Very original, Booger.”

“You have room to talk, dickhead.”

Fuck. He has a point there. I laugh as I get a good look at my dad’s cowboy costume, complete with a Stetson on top of his head. “Clean up good, old man.”

“Nice underwear,” he throws back.

I shake my head just as Lilah comes barreling out of the door in her next-to-nothing outfit.

My dick instantly hardens at the mere sight of her.

She stops right in front of me, throwing herself into my lap.

“Thanks, baby.” I kiss her neck as she hands me an orange plastic cup with what I can only assume is beer.

I don’t know why Ghost had to make this such an event. If it were up to me, it would be just like this, all of us chilling around the fire, shooting the shit and having a good time.

A little while and a few drinks later, Pebbles comes out and falls into an empty chair next to Ghost. A little girl I saw earlier and wondered who she belonged to stops right in front of Pebbles like she knows her.

I watch on curiously as Ghost teases her about names. A second later, the kid is screaming for her mom. The biggest

smile to ever grace my face takes over as I watch my brother's downfall.

"Who is that?" I press my lips to Lilah's neck and nod towards the dark-haired skeleton a few feet away. I can't take my eyes off of my brother's expression as his tongue practically falls out of his mouth.

"I think her name is Brit, or maybe Bre? No, it's Brit for sure. Her daughter dances at Pebbles studio. I'm pretty sure something happened recently, and now she and the girl are living in Trigger's old apartment. I think they gave her a job working in Maria's shop. She's fucking gorgeous."

"How the fuck do you know all that?"

The little tease winks at me and shrugs. "I know everything."

I tap her on the ass, and I stand up after her. "I guess being married to a gossip has its perks."

She scoffs and pinches my nipple, which causes me to yelp like a fucking girl. "That fucking hurt, Lile."

"I am not a gossip!" she huffs cutely.

I tap her on the nose before turning to pull her inside behind me. "Yes, you are."

Lilah huffs behind me but follows me inside regardless. Working her up is one of my favorite things. She doesn't truly get angry, but the make up sex is well worth the pinches and smart comments.

I turn back and smile at her as she crosses her arms and pretends to be upset. "Is it time to do this contest shit yet?"

"Yeah, I think so. Why?"

I drop my lips to the edge of her mouth and press a kiss there before flicking my tongue along her bottom lip. "Because my wife is standing in front of me more than half fucking naked, and I've been rocking this fucking hard on since I walked out of the closet." Grabbing her hand, I press it against the front of my shorts and groan at the contact.

Lilah contemplates for all of ten seconds before grabbing my arm and pulling me towards my brother's office, which just so happened to be the closest door.

I don't think twice as I grab her by her tiny waist and slam her up against the back of the door, crashing my mouth to hers.

She climbs up my body, her arms winding around my neck. "Fuck, baby, hold on," I groan.

Hooking my thumbs in the nylon bottoms, I force them down her legs, not giving a fuck if the damn things rip. Throwing them behind me, I grasp her thick thighs in my palms and lift her and press her ass flush with the door.

Using my hips to hold her against the wood, I break the kiss and pull away so I can see her. Damn, am I pleased with what I find. Chest heaving as she catches her breath, her eyes follow mine down her body where they land on where my length is still covered by my shorts and pressed against her wet pussy.

The song leaking in from behind the door fits so fucking perfectly. *Addicted* vibrates the door as I thrust against her. "I'm addicted to this right fucking here," I say, rolling my hips against her to the beat of the music.

Her eyes roll to the back of her head. I push her top up so her tits fall free. As soon as the peach tips come into view, I attack. I swallow one whole as I run my thumb over the other, causing it to pebble and strain. "Fuck," she whimpers.

Reaching between us, I push my shorts down and barely have to tilt my hips before she's sinking down on my length.

Letting her breasts fall free between us, I pull my gaze back to hers and love what I fucking see. Her hooded eyes look at me so lustily as I fuck her into the door. I wrap my hand loosely around her neck, guiding her lips back to mine. "This is fucking mine," I growl into her mouth.

"Yes," she hisses as I thrust faster. "You're so big."

What fucking guy doesn't love to hear that while he's fucking? Especially from his wife, who he's fucking against

his brother's office door while an entire fucking party is going on right outside.

“Are you going to come on my big dick?”

She nods, her head bobbing against my hand at her throat.

“Words, Princess.”

“Yes.”

“Yes, what?”

I slow my thrusts down as I wait for her answer. I tease her by fucking her deeper and slower.

“Yes, I'm going to come,” she whines.

I run my nose along the side of her face before nipping at her lip. “Where?”

“On your big dick,” she moans as I bottom out inside of her, grinding my pelvis just right so I hit her clit.

“Good girl.” I can't help but chuckle.

Pulling out so only the head of my cock remains, I slam back inside her, thankful for the change in song outside the room to an upbeat one. I start to fuck her to the rhythm of Theory of a Deadman, and within seconds, my girl is screaming out, coming all around my dick. Her pussy pulses against my shaft, milking the come straight from my balls. Ropes of come rip from my body, and as I lazily thrust in and out of her, coming down from the high of our pleasure, our combined releases drip to the floor below us.

“Fuck,” I breathe against her hair. “That was—”

“Yeah,” she interrupts me with a small giggle.

Holding her steady in my arms, I thrust inside her a few more times, not wanting to pull out of the fucking heaven that is her body. I press open-mouthed kisses along her neck and up until I reach her mouth. “I love you, Princess.”

She smiles against my lips. “I love you.”

Dropping her to her feet, she turns toward Ghost's desk for a tissue.

“Don’t even think about it.”

She looks at me like I’ve grown three heads. “You expect me to walk around the party like this?”

I close the space between us, reaching between her legs and gathering our releases. I smirk in satisfaction at the way her eyes roll as I push everything back inside her before helping her back into her shorts.

“You’re incorrigible.”

“You wouldn’t want me to change.”

She shakes her head with an exasperated smile. “Damn you. I hate that you’re right.”

“Every step you take tonight, you’re going to think about me.”

My eyes drop as she saunters a few steps toward me. “I’d think about you even without your come between my thighs,” she purrs.

I groan at the intense visual of my seed dripping from her flashing through my mind. “Fuck.”

“You seem to say that a lot. Cat got your tongue?” The little minx pulls my bottom lip between her fingers. “Or do I just make you speechless?”

“Your pussy makes me speechless. So I guess you *could* say the cat has my tongue.”

She giggles and shakes her head before patting my chest.

I follow her back out to the main room where Maria, who is dressed in a sexy Harley Quinn costume, sees us immediately and tells Lilah she needs to announce it’s time to vote for costumes.

I help her onto the stage and hold back the growl at all of the whistles and catcalling that greet her as she stands behind the mic. Fuckers need to keep their eyes off my woman. She’s mine to look at.

“Everyone shut the fuck up and listen up!”

When the noise continues, Lilah puts her fingers in her mouth and lets a loud as fuck whistle out. As the room immediately silences, she smiles sweetly.

“Since we have so many amazing costumes, we’ve decided to have two winners this year! I’m pretty partial since I made a lot of them,” she laughs with a shrug of her shoulders. “Anyway, we’ll let the votes decide! There are two buckets on the bar! Happy voting and Happy Halloween, bitches!”

She turns, smiling down at me, and I don’t have time to brace myself before she jumps into my arms. Good thing she isn’t heavy.

She wraps her small hand around my large one and pulls me towards the bar Maria set up for voting.

“Well?” I ask when she puts the small slip of paper in my hands.

“What?” She looks at me quizzically.

“Who are we voting for?”

“That’s cheating! *You* have to vote. That’s the whole point.”

“Who are you voting for?”

She scowls at me playfully. “I’m not telling you.”

“Come on, babe.”

I’m reaching for her neck to pull her in for a kiss, planning to distract her so I can see who she’s written down, when Trigger stops next to us. “I need you to come with me fast, brother.”

I turn away from my girl and note the severe worry in Trigger’s gaze. “What’s going on?”

“Follow me. *Hurry.*”

I catch Lilah’s eyes, and she nods me away with a curious smile before turning back to the bar and collecting people’s votes.

twenty-five

Ringer

WHAT THE FUCK?

I cough over the smoke starting to accumulate in the kitchen.

“What the fuck?” Ghost roars behind me.

“Fuck man, be careful! That’s the shit that fucked my face up,” Trigger shouts at my brother as he rushes across the kitchen to the random box sitting on the counter. Trigger grabs a fire extinguisher and sweeps the nozzle across the counter.

“Who the fuck started this?” I growl, and we all step carefully toward the counter.

“I don’t know, but something’s going on here. Shut this shit down,” Ghost barks at no one in particular as my eyes rove over the entire kitchen to assess for anything else that could be suspiciously out of place.

Just as I step closer to the box to check it out, my dad, Tank, and Reaper push through the swinging door. Dad waves his hand in front of his face from the leftover smoke. “What’s going on?”

I reach into the box, finding a small piece of paper. How the fuck did that not catch fire too? I look farther into the box, noticing that the sides are lined with some sort of thin metal. “Fuck!” I roar when I realize what the paper says.

*See how easy it was for us to get into your clubhouse?
Next time we won't miss you, Ringer.*

Ghost brows furrow. "You just got out of fucking prison, man. Who the fuck did you piss off already?"

"I haven't done a damn thing!" I bark back, my defenses toward my brother rearing back up with a vengeance.

"This isn't the time," Reaper roars as he puts himself between me and Ghost. "The clubhouse obviously isn't fucking safe right now for our families."

Ghost stomps from the room first, and we all follow behind him out to the main room. The party continues as if our world wasn't just rocked.

I find myself wrapping my arms around Lilah, and my heart rate lowers momentarily as soon as she's safe in my arms. I'm quickly reminded of the seriousness of the situation when I look around and see each brother attaching themselves to their woman. We begin to guide them to the exit.

"We've gotta go, Princess."

Lilah's dazed, sleepy eyes rise to mine. "Hmm?" Her brows furrow when she senses the urgency in my features.

My eyes raise and find a panicking Ghost as he holds the little girl, Emery, in one arm and pulls on the door repeatedly with the other. "Door won't fucking open."

"What's going on, babe?" Lilah squeezes the arm I have wrapped around her waist.

"It's not safe in here right now, baby. Don't worry. I'm not going to let anything happen to you."

Fear flashes across her face before she quickly schools her features and turns to Maria, who is yelling for someone to tell her what's going on.

I step towards Ghost, who is cradling the small girl's head to his chest as he roars. "We need to get the fuck outside!"

Reaper comes up from behind Lilah, holding onto Sasha. "Who's to say whoever started the fire and left the message

isn't out there waiting for us to try and get out? Take a breath and think, Pres."

Ghost's chest visibly rises and deflates with a breath, and he turns, handing Emery over to her mom.

"We can try the window in your office, Ghost." Bull suggests.

"I can fit through it," Trigger offers.

Trigger and Pebbles's dog, Henry, is whining at Trigger's feet, gathering everyone's attention. Henry is alert and watching Pebbles, who suddenly lets out a pained groan as her face contorts.

I vaguely hear her tell Trigger that her water broke and that he can't leave her. She's right. If Reaper's right and someone is outside waiting to pick us off, the twins will grow up without a dad. That can't happen.

"I'm going out," I say. "Based on that note, whatever the fuck is going on is obviously because of me. Let me go." I look towards Ghost.

I can see my dad shaking his head behind Ghost, but all it takes is a small nod from my brother, and I'm heading toward the office.

Lilah clasps onto my arm, halting me in place.

I look down at her worried face. Her forest green eyes are showing all the fear she has clear as day. "I have to get you out of here, Princess."

"I'll go out. I can fit better!" she pleads, her almond-shaped fingernails digging into my bicep.

I shake my head, pushing a kiss on her forehead. "Absolutely not."

"But—"

I cut her off with a rough kiss on her wine-stained lips. "Don't you dare ask me to put you right in the line of danger. I will never fucking allow that. I need you to stay here and help Pebbles. Okay, Princess?"

I curse when a lone tear sneaks its way out of the corner of her eye. "I'll be fine, babe." Kissing her again, I pry her fingers off my arm, which causes her to cross her arms over her chest angrily.

"I love you, baby," I say, kissing her one more time before continuing to Ghost's office.

I'm prying the old window open when Bull walks into the office behind me. "I'm coming with you."

"Thanks, brother."

The rest of the guys, minus a few, pile into Ghost's office to gather whatever weapons they can and to make sure Bull and I make it out the window.

I go through first, dropping down to the asphalt next to a row of bushes. They cut the fucking lights so I can only see as far as the flashlight on my phone. I lower my voice after checking the immediate area. "You're good, Bull."

Bull's big ass frame drops from the opening a second later. Ghost peeks his head out and clenches his jaw. "Be fucking careful."

Bull offers me a handgun, and I study it for a minute before deciding to take it from him. I told myself I was going to do my best to not do any fucking thing to land me back in that shit hole and take me away from Lilah again. But if it's between a six-foot hole in the ground and back behind bars, I pick life.

We crouch down and walk along the side of the building. Bull takes the lead since he does this kind of fucking shit for a living, and I'm obviously a little rusty when it comes to surveillance and action.

Bull waves his hand in some fancy fucking motions, and when I look at him like he grew two heads, he turns to me and rolls his eyes. "When I wave at you, run over and crouch behind that bench."

"Got it."

I hold Ghost's gun down by my side until Bull waves. I raise it up just in case before taking off for the bench. When I've made it there safely, I kneel on one knee, watching Bull's back as he tests the corner.

Suddenly, my blood turns ice cold. My heartbeat thrums through my temples as two shots ring out, hitting the corner of the building that Bull just peaked around.

Fuck! I swivel my head furiously, trying to see where the fuck those shots could have come from.

"What the fuck are you doing?" I hiss as Bull raises his gun and steps around the corner.

Is he fucking psycho? I knew those military dudes were missing a couple of brain cells sometimes, but when the fuck is it ever smart to walk towards the gunfire?

I rise to my feet and follow behind him as he lets shot after shot go. As soon as I'm within arm's length of Bull, I immediately see what, or rather *who*, he's shooting at.

Two men dressed in Michael Myers costumes are aimlessly shooting behind themselves as they scurry onto two Harleys.

Fucking BINGO.

I let the full clip loose as I aim at the retreating bikes. Neither one swerves, but there's no fucking way I missed.

"Did you get one?" I ask Bull.

"I think you hit them both," he calls over his shoulder. I take off in a jog towards my bike to follow them. If I hit them, there's no way they can get far.

"No!" Bull calls behind me. "We need to get everyone out, we don't know if they set anything else up in there, and you are not fucking going after them alone."

Fuck. I hate when other people are right. I want to fucking follow them and tear out their teeth one by fucking one to figure out what the fuck their problem is.

I don't even know *who* the fuck they are!

“What’s your call then, boss?” I ask Bull.

We’re now standing in the crowded parking lot. “We need to hotwire one of these cars and crash it through the front door.”

“Crash it?” I question. “Through the front door? Where there are at least fifty people?”

“Yeah,” Bull says, like I’m the one talking crazy.

“Who’s fucking car are you going to crash? Not fucking Lilah’s.”

Bull rolls his eyes. “Calm down, Romeo. I’m not going to crash your wife’s car.”

I rear back and frown. “How’d you know she’s my wife?”

“I didn’t. Now I do.”

“You are fucking confusing.” I roll my eyes back at him and follow him toward Brenna’s Toyota Camry. Within seconds, he has the door popped open and is fiddling under her steering wheel.

“Got it,” he says right before the ignition turns over. “Alright, call Ghost and tell him to steer everyone clear of the door.”

I pull out my phone and dial my brother.

“Talk to me.”

“Get everyone away from the door. Bull’s crazy ass is about to drive Brenna’s car through it.”

“Mhm, ok.”

I turn around and watch the road leading to the clubhouse to make sure they aren’t making a return while the loud crash of Bull driving through the door clangs behind me.

When the coast is clear, I turn and watch him reverse the car back, and my boots crunch through the splintered wood littering the ground. “They took off on bikes,” I yell out at soon as I can see Ghost through the wreckage.

“Did you fucking shoot them? I heard shots.” Ghost yells, pointing down at the gun I’m still holding by my side.

I shake my head, shrugging. “No.”

“Fuck!” Ghost shouts.

Thank fuck for Reaper, who steps up to me first and takes my gun, then turns to our President and squeezes his shoulder. “Let’s take this conversation to the office. You’re sure they took off?”

“I’m sure, Reap.”

Bull stumbles through a minute later and makes a beeline for a very pregnant Winnie. “Outsides clear,” he says, not bothering to look anywhere but at her.

Ghost decides that Trigger, Tank, Flame, and Reaper are going to take a laboring Pebbles and the rest of the women to the hospital while the rest of us follow in the direction the men took off. We’ll do a needle in a haystack search for the fuckers.

Lilah leaves in Pebbles’s SUV with the rest of the family. I run upstairs and put on real clothes before meeting the rest of the guys out by our bikes. We all take off, with me leading the way in the direction the two bikes rode away.

I’m fucking pissed. How dare whoever this is to come inside our home base and threaten it. With our whole fucking family there, no less. Fuckers.

Lilah was there. If anything would’ve happened to her, I couldn’t live with myself.

I’m already feeling murderous. Hell, I’ve *been* feeling murderous. But something about them coming into the clubhouse after what they did at Lilah’s bakery has me even more on edge. I don’t even care that they could be dead on the side of the fucking road from any of the shots that Bull and I fired off at them.

I’d much rather them alive so we can put an end to this fucking bullshit. But if the men that threatened my family are dead? Well, I’ll take that too.

After twenty minutes of searching the surrounding area, Ghost makes the decision to head to the hospital. They aren't here, and if they are truly hurt, they'll be seeking medical attention. That could be their own clubhouse or home base, assuming they are a part of some other organization, or a hospital. I'm anxious to see Lilah again, so my hopes are set on the hospital. Two birds with one stone and all that.

It takes no time for us to get to the hospital and into the large waiting room that holds the rest of the family. I head straight for Lilah and pull her into my arms. I wrap her in the hoodie I brought inside from my saddlebag. I sit next to her and let the smell of her shampoo relax me.

I'm restless as we sit in the waiting room, surrounded by the entire family.

We've been sitting here for twenty minutes, but all I want to do is fucking leave to keep searching. They've fucked around for too long. Too many people in my family could have gotten hurt, and I'm fucking done.

Lilah's still content to be sitting in my arms. She holds onto the arm I have wrapped around her, and her leg bounces in anticipation. I lean over and press a kiss to the side of her face. "Relax, Princess."

Tank and my pops are huddled together in the corner, surrounded by Flame, who holds a sleeping Brenna in his arms, Razor, Tiny, who has his ever-present laptop stuck to his lap, and Texas. Ghost is lying on the nasty-ass floor of the waiting room, playing Candyland with the little redheaded girl from the party while her mom sleeps soundly on the small couch against the far wall behind them.

"Here ya go," Reaper grunts, handing me a styrofoam cup with steaming coffee. Sasha hands one to Lilah and takes the seat on her opposite side while Reaper takes the empty one to my left.

“I need to keep looking,” I say as softly as possible, looking into Reaper’s weathered eyes.

He blows on the steaming cup in front of him before taking a small sip of the scalding liquid. “Let’s make sure the babies and Pebbles are alright, and then we can go from there.”

Lilah squeezes my hand. I drag her further into my side and hold her tightly.

“I can’t let this shit go, Reap.”

“No one is asking you to, son. But everyone is here right now, and we’re all safe at the moment. We will get right back to it as soon as we know that Trigger’s family is safe as well,” Reaper says with such emotion that I can’t argue.

Who am I to argue that, at this moment in time, everyone in the Desert Outlaw family isn’t safe? The prospects are posted at every entrance, sending updates every ten minutes to the group chat, letting us know they are good. Every brother, aside from Trigger, is currently in this very waiting room, and all of our women are here. Shit, even Horse and Maggie are here. Reaper isn’t wrong, but I can’t control the need inside of me to want to get the fuck out of here and go find the stupid mother fuckers that are threatening this family.

The waiting room door bursts open, and Tank, as if he is connected to her enough to know her every move, stands as Maria rushes in. “They are here! Two beautiful baby boys!” she cries.

Echoes of cheering ring out around the waiting room. Lilah throws herself into my arms, and I catch her immediately, welcoming her sweet body into my lap. “I am so happy for them!” she squeals excitedly. A tear meddles its way down her cheek, and I chuckle at her as I wipe it away with my thumb. I lick the pad of my thumb and wink at her as her cheeks start to blush.

All of the women in the room hang onto Maria’s every word as she gushes over the two new additions to the family. I overhear her talking about how small Cade was when the

twins were born. Apparently, he needed some help in the beginning but is doing fine now.

“How are Pebbles and Trigger?” Ghost asks, pushing to his feet.

“They are absolutely wonderful!” Maria sighs in contentment as she hugs Tank’s middle.

I kiss Lilah on the cheek, pushing her off of me and back to her chair. “I’ll be back, Princess.”

I stand and pad over to my brother. “A word?”

Ghost nods and follows me out of the waiting room. A second later, the door opens again as Flame steps into the hallway.

“I think I’m gonna go scope out the ER,” I tell the guys.

“Why?” Ghost asks, chewing on a toothpick as he leans against the wall.

I lower my voice, cautious of any listening ears that could be around. “I know for a fucking fact I hit them both at least once, Ghost. They took off, and who the fuck can get shot and not need medical attention? Maybe they’re here, right under our fucking noses!”

“Who’s to say they would even go to a hospital?” Flame asks, crossing his arms.

“I don’t, but I can check it out.”

Ghost nods, not saying a word.

“I’ll go with him,” Flame adds.

“I don’t need your fucking permission, Ghost. I’m telling you out of consideration that I’m going downstairs to check it out,” I proclaim through clenched teeth, earning Ghost’s attention. His eyes narrow as he pushes off the wall to stand at his full height.

“You seem to keep forgetting how we fucking do things, Ringer. We don’t just go off at the drop of a fucking hat. We communicate so we can watch each others’ fucking backs. Flame didn’t offer to go with you so that I would *let* you. He

offered to go with you so that you have some fucking backup.” He adds air quotes with his fingers around the word “let,” further pissing me off. “Get your head out of your ass, little brother. You seem to forget that we’re a family.”

“You seem to be forgetting something too, *big brother*. The note at the clubhouse made it pretty fucking obvious why this shit is happening. This is because of me, so fuck me for wanting to handle it.”

Flame holds his hands up, shushing us as we must be getting too loud for the hospital hallway.

“I’m not saying you can’t handle it, Ringer. I want you to take a goddamn breath and let us help you,” Ghost mutters, stepping around me and heading back towards the waiting room door.

I pause in the hallway, watching behind Ghost as the door closes before looking at Flame. “You comin’? Cause I’m going down there.”

“Jesus, you two are going to give me a fucking ulcer,” he mumbles as he follows me to the elevators.

On the ride down to the first floor, I break the silence. “You and Brenna planning on having crotch goblins anytime soon?”

Flame chuckles. “Shit, I was going to propose tonight before all this shit went down. I bribed Lilah to rig the costume contest results so that I could get Brenna on the stage and was going to do it up there. How fucking funny would that have been, Hugh Hefner propping to a Playboy Bunny. I thought it was catchy.”

I let a burst of laughter out as the elevator doors slide open. “Holy fuck, that’s good.”

Flame and I probably look suspicious as fuck as we wander around the ER, peeking our heads into random rooms, searching for gunshot victims.

A young girl in scrubs bats her eyelashes at us from across the room. *Bingo*. We head in her direction and stop in front of her. I lean down against the desk and wink. I paste the smirk

on my face that Lilah calls “the panty-melter” and introduce myself.

“Hey, darlin.’ My name is Emmett, and this is my friend Jace. We’re looking for some friends of ours. Weren’t sure if this is the hospital they were brought to.”

She twirls the hair of her ponytail around her finger as she snaps her gum in her mouth. “What’re their names?”

“They’re new to town, so we only know them by their nicknames,” Flame adds smoothly, not missing a beat.

“Oh. Hmm,” she says.

“Did anyone come in saying they’d been shot?” I ask, and at her widened eyes, I try to reassure her with a smile. “They are buddies of ours. They were checking out their new guns, and one accidentally misfired.”

“Well, I’ve been here all night, and no one has come in with any gunshots,” she shrugs.

“Damn. Okay, thanks anyways, darlin,’” I say through my smile and turn to walk away.

“Wait! Can I have your number? I can call you if they come in,” she suggests with a twinkle in her eye.

I look at Flame who holds his hands up, shaking his head as he turns to head in the direction of the elevator we came down on.

I war with myself for a moment. Do I actually think this chick wants my number so she can call if two dudes with gunshot wounds come in? Fuck no. But do I leave it to chance that she would if they do?

“My wife is upstairs with my phone. I just got a new one, and I don’t know the number by heart yet. Thanks anyway.” I turn away without a look back and get on the elevator next to Flame.

As the doors close, I let out sigh of frustration at yet another speed bump in this whole fucked up mess.

twenty-six

Lilah

“Hi, sweet boy. I’m your Auntie Lilah,” I say to the tiny baby in my arms.

Ringer is in the waiting room with the rest of the guys while Brenna and I are visiting the newest members of our family. Cole and Cade are the cutest babies I’ve ever seen. Not that I spend too much time around babies in general, but still.

I’m sitting on the couch, with Brenna plastered to my side, as we both look at Cole in my arms. Trigger refuses to let go of Cade, and Pebbles wanted a break, so they let us hold Cole.

I run the back of my finger down his pudgy cheek, and we both ‘ooo’ and ‘ahh’ over his little noises. “You guys did pretty well, they are super cute,” I tell the new parents.

“So cute!” Brenna adds with a tearful smile.

“Oh God, please don’t start crying,” I groan.

“What! I just love babies.”

“Ew.”

Brenna playfully backhands my arm. “If babies are so ‘ew’ then give him to me!”

“Hey now!” Trigger barks quietly, a sleeping Cade pressed to his chest. “No roughhousing while you’re holding my kid.”

“Gimme!” Brenna waves her grabby hands at me and takes the baby from my arms, cuddling him into her embrace.

I run my fingers over his capped head before pushing off the couch and heading over to Pebbles’s hospital bed. She has a look of exhausted bliss.

I take my phone from my hoodie pocket and snap a picture of her.

She turns a glare on me. “Delete that shit right fucking now, Lilah Jane.”

“Nope. One day you’ll appreciate it.”

“I probably look like fucking ass.”

I nod with a grimace. “Yes, you do.”

She scoffs, flicking me off. I laugh and swat her hand away. I sit next to her on the edge of her bed, and she smiles up at me.

“Proud of you, Pebbles.”

“Thank you.”

We laugh over all the weird shit Brenna is cooing at Cole and Trigger’s soft snores as he holds Cade in a death grip.

A few minutes later, Flame and Ringer enter the room.

“Time to go already?” Brenna pouts.

“Let’s go, baby,” Flame nods at her as she guards Cole with her arms.

“I’m not ready,” she whines.

We all chuckle at Brenna. I push off from Pebbles’s bed and press a kiss to her head. “Love ya, mama.”

“Love you guys, thank you so much,” she smiles sleepily.

I head into Ringer’s arms and watch as Flame takes Cole from Brenna and puts him carefully into his crib. Turning up to him, I see Ringer’s eyes studying Trigger closely as he cuddles his baby.

A pang of something close to regret hits me straight in the chest.

It's set in stone that I don't want kids. But am I keeping Ringer from something that he truly wants?

I hope not.

We all head into the waiting room, where we say our goodbyes. I'm dead on my feet as I check the time on my phone and let Ringer lead me downstairs and out to his bike. It's already one in the morning, and we still have to go back to the clubhouse before we can go home. Ugh.

By the time we get back to the clubhouse, I'm surprised as hell I didn't fall asleep on the back of Ringer's bike.

Pulling into the parking lot to the site of red and blue lights flashing has the hair on my arms rising. Two officers, one male and one female, are standing near the crashed-in front door where Brenna's car still sits.

"What the hell?" I squeeze Ringer's waist tighter in my embrace.

Ghost flies into his spot next to us and curses. "Fuck."

The rest of the club pulls in and parks. Everyone steps off their bikes with confusion and anger lacing their faces.

"What the fuck are you doing here, Truden?" Ghost barks.

"Fuck," Ringer exhales, and his head falls.

"What's going on, Ring? Who is that?"

"That's Derek's brother, Michael."

Derek, the kid that he accidentally killed? Why would his brother be here? With flashing lights? We're the ones that were attacked. They had a bomb in our kitchen, not to mention that these have to be the same people that blew up my bakery.

“You know damn well I wouldn’t be here if I didn’t have to be,” the officer sneers.

Ringer helps me off the back of the bike as we all gather in a circle in the parking lot. Ringer wraps his arm tightly around me, pulling me flush to his side.

The officer’s eyes follow the movement, and they twitch as recognition flashes in his face when he sees me.

“Can we help you officers with something?” My dad calls, crossing his arms over his chest.

“Ah. Mr. Neal. Yes, we were sent out to investigate an incident that was brought to our attention.”

The officer, *Michael*, smirks and refuses to break eye contact with Ringer.

“Mind telling us what that is?” Ghost adds.

The officer finally breaks contact and widens his stance as if he was the most relaxed man in the world. He rests one hand on the pistol at his side lazily. “Well, we have it on good authority that someone from this location, someone who is a part of your *organization*, *fired* shots at two retreating motorcycles.”

My palms start to sweat, and I can’t help the whimper that leaves my throat.

Ringer squeezes my shoulder and pulls me even farther into his side.

“Mind telling us where this ‘good authority’ comes from? See, we were having a nice Halloween costume party, then headed to the hospital for the last few hours while our *family* members had their babies,” Ghost says, his tone cool and calculated. He’s mirroring the officer’s relaxed stance, except his arms are crossed over his chest.

The male officer turns to the female and says something inaudible to the rest of us. Her eyebrows pinch in before she shakes her head in question. Michael smirks when he turns back toward us. He takes the few steps to stop right in front of Ringer and me. My heart races through my chest.

“God, I’ve been waiting years for this.” He smiles before pulling his cuffs from his pocket. “Emmett Mack, you are under arrest for the attempted murder—”

Suddenly, it’s like I’m plunged under water. I can’t hear a thing the officer says as he reads Ringer his Miranda rights. I’m pulled away as the officer forces Ringer’s hands behind his back. I clue back into the present, and my ears start working, only to realize I’m screaming as he tells Ringer he has the right to an attorney.

“No, no, no!” I yell, not giving a shit that he is currently securing Ringer’s hands behind his back. I break free from whoever has been holding me back and throw my arms around his neck, clinging to him. “No! This can’t be happening again!” I shout.

Tears stream down my cheeks. I distantly feel my dad pulling me back by the waist. “No!” I fight against him.

“Please, baby, don’t fight. Don’t give them a reason to target you too. It’ll be okay,” Ringer says, pressing a kiss to my cheek.

I let my dad pull me back a step and frown at the officers. “Why are you doing this? He didn’t do anything!”

“Sure he didn’t. That’s what they all say,” he says while shoving Ringer toward the back of the police car.

“Ghost! Do something!” I scream. Ghost stands, watching them arrest his brother for the second time with a stone-cold sober expression on his face. Bones frowns and has his hands wrapped around the back of his neck.

“What the fuck!” I scream as everyone just fucking stands around while the love of my life is getting so viciously shoved into the back of a cop car *again*.

“Baby girl, you gotta calm down. They are taking him in one way or another, but reacting like this is doing nothing to help him.”

My tear-blurred vision locks on the back window, where I find Ringer’s clear eyes locked back on me. *I love you*, I mouth.

Me too, he mouths back.

UGH! What the fuck!

“Fuck!” Ghost finally roars as the cop car pulls away. “Tiny, you better have something for me on those fucking names before I count to fucking twenty!”

We watch as Ghost picks up a large piece of wood that used to be part of the front door and smashes it into Brenna’s already cracked windshield. The rest of the glass shatters on impact. My eyes fly to Brenna, who flinches at the sight. I watch, and more tears flow from my eyes as Flame holds her and presses a kiss to her head.

I wrap my arms around myself and let out a heartbreaking sob, dropping to my knees as I realize the true severity of what has just happened.

He’s been taken from me again.

What if it’s another eight years before I see him again?

There’s so much at stake this time. I just got him back.

twenty-seven

Lilah

SITTING on a couch in Ghost's office as everyone talks a million miles a minute, I fight off another wave of nausea. I can't stand the thought of Ringer in that fucking place again.

Ghost and my dad have had to talk me out of walking to the police station about fifty times so far. Tiny is at Ghost's desk, still working on the names that the officer said Ringer is accused of *attempting to murder*. Bones is sleeping in an armchair, with the back of his head leaning on the wall behind him. Flame and Brenna fell asleep on the floor of Ghost's office an hour or two ago, and Bull left to take Winnie right back to the hospital we just left.

Seems like we're adding another babe to the group soon, but not even that happy thought can bring a smile to my face. I'm so fucking mad that Ringer's been taken from me *again*.

"How did we let this happen?" I say to no one in particular.

Ghost's sigh is audible above any other noise. I can tell, just like the last time, Ghost is taking his brother's arrest really fucking hard. Well, guess what, buddy? Me fucking too.

I listen to my dad, Tiny, Razor, Ghost, and Texas go on and on about what angle they can come at this whole thing from, but the one thing I'm not hearing is that we get a fucking lawyer and get my husband the fuck out of there and back to me.

“What the fuck is going on?” Maria plows through Ghost’s door with Tank fast behind her. Flame’s head lifts groggily at the sound of his mom’s angry voice, and Bones’s weathered eyes blink open.

Dad takes his arm from around me and lifts off the couch, heading toward his friend. “We didn’t want to wake you guys.”

“Ringer was arrested again, and you didn’t think that was a good enough reason to call? You thought it was a good idea to *text* that information so that we wouldn’t see it until we woke up?”

“Calm down, love,” Tank pulls his spitfire wife back against his chest.

Her shoulders immediately soften, and I have to tear my eyes away. Ringer calms me like that, and going through all this without him solidifies in my heart that I *always* want him to be the calming force in my life.

He can’t fucking do that from prison.

Now, along with all the men, Maria is adding her opinions on what the fuck to do.

“Has anyone thought that maybe we should be talking to a lawyer?” I add, not even recognizing my small, scratchy voice.

Ghost and my dad share a beat of eye contact and huff.

“Only one problem with that, babe. Roy retired.”

“Roy?”

“Our club lawyer.”

I shake my head and let out the fakest bark of laughter I’ve ever heard. “That’s just fucking grand. So let’s just let him get a fucking court-appointed public defender and throw ’em to the wolves.” I throw my hands up and slam Ghost’s door open, stomping out to the main area.

I head straight for Ringer’s room and throw myself down on the bed that he hasn’t had to use in quite some time. It still

smells exactly like him. I shove my face down into his pillow and let the tears flow free.

I can't stop the images of him standing in court with that stupid officer laughing at him, and a pimple-faced public defender that can barely tie his own tie, let alone defend my husband from going back to prison.

Just then, another image flashes through my mind, and I'm scrambling to sit up on the bed. Pulling my phone from my pocket, I fly through my contacts to the 'Rs.' I don't even think twice before stabbing my finger on the name.

"H-hello?" His silky sweet voice comes through the speaker before he clears his throat. "Good morning, this is Reggie Morgan."

"Reggie," I breathe a sigh of relief. "This is Lilah. I don't know if you remember me, but I had a flat tire, and you stopped to help—"

His chuckle interrupts me. "Of course I remember you. Scary biker boyfriend, right?"

Tears track down my cheeks, and I let out a small laugh. "Husband, actually."

"Oh, well, okay. Scary biker husband then," he chuckles. "What can I do for you? You sound upset?"

"Well, speaking of scary biker husbands, I was hoping you could help us. He was arrested last night, and I don't know what to do." My voice breaks as the sobs force their way out of my throat.

"Oh, shit."

"Yeah," I scrub my wet cheeks.

"Well hell, Lilah. I don't do criminal defense."

My heart drops. "Fuck."

"But," he says, and hope rises in my chest, "A friend of mine just moved to town. She's actually joined my practice. Her name is Kourtney Walker. I'll text you over her info. She

will jump right on this. Since she just got to town, she doesn't have much going on right now."

"Seriously?"

"Yeah! She'll probably want me to come with her, so I'm sure I'll see you soon. Hang in there, Lilah."

"Thanks." I bite my lip, fighting off the wave of fresh tears.

After hanging up, I hold my phone in a death grip as I wait for the damn thing to alert me with a text.

As soon as it does, I'm flying off the bed and running downstairs back to Ghost's office.

"I got it!"

All eyes fly to mine as they wait for my explanation.

"A few months ago, when I had a flat tire, a man stopped to help me. Well long story short, he gave me his card. He's a lawyer and newer to town. He doesn't do criminal law, but he has a new partner, and she does."

"What's her name?" Tiny asks. I hand him my phone and wait for him to look her up on his computer.

After waiting in silence for a few excruciating moments while Tiny clicks and stares at his computer with a furrowed brow, his face softens. "Says here she was pretty damn successful in the courtroom, but she was fired from her last firm. It doesn't say why."

"Who cares if she can help us?" I shrug.

Tiny looks at Ghost and shrugs. "It's worth a shot if she's half as good as these reviews, brother."

Ghost nods. "Give her a call."

Tiny punches her number into his cell and places it on speaker.

"Hello?" a soft voice echoes throughout the office.

Tiny smirks. "Is this Kourtney Walker?"

"This is, can I help you?" her tone turns hesitant.

“My name is Nathan, but you can call me Tiny. There’s a few of us here. One of our friends was arrested last night, and we need your help. Your friend—” Tiny pauses and looks at me.

“Reggie,” I offer.

“Your friend Reggie gave us your number and said you could help us out.”

“Oh, of course!” she perks up. “Can we set up a meeting? Has your friend been able to call you yet?”

“Not yet. Unfortunately, the officer that arrested him has a personal history with him, so we’re thinking that could be affecting his intake process.”

“Okay. Text me where I can meet you all in an hour, and we’ll get started.”

My eyes widen, and hope floods my belly. One hour and we’ll be closer to getting him out! I really fucking hope this girl can help us.

“Alright, honey, I’ll send it right over.”

I’m giddy with excitement for the first time since the party last night at the thought of this woman getting Ringer out of jail.

I go upstairs and shower for something to do to pass the time until she gets here. Back downstairs, I find everyone outside sitting at the picnic benches. I pull my sunglasses down to cover my eyes, listen to the conversation around me, and with nothing else to do, wait.

Fifteen minutes later, a black Range Rover with shiny black rims pulls through the gates and parks to our right.

Razor lets out a loud whistle and elbows Tiny. I watch as a sleek, white leather, Louboutin- heeled foot slides out of the driver’s seat, followed by a toned, tan leg that leads up to a pale blue blazer dress embellished with gold buttons.

Holy shit.

I think I just popped a lady-boner for my husband’s lawyer.

Reggie comes around the other side of the vehicle in another impeccable suit. Half of Kourtney's face is covered in large black-as-night sunglasses, and when they approach our table, she pushes them up onto the top of her head. I swear we're all struck by her piercing blue eyes. Her long lashes are a dark contrast against the Caribbean blue of her irises. Her impeccable makeup looks as if she just got it done professionally for a photoshoot, and her blonde hair is slicked back into a low bun with a few loose curls framing her face.

I know I'm not ugly. Hell, I would even be willing to admit out loud that I'm a pretty woman. But holy shit, within the span of two days, I've been humbled by Brit's striking beauty and now Kourtney's.

"Hi guys, I'm Kourtney." She reaches forward and offers her hand to every single person to shake. Reggie, looking slightly uncomfortable, then offers his hand, most likely in obligation since his partner just did so.

"Ghost." He takes her hand with a hard expression and welcomes her to the clubhouse.

When she gets to me, I reach forward and take her warm hand in mine. "Lilah, right? It's your husband that was arrested?"

"Husband?" Razor's deep laughter raises through the group. "He fucking wishes."

I nod at the lawyer. "Yeah, that's him."

"Wait, what?" Razor balks at me, and then every single set of eyes snaps to me.

"Excuse me?" Maria blurts with her hand pressed to her chest. Tank frowns at me from behind her.

I shake off the intense emotions and anxiety of having everyone's eyes on me when I'm already feeling vulnerable. I wave my hand in the air, motioning everyone to move on from the surprise. "Ringer and I have been married for months."

Gasps ring out from around the picnic table from every single person, minus the only three that already knew. I turn to

Kourtney, and the pure sympathy I find in her eyes causes me to break down into a fit of tears.

Her arms envelop me a solid second later, and I break apart against the softest material I've ever felt. Floral perfume fills my nose as I take a shaky inhale.

“I promise you right now, Lilah, I will get your husband home to you. I know you don't know me from Eve, but I will do everything in my power, and then some more, to free him.”

I pull away from Kourtney's shoulder and sniffle, nodding. I hope she isn't filling me with empty promises because I don't think I can survive another day without him. Let alone another eight years.

twenty-eight

Ringer

“MACK,” the officer calls from the door.

Looking down, I roll my eyes at the prick that arrested me. Derek’s fucking brother. I should’ve known he was going to find me when I got out.

Shit. I can’t even say I blame the guy. If the shoe was on the other foot and he accidentally killed Ghost, Lord knows I’d do worse than *arrest* him.

“Go call whoever. Won’t do anything for ya, but have at it,” he says as he walks a step behind me to the phones on the wall.

I hold in my growl of annoyance as he stands entirely too fucking close to my back. I look over my shoulder as I lift the handset off the holder. “A little privacy?”

He scoffs, looking down the hall and taking the smallest step back. Might as well have not even fucking moved.

I jam my finger into the keypad. After only a few rings, the line pauses as I’m sure Ghost is accepting my call.

“Ringer!” Lilah’s sweet voice calls out.

My eyes fall closed, and a pang hits my chest. I promised her I’d never leave her again, and look what happened.

“Baby,” I sigh.

A sob echoes louder than anything, hitting me deep in my soul. “Princess, don’t cry.”

A shuffling comes through the speaker before my brother’s voice. “You alright, brother?”

“Yeah. She alright?”

“Not even a little.” *Fuck.*

“Listen, Lilah got a hold of some lawyer she said you guys met a few months ago.”

Lawyer?

“Some guy that helped her with a tire or something.”

Ah. It must be that stranger I thought was hitting on Lilah, but she swears bats for the other team.

“And?”

“Well, he has a partner who specializes in criminal law. She’s here now. I think we’ll be able to get you out today.”

“Today?” The anticipation has me standing a little straighter.

“Yeah. She actually suggested we come down there now and get things started. Dude, you should see it. She has Tiny wrapped around her little fancy ass. She has Lilah convinced that you’ll be sleeping in your own bed tonight. She’s taken to her.”

“I fucking hope so, Ghost. Let me talk to my girl.”

“Alright, brother, see you soon.”

Voices raise in the background as if he’s getting closer to the crowd before fabric rustles against the speaker, and it goes silent again. The corner of my mouth pulls up in a smile as soon as I hear her faint inhale and exhale.

“Princess? Are you there?”

A deep breath. More silence.

“How are you?” I ask with a smile in my voice.

A frustrated sigh hits my ear. “How the hell do you think I am? I just got you back and you’re already there again!”

I let out a chuckle at her sass. “Ah. There’s my girl.”

Another huff.

“Ghost says you have a new friend?”

“Her name is Kourtney. She swears she’s going to get you out, and I really fucking hope she does because she’s gorgeous and badass and I really don’t want to have to hate her.”

I let out a true laugh this time and rest my head against the metal top of the phone base. “Well, for both of our sakes, I hope she’s right too, baby.”

“We’re going to come up there soon. I’m not leaving that police station without you.”

“I don’t doubt it, Princess.”

Lilah’s well-oxygenated with the amount of sighing and damn deep breaths she’s taking. It pains me to know how worried she is.

“I really love you, Emmett.”

My eyes fall closed, and I thump my head against the metal a few times. “I love you too, Lilah Jane.”

“Promise?”

I smile at her unusual insecurity. “I swear. See you soon, baby.”

“See you.”

I wait for the dial tone before hanging the phone back on the base. I turn a hardened gaze on Michael, who stares at me with a frown. “Go.”

I follow his command and walk back down the hall toward the holding cell with my hands behind my back. There isn’t anywhere for him to go, so I know he has no other choice but to listen. “Look man, for what it’s worth, I am terribly sorry.”

“Shut it, Mack.”

“If it were my brother, I’d want me dead. So I understand why you hate me, but I didn’t kill anyone.”

“Maybe not this time, Mack. But the urn on my mantle tells another story.”

“I did my time for that.”

“Not enough,” he mumbles under his breath as we get closer to the cell.

I want to stop short and explain myself, to apologize, to say anything. But I know nothing I say will take away from the fact that he doesn’t have a little brother anymore, even if said brother was a piece of shit at the time and trying to drug underage girls.

Michael shoves my back into the holding cell and slams the door shut with a clang, locking me inside before he stomps away, leaving me alone once again.

I became perfectly okay with being alone after eight whole years of it, but just a few months of living in unrestricted freedom and being around people all the time has softened me. The loneliness eats at me now.

I drop down on the single bunk and stare at the sharp fluorescent light, imagining the future I wish for with Lilah. In it, I’m not stuck in this hellhole again. Anything but that.

I scoff and kick the foot of the bed as I recall the car ride to the station, and anger rises through my system all over again.

“It was only a matter of time before your little ass was put back exactly where you belong. You and the rest of that club are all scum,” Michael Truden spouts from the front seat of his police cruiser. It seems like his behavior isn’t surprising to his partner as she stays completely silent and gazes out her window in the passenger seat.

My cuffed hands are pressed uncomfortably against the seat. I have no doubt that the skin under the metal is broken. The asshole tightened the cuffs way tighter than necessary.

“I’ve been telling your brother for eight years that I would find a way to get you right back in there, and look, you did it all by yourself. I didn’t even have to do anything. I was just the lucky son of a bitch that took the call.”

“Truden,” the female cop whispers in warning.

“What? He knows what a piece of shit he is. He killed a kid, Rose. A fucking kid. He deserves to rot in prison.”

She turns back to the window, probably scared by the seething tone of his voice.

“He wasn’t a kid,” I mutter under my breath, unable to let it go any longer.

“He was 20 and on a full-ride scholarship to UT. You took that from him. You took my parents’ son away from them.”

“He was trying to rape her.”

“Pretty sure my brother was fully fucking clothed when you murdered him in cold blood. You deserve way worse.”

“Truden,” Rose says, a bit more stern than the first time.

“You wanted a little bit of that underaged pussy yourself, so what did you do because you couldn’t handle that my brother was the one she was all over that night? You fucking killed him.”

“Michael!” she yells. “Enough, or I’ll report this.”

I take a page from Rose’s book and turn to look out the window for the rest of the drive to the station.

He has it all wrong. I didn’t want Lilah like that. All I wanted was to keep her safe. I didn’t want his drugged-out brother raping her and taking her innocence. So I did what I had to do to stop it. He wasn’t supposed to die. He was supposed to take the hint and leave her the fuck alone.

He wasn’t supposed to die.

“Emmett? I’m Kourtney. Your wife hired me,” the sharp-dressed woman says, reaching across the metal table in the small interrogation room to shake my hand.

“Call me Ringer,” I reply, shaking her small hand.

“Perfect.” She makes herself comfortable in the very fucking uncomfortable metal chair as she unzips a very fancy briefcase. “I’ve already petitioned the judge to release you immediately on the grounds of these fucking small-town, idiot cops not having a damn lick of evidence. They arrested you based solely on the small word of two druggies with rap sheets longer than a CVS receipt. I anticipate his response within the hour, but until then, I need you to tell me if you did, in fact, attempt murder yesterday so I know what the fuck I’m actually dealing with. Your brother told me that the cop that arrested you is the brother of the man you accidentally killed in 2013. Is that correct?”

My eyes widen at the woman’s no-bullshit attitude, with a damn sweet-as-sugar smile on her face. I shake my head a few times to clear it before actual words come to me.

“There are no cameras or mics in this room. You can speak freely, Ringer. Either way, I will not let you go back to prison. Now, your brother said you may not want to say certain things because of your history, but he told me about the bakery, and he told me about the box in the kitchen in full detail. He told me to tell you that he told me so that maybe you could trust me too.”

I nod, running a hand over my hair and chuckle. “I can see why my wife likes you.”

She shrugs, smiling. “I’m hard not to like.”

“I’m pretty convinced it’s all related, so after the last stunt they pulled at the clubhouse, I wasn’t going to let them get away. Another brother and I followed the two men on bikes. They started shooting first...”

I explain the entirety of the night, going to the hospital, then everything after, leaving not a single detail out. She asks

me a few pertinent questions but mostly stays quiet while I speak.

She scribbles some notes on her Tiffany blue legal pad, and a few moments later, a knock and a lock disengaging echo throughout the room.

Michael and his female partner enter the room, and the man looks like he's seconds from steam erupting out of his ears. "You're free to go," he spouts through gritted teeth.

"Ah! Wonderful." Kourtney claps her hands together, dropping her heeled feet to the concrete floor with a clack. She turns a sugar-sweet smile to Michael and rises from her seat. "I will also be filing a request that you will no longer be handling this case. As you hold too much personal history with my client, I'm afraid your opinion of him may be altered. Should this case be extended to the courts, you will not be welcome in my courtroom, Officer—" she looks down at his badge, "Truden."

She turns a smile on the female officer, and the dreamy look on the woman's face is almost comical. "Officer," she says with a wink before heading out the door. I don't question it for a second as I catch up behind her.

"Holy shit."

"I know," Kourtney waves her hand as we continue down the hall, confidence pouring off of her in waves. I fucking love it. "I'm quite impressive. Just you wait, Ringer. I have a feeling today was the start of a wonderful relationship."

"If you can do shit like that every time we get into trouble, I would say so. Shit."

When we get to the end of the hall, another officer that's manning the desk unlocks the door from a button at his desk, and she pushes it open.

Barely out of the doorway, I'm blessed with the sight of my wife. *Fuck*. Not even twenty-four hours without her, and I was already going through withdrawal. Her small frame slams into mine, and I envelop her in my arms as she wraps her legs around my waist.

I chuckle as she peppers kisses all over my face. After pressing a firm kiss to her lips, she finally releases me and drops her feet to the floor. A sharp slap across my face rings through the small waiting room, and my cheek stings. “Don’t you ever do that shit to me again!” my little spitfire spouts, pressing her fists against her hips as she scowls at me.

A feminine whistle comes from right next to us, and our new lawyer winks at Lilah. “Me-ow! I love a kitty with claws.” Turning to the rest of the group, Kourtney nods at Ghost and raises her head high. “It was a pleasure doing business with you all, although no offense, I love a little more excitement and fight. But with you bunch, I’m sure I’ll stay entertained. Ringer, I’ll be in touch because this is nowhere near over, unfortunately, but you guys all give me a call with whatever you need.”

We all watch in awe as she links her arm through Reggie’s bent one, and they leave the station.

“I think I’m a little in love with her,” Lilah blurts, staring after them with awe.

I growl at her and pull her back to me.

“I feel like this was all one big dream in slow motion, and I just watched from the outside,” Lilah says with a faraway look on her face.

“Ditto, babe.” Ghost wraps his arm across my wife’s shoulder. “Can we go home now? I, for one, need a fucking nap. Plus, we need to have church.” He looks right in my eyes as he says it.

There must be some new information within the last eighteen hours since I was arrested. Does that mean Tiny has pinned down the two assholes who tried blowing up our clubhouse? Has he found the two pussies that tried getting me pinned for attempted murder?

“Don’t you even for one second think that I’ve forgotten about the fact that you two are *married*.” Maria barks out as soon as we have all finished eating around the large table in the corner of the clubhouse.

I look to my left, where Ringer is wiping his mouth with his napkin after taking his last bite. “Come again?”

I wince. “I accidentally blurted to Reggie that you were my husband and, he must have said something to Kourtney. She said it in front of everyone. So everyone knows.”

“Fucking goddamn! Finally!” he blurts, grabbing the back of my neck and smashing his mouth against mine. Pulling away from me, he looks directly at Maria. “Fuck. In my defense, I’ve been wanting to tell everyone since the moment we got back from Vegas.”

“You’ve been married since Vegas!” she shrieks. I feel a little bad at the distraught look that comes over her.

I clear my throat. “I just wanted to make sure it wasn’t a mistake. We were a little drunk.” I look down at the table and pick at my napkin.

“A little?” Ringer chuckles. “Lilah, I carried you from the chapel all the way to the hotel room. You woke up the next morning and didn’t remember anything! You needed *photo evidence* because you didn’t fucking believe me!”

I wince, then smile. “Yeah, a little.”

Everyone laughs with us, and the tension in the room lifts.

“Will you let us throw you an actual wedding?”

I cringe a little at the thought of doing the whole wedding ceremony. It’s never really been a dream of mine to have a full blown dog-and-pony show of everyone staring at me. A party? Fuck yeah. But not standing at the front of an aisle with a shit load of eyes on me.

“What about just a celebration?” she offers instead, most likely reading my discomfort correctly.

“I can do a party,” I agree with a soft smile.

Maria forces us to retell the story of the entire wedding night and what led to our matrimony.

Ringer has everyone eating out of the palm of his hand as he recites the night minute by minute. I excuse myself to the bathroom, and when I return, Ringer’s eyes zone in on my left hand. I knew he would notice the ring immediately.

“No reason to take it off ever again,” I lean into him and kiss the corner of his mouth.

Brenna, Maria, and Sasha, who has already seen the ring many times, all fuss and gush over the giant rock.

“I hate to break this up, guys, but we got some shit to discuss,” Ghost announces as he leans back in his chair and stretches. “By the way, Maria, I need you to check in with Brit and Emery. I had a prospect watching the strip but haven’t heard from him in a bit.”

“Oh, okay.” Maria’s brows drop, and she pushes away from the table to walk toward the bar where her purse is sitting.

“I’ll be back, babe.” Ringer kisses the top of my head and heads to the back hallway.

“Give me your hand, you bitch,” Brenna says saucily.

I cackle at her eyebrow wag and reach my hand across the table at her. “Jeezus,” she emphasizes.

“I know, right? I think I want to get something tattooed there so I don’t have to wear this to the bakery and risk breaking it.”

Brenna rears back, and her eyes widen. “Damn, girl. It’s that serious?”

I roll my eyes and laugh. “I mean, we are married, Brenna.”

“Well, yeah. Dang.” She nods her head and then shrugs. “I can come up with something if you want.”

“Yes, please!”

“You are crazy, but I got this.”

twenty-nine

Tiny

MY COCK HARDENS at the image of the blonde bombshell that just wrecked my entire fucking existence today. I've split today flipping between the internet search I did of Kourtney this morning and everything I've found about her and piecing together the shit storm I discovered while everyone was at the police station.

I'm currently situated in my spot at the table reading an article about a bank robbery that Kourtney successfully got lowered to a misdemeanor. How the fuck does someone, who was proven guilty beyond a reasonable doubt, get their charges lowered to a misdemeanor after a bank robbery that resulted in over two million dollars missing? How the fuck is that even possible?

I'll tell you how; she's a fucking sorceress that seeps into people's souls. I'm convinced. How the fuck else has just the sight of her and a handful of simple sentences have me so goddamn enraptured with her?

Sorceress. She fucking has to be.

"Shit," Ghost grumbles as he enters the room, followed by Tex, Reaper, Bones, Razor, Tank, Flame, Patch, and Ringer. "Trigger and Bull are on the way. We can start without 'em and fill in later."

I plug the cords into the back of my laptop, quickly closing the page with Kourtney's face plastered across it, and click on the arrest records of the two shit stains that were here last night. My computer screen mirrors onto the large touch screen across the room.

"Who are these two?" Reaper asks.

I push up from my chair and grab my wireless remote. I click on the wall to enlarge the first page. "This is Robert Brown, a 25-year-old felon who has been arrested on multiple charges of grand larceny, arson, petty theft, breaking and entering, and, my personal favorite, being a part of a group that runs a shitty chop shop."

I can feel everyone's skeptical eyes on the back of my head as I switch over to another screen. "Now, meet Jake Davidson, 26-years-old with arrests including all of the above, plus larceny that resulted in, you guessed it, running a chop shop. He did four years upstate in the same prison where you did your time, Ringer."

Ringer's brows furrow. "Zoom in on that picture."

"I'll do you one better." I click through his arrests and select the one showing a mugshot from when he did time with Ringer.

When the mugshot enlarges on the screen, Ringer curses. "I'll be fucking damned."

"You know him?" Flame asks.

Ringer nods. "We were on laundry duty together. He stole a tool, and we went on lockdown. I never ratted on him, but when they found it on him, he was convinced I squealed since I was there when he stole it. If you ask me, it was his cellmate that ratted, probably because that's who he was gonna fucking use it on. We got into it a few times in the courtyard, but he was too chicken shit to do anything."

"That makes a little more sense. But once I discovered the connection, I still couldn't figure out how these two fucking dropout idiots were able to outsmart my security or knew where we were going to be and when."

“Get to it, Tiny. I’m fucking tired,” Ghost grumbles.

I wave him off, clicking into another screen. “This is Kyle Davidson. Look familiar?”

“What the fuck?” A few of the guys spout in tandem.

“Hawk,” Ghost blurts.

I nod. “Hawk, president of the Dragon’s Ace. Jake Davidson’s older brother. That’s not all.”

I click to the next image, this one of a young woman holding a small baby in her arms. “This is Sydney Carter. Look familiar?”

A few of the guys concentrate on the screen and try to figure out if there is any recognition of the pretty young girl on the screen. “Let me make it easier for ya.”

I flip to the next screen, and a chorus of curses from gaped mouths sound from around the table.

“Motherfucker!” Bones shouts, slamming his fist on the wooden table.

The picture on the screen is one from this very clubhouse a few years back at a cookout. The girl in this picture is visibly younger, no older than sixteen at the time of the party. Sitting next to her, with his arm around her, is Beau.

“That’s Beau’s little sister,” Flame says.

Ringer lets out a growl and slams his fist on the table. “What do Beau and his sister have to do with this, Tiny?”

I click to the next screen, which is a picture of the same girl, looking miserable and way too skinny, with Hawk holding the same baby right next to her.

“Explain, Tiny,” Bones seethes.

“I did some digging, as I do best. Jake was moved to another prison south of here and was released a year ago, just a few months before Ringer. When he was released, he started prospecting for his brother’s club. Robert came in right after, and the two prospected together. Thanks to social media, I

discovered that Sydney and Hawk started dating about a year and a half ago.”

“I need to get a hold of Powers,” Razor says, running his fingers through his mohawk, referencing his military friend who just so happens to be a part of the Dragon’s Ace MC.

“Already done. He’s going to be here in thirty minutes.”

Razor’s eyes widen. Ghost frowns at me. “Keep going.”

“This is all speculation until we figure it out for sure, but I figure Beau wants in their club, so how else would he get an in other than helping them with insider information about our club? I mean, think about it. He works in our garage, and he dated Lilah for however long, so he knows some details about us whether we want him to or not.”

Ringer growls at the mention of Beau having dated his wife.

I fucking get it, dude.

“That doesn’t explain how they infiltrated your security, Tiny,” Texas offers with a drawl.

I nod and click into another screen. “That brings me back to this little miss.” On the screen is a mugshot of Sydney where she looks so beaten down that I truly feel sorry for her.

The screen reads ‘Computer Crime’ in large letters under her picture.

“That’s a reason for arrest?”

“It is when you are hacking into major security networks and disabling alarms to give people access to steal.”

A soft knock comes from the thick door in the corner. Ghost nods at me, and I quickly minimize the screen.

“Come in,” Ghost calls out.

Powers steps through the door in a plain white T-Shirt and jeans, nodding at the group. I slap a palm over his back and thank him for coming. Fresh bruises litter his face, and his left lip and right eyebrow, once split clean, are closed with crusted scabs.

“Powers, no cut?” Ghost asks and nods at his bare back.

“Not anymore, boss.”

“No?”

“Turned it in yesterday.”

Ghost nods, running his finger along his bottom lip. “Sorry bout your face.”

Powers waves him off. I offer him a seat, and he takes it without question.

“We need you to answer some questions for us, Powers.”

“Call me Noah, man. I hated that fucking name, but you know how that goes.”

“Noah. Alright, man. Think you can help us out?”

He nods.

I open the picture of Sydney and Hawk again. “Mind telling us about these two?”

“Hawk’s the president, as I’m sure you know.” He forces a chuckle and rolls his eyes. “Syd was a good kid. She was a baby when she came around, and I’m honestly not even sure how she came about. But one second, she wasn’t there, the next she was, and then in the blink of an eye, she was pregnant. I honestly think he got her pregnant before she was even 18, but that’s beside the point. Anyway, Syd’s a computer genius. She does all their shit for them, hacking, transfers, everything.”

“So would she be able to hack into and dismantle cameras around town?”

“With her eyes closed.”

I nod, waiting for him to continue.

“I don’t know what Hawk holds over her. I’m pretty sure he doesn’t hit her, but he has to do something because she’s miserable. He treats her like shit. Threatens to take the kid away, kick her out on her ass, and everything in between. He

controls everything about her life, so she doesn't have a choice."

"Why is she hacking our shit?" Ghost grumbles.

"He's making her."

"Why?"

"I think that answer is obvious, Ghost. He wants control of Desert Rose and the surrounding area."

Ghost slashes the air. "Not fucking happening."

I click on the other screen with Robert and Jake's pictures. "Where do these two come in?"

"When Hawk brought up bringing drugs through, he knew you guys would immediately shut it down. So he decided on taking you guys out. Hawk assigned jobs for his brother to do to show his loyalty. His first job was to run one of you off the road, with the goal of killing one of you."

"Horse," Bones grunts.

Powers nods. "I didn't know. I've been so distanced from the club lately, taking care of my own damn family. I didn't even fucking realize what was going on. Hawk only involved a certain amount of people in the plans. I wasn't one of them."

Jake's a fucking idiot. He can barely get til noon before he's passed out somewhere in the clubhouse, fucking off on some sort of shit. Who knows. Before you guys shoot me in my seat, know that I didn't know about the majority of this until yesterday, which is why I turned my cut in."

Powers takes a shaky breath before continuing. "Then, somehow, a kid named Beau starts hanging around. He's Syd's older brother. Jake and Robert knew him from their chop shop days. I think Beau used to paint for them or something. I guess with Syd dating Hawk, Jake and Robert figured Beau could join the club. In turn, I'm guessing Beau was feeding them information about you guys. They knew everything you guys were doing. Whatever gets said at your garage, Beau is feeding Hawk and his minions," he says, looking directly at Bones and Tank.

“Shit,” Bones says, scratching his bushy beard.

“The bakery?” Ringer asks. “Was that meant for Lilah?”

Powers nods gingerly.

Ringer throws himself back out of his chair and slams his fist into the wall behind him. Too bad Ringer hit a fucking stud. The bone crunching sound that follows makes me cringe. That hand’s broken.

“Fuck! I’m going to fucking kill that piece of shit!” Ringer’s losing his cool and pacing behind his chair.

“Trigger’s car? Maria’s car?” Flame asks.

“Those were meant as warnings. Not meant to hurt anyone.”

“How do you know all of this now?” Ghost asks through his clenched teeth.

“Last night, Jake and Robert were supposed to come here and do something, I still didn’t get the full story on that, but I was at the clubhouse giving one of the pregnant ol’ ladies an IV infusion when Jake and Robert came limping through the doors. They both had gunshots, and I had to treat them.”

Powers was a medic in the Marines with Razor, so it’s no surprise that he’d be in charge of their medical care.

“Weak men spout a lot of shit when you give them the right pain meds,” Powers adds.

Ghost nods. “So all of this is because Hawk wants to bring drugs in?”

“Yeah. And get you out of his way.”

“For Jake, Robert, and Beau I think it’s all personal, because of you,” Powers points at Ringer. “Those three are focusing on their personal connection to Ringer. And Hawk’s sitting back while they all do the dirty work, even if it’s sloppy as fuck.”

“It may be sloppy, but people are still getting hurt. My fucking family,” Ghost barks.

Powers nods, sympathy clear on his face. “My family is outside in the car. I’m leaving town and getting the fuck away from them.”

Ghost presses his lips together in thought. “Are you safe?”

Powers forces a laugh and shakes his head. “I can handle myself. Besides, Hawk won’t leave this fucking state. I’ll be fine.”

“Well, I appreciate you coming by tonight,” Ghost says.

“If it helps, as far as Jake and Robert said, they don’t have anything else planned *yet*. And Syd’s down right now since Hawk smashed her computer a few days ago. So until he gets her a new one, I think you have time to figure shit out.”

I nod. “That does help. I can secure our network like Area 51. I just need a few days.”

“Thanks, Noah. You’re always welcome here.” Ghost offers as the man stands up to head out the door.

Razor meets his friend at the door for a brotherly hug and a few pats on the back. I wouldn’t doubt it if this is the last time they see each other.

“Shit,” Flame grunts once the door is closed again.

Ringer’s sitting in his seat again, carefully cradling his hand. The rest of the group looks lost in thought as we all ponder the new information we’ve just learned. I unplug my laptop and settle back in my own seat, clicking over to the web page I now have favorited and pinned to the top of my bookmarks tab. Kourtney’s social media page opens up, I’m settled on the view of her bright smile and get lost in her clear blue eyes for a moment.

thirty

Ringer

MY HAND THROBS as I sit in silence and listen to the group fill Trigger and Bull in on all the new information we've learned. Ghost sent a prospect to sit outside their hospital rooms to be with their women while they are here.

They are just as pissed as the rest of us. Bull comes out of his chair when he learns that the goal of his dad's accident was, in fact, to kill him, not just run him off the road.

After what feels like hours at the table, Ghost calls it a night and tells us we will be holding church again in the morning once we've all rested on this new information.

I leave the room and am not surprised when the main room is empty, save for a few club girls and two prospects. I stop in the kitchen for a bag of ice before going on a search for my wife. All I want is a shower, a bed, and my fucking woman.

Pushing open the door to my old room, I find Lilah lying on her side in a small ball on top of the covers.

Even with my mangled hand, I manage to pull her shoes off her feet and work her jeans down before pulling the blanket over her. She stirs in her sleep but immediately falls back asleep as soon as I run the fingers of my good hand through her hair.

Once I'm sure she's asleep, I head into the bathroom and take a quick shower, scrubbing the stench of the holding cell

from my skin.

I skip boxers and slide into bed under the covers, pulling Lilah's limp body into mine. I press a kiss to her temple and let out a relieved sigh as she cuddles further into my embrace.

As soon as I close my eyes, I'm pulled under and let the darkness consume me.

"Ringer!" a female voice screams, her voice muffled like she's inside a box or something. I look around and realize I'm in the front of Lilah's bakery, working on retiling the entire dining room.

"Emmett!" the voice calls.

Where is it coming from? I search my surroundings and come up empty.

"Ringer, please!" the voice cries.

I stand up from my spot on the floor and push through the swinging door to the kitchen. The sight brings me to my knees. Lilah is on the floor with her entire body in flames. I drop to my knees and crawl to her. The kitchen is on fire. Why isn't it hot?

I crawl through the flames and come to a stop next to her ash-covered body. I run my hands all over her skin, trying to put the fire out. I even hit her skin in an attempt to suffocate the fire. I scream as tears stream down Lilah's face.

"Ringer!" Lilah screams, but her lips don't move with the noise.

Why isn't her skin hot?

I blink, and Lilah is gone. I'm at the clubhouse now, and something is tight against my neck. When I look down, I realize I'm in a suit.

Everyone around me is dressed in nice clothes, and there are chairs set up, split down the middle by a soft, red carpet.

Ghost, my dad, and Flame are standing at the end of the aisle on one side. I walk towards them, and they all smile at me. What the hell? Why are they just standing there?

Lyric, Brenna, and Pebbles are on the other side of the aisle, smiling at me too.

Then, the most beautiful sight of Lilah in a white dress walks slowly toward me. Just before she reaches me, her entire body goes up in flames, and she drops to the floor, screaming. How is this happening, and why isn't her face moving?

"Emmett, please! Please! Please!"

I drop down to her side and cradle her burning body to my chest, chanting to her how much I love her.

"Emmett, I love you! Wake up!"

Wake up? I'm not sleeping. How could I be sleeping when the love of my life is burning alive?

Freezing cold ice water douses my face, and I jackknife up in bed to find Lilah standing above me with one small foot on each side of my thighs.

"What the fuck, babe!"

"You wouldn't fucking wake up! You were scaring me!" she huffs, dropping onto my naked lap. I hold her half-naked body against my now soaking chest.

She pulls her face away from mine, and I can clearly see the tear tracks lining her face. Come to think of it, my fucking eyes burn too.

"What happened?"

"You tell me! You woke me up thrashing all over the bed and screaming."

"Screaming?"

Lilah wipes the tears from her cheeks. "You were screaming that you had to save me and that you loved me."

I shake my head, the images of my nightmares hitting me like a cement brick. “I was having a nightmare that your whole body was burning at the bakery. I couldn’t save you.”

“I wasn’t even there when the fire was happening.”

I grip her thighs tightly and pull her into me, not allowing one square inch of space between us.

I look up into her forest green eyes and frown. “No, but you were supposed to be.”

Her brows furrow. “What do you mean?”

I tell her everything that Powers said tonight. There are many things discussed at church that I will never discuss with Lilah. But when it comes to things like this that could affect her safety? She will *always* know.

“Oh my god,” she whispers.

“I know, Princess. It’s a fucking mess.”

“So you were dreaming that I was there?”

I nod against her chest. “Then the dream switched to a wedding ceremony in the main room. You were walking down the aisle towards me, and right before you got to me, you caught on fire.”

“Jesus.”

“Yeah,” I hold her tighter to me.

Lilah wiggles back in my lap so she can look into my eyes. “You probably don’t want to go back to sleep now, huh?”

I chuckle. “Absolutely not. I don’t care to find out the next way my fucked up brain will catch you on fire.”

Lilah shivers. “Death by burning alive? No thanks.”

“It doesn’t look too pleasant. At least in my brain, it doesn’t. I’ve never seen it in real life.”

Lilah rolls her eyes and smiles softly at me. Her eyes roam around my face before landing on my lips. She only has to lean a few inches forward, and her lips are pressed firmly to mine.

I slide my hands around to her ass, almost forgetting that my right hand is most likely broken, and I groan against her lips at the feel of the lacy material against my rough hands. Her tongue peaks through my lips, and I deepen the kiss before she can pull away.

I slip my hands underneath the fabric and pull back, testing the resistance. Lilah lifts her body off of me and rests up on her knees, causing me to have to bend my head back. I let out a groan when her fingers run through my hair, pulling it roughly. “Fuck,” I whisper against her lips.

She kisses down my neck, stopping right above my collarbone. I swat her ass when she nips at the sensitive skin there and slap it again when she teasingly licks up my neck. “Mmm,” she moans in my ear.

“You’re playing with fire, Princess.”

“Just like in your dreams, Ringer. I want you to make me burn.”

Gripping onto her back, I flip her underneath me and press against her body. My cock is hard as fucking steel. I went to bed naked, so nothing is blocking me from her aside from her flimsy-ass panties as I press my cock between her legs.

I press my lips back to hers and devour her mouth. Snaking one hand between us, I work my fingers underneath her panties right at her pubic bone. On the next breath, I rip the fabric away from her and throw them behind me off the bed. Lilah throws her head back, ripping her mouth from mine, and she lets out a tortured moan, rocking her body against mine. She searches for any type of friction, and I’m more than fucking happy to give it to her.

Craving the taste of her pussy on my lips, I give no warning before scooting down the bed and throwing her legs over my shoulders.

“Fuck!” she shouts.

Her small hand lands in my hair as I cover her entire pussy with the expanse of my tongue before landing on her clit. By now, I know exactly what it takes to make Lilah explode.

But what's the fun in that? Teasing her is half the fun. I grind my cock against the bed, needing the pressure since her thrashing and moaning have me ready to fucking explode. I refuse to come before her, so I attack her clit with repetitive flicks of my tongue.

I run my hands all over her body as I lave her sweet, wet pussy. Urged on by her moans filling my ears, I reach her armpits and grab ahold. Hefting all of her weight in my arms, I flip us so she's sitting straight on my face.

She gasps in surprise, one hand landing in my hair, the other reaching back to steady herself on my chest. She tries to pull some of her weight off of me, but my hands clamp down on her thighs, holding her right where I want her, fucking suffocating me.

It takes her a minute to get comfortable with the position, but once the uneasiness leaves and the pleasure overtakes her, it's a fucking sight for sore eyes. I can't take my eyes off of her as I run my tongue through her folds. I let out a moan as she starts grinding on my face. She throws her head back and runs her hands up her body to her breasts, where she pulls at her nipples, rolling them between her fingers.

“Fuck! I'm going to come, Emmett.”

Her saying my name has precum leaking from the tip of my dick. I reach down, jerking my cock from base to tip with my good hand and squeezing at the tip, where more come starts to dribble out the slit and down my shaft.

“Fuck!” Lilah screams. Dropping her hands back to my hair, all reservation leaves her, and she grinds down on my face. I can't take a breath, but what a fucking way to go.

A smile hits my lips as her beautiful body is overtaken by pleasure, and her thighs start to shake on either side of my head.

“Emmett!” She lets out a blood-curdling scream as her entire pussy convulses against my tongue. I drink down her orgasm and groan against her as I feel my own threatening to blast through me.

I reach down and squeeze my cock, willing it to calm the fuck down.

“Shit,” Lilah groans, trying to tear her body off of me.

I pull her back down. “I want another one.”

“What?” she whimpers as I softly run my tongue back through her folds.

“Come on my fucking face, Lilah.”

“I just did!” she pants.

I flick my tongue against her clit. “Again,” I command.

She whimpers before her eyes roll to the back of her head, and I pick up the pace. I let go of my cock and work my good hand between us to insert two fingers into her tight opening. Her muscles grip onto me, and she grinds against me as I swirl circles around her clit.

She’s screaming through her second orgasm in no time. I chuckle at her as she quickly jumps off of me. Little brat must know I was going to push for a third.

My chuckle dies on a groan as she impales herself down on my cock. “Fuck!” I shout, and it’s my turn for my eyes to roll to the back of my head as she works her pussy up and down my cock like a professional.

I run my hands down her chest as beads of sweat drip down her neck and onto her breasts. “You’re so fucking beautiful.”

She smirks down at me as she speeds up. I’m going to come too fast like this. I can fucking feel it.

Reaching behind her, I grasp her tightly before flipping us so she’s tucked underneath me. “Where you belong,” I smirk.

Submission flashes quickly in her eyes before she smiles devilishly back at me. “So you think.”

“The only thing you need to be thinking about is coming on my fucking cock.”

Her eyes widen before I change my angle, and her eyes are once again rolling to the back of her head. “Mmm,” she moans.

I continue to fuck her into the bed, determined to fuck a damn hole in the thing the shape of her sweet body.

Her pussy starts to spasm against my dick, so I double my efforts, and within seconds, she’s coming around me, suffocating my fucking shaft. I can’t stop my own orgasm from blowing through me. It hits me so fast and so hard that I’m fucking dizzy as I pour every drop into her. “Oh my God.”

“Not God, baby. Emmett.”

She slaps my shoulder lazily and smiles as she runs her other hand through her sweaty hair. “Shut up.”

I drop my head to hers, catching her plump lips in a kiss so sweet that my own fucking knees turn weak.

“I fucking love you,” I say against her lips.

“I love fucking you.”

I lift from her body and swat her breast before grabbing the handful and rolling her nipple. “Brat.”

“I love you, too.” Her eyes soften as I run my thumb down her cheek and trace her bottom lip.

“I’m so glad I married you.”

“I’ve dreamed of being Lilah Mack since I was twelve.”

“How does it feel to get your wish?”

She shrugs, squinting her face playfully. “Eh. The dream was better, but I guess it’s alright.”

“You little shit.” I lift up and run my fingers along her sides tickling her.

She chokes on laughter and wheezes out as I ruthlessly tickle her, making her pussy squeeze down on my now hardening cock.

“I’m kidding!” I stop tickling her long enough for her to catch her breath. I slowly thrust in and out of her now that my

cock is almost fully erect inside of her.

Her eyes flutter closed as I thrust in slowly. “The dream has nothing on reality.” Her eyes open and land directly on mine. “Being married to you is nothing like the dreams.” I’m fully hard now and thrust all the way inside her, holding myself to the hilt.

“No?”

She shakes her head, clamping her muscles down on my cock.

“It’s so much better.”

epilogue

Lilah

“I DON’T KNOW why you’re forcing me to do this,” I say to Maria as I flip through the racks at some posh boutique in the city. “I hate all of this crap, and you know it.”

“A woman should not have to make her own wedding dress, Lilah.”

“Good thing I already got married then, Maria. This is a party dress. Something I have *plenty* of, by the way.”

“Lilah Jane, you were the one that decided to get married in Vegas away from all of your friends and family. You, of all people, should have known how we would all take it.”

“Actually, you’re right. I knew how you’d take it, but in my defense, I wasn’t really even conscious at my *own* wedding,” I say to her, earning an incredulous mom look.

“Fine.” I stomp my foot like a toddler and move on to the next rack of overpriced dresses.

Flame and Brenna *and* Trigger and Pebbles are now engaged, so Maria *insisted* on throwing a party for Ringer and I’s anniversary before the other two wedding festivities start.

Our anniversary is this weekend, and I’ve been putting this dress shopping off since the beginning. But with only five days til the party, I couldn’t push Maria off anymore.

My bakery has been back open for two months now, and Ringer's gym just opened three weeks ago. Ghost pulled his usual stunt and had an entire gym built for his brother. In true Ghost fashion, Ringer was completely surprised. It wouldn't surprise me if Ghost bought a huge RV and started traveling across the country for his own Extreme Makeover: Business Edition. I can picture him now screaming, "Move that bus!"

Maria convinced us to let the gym's opening celebration double as our anniversary party on the condition that she got to decorate the place. I'm nervous as all hell for it, especially because she's making me fucking wear white.

It takes three hours and six different boutiques to find the dress, and just because I can be a petty betty, it pisses me off that I actually find a dress I like. I allow Maria her moment and let her gloat over the fact that she was right. Despite my best efforts, I fucking love this dress.

Maria takes me to lunch and then back to her salon, where she primps and pampers me to within an inch of my life. I also highly appreciate the fresh Brazilian wax Brit treats me with, and I know Ringer will too.

As soon as I'm done with Maria, I head over to the gym, where I know my husband is going to be doing whatever it is that he does.

I wave through Pebbles studio door, where she's sitting at the front desk with a baby in her arms. Clara stands behind her with the other baby as they discuss something Pebbles's is gesturing to on the computer.

Pushing through the tinted glass door of the gym, I'm immediately assaulted with the sounds of skin hitting leather. Ringer is standing in the middle of the main training mat with a teenage kid as he throws punch after punch at the punching mitts. Ringer instructs the kid carefully and calmly coaches him through the steps.

He just opened a few weeks ago, but without another gym in town similar to this one, he has had an amazing turnout. I fell in love with my husband ten times harder when this specific kid he's training told him he didn't have money for a

membership. So what did my sweet husband do? He gave him a job.

Carter is a senior in high school with a single mom who works double shifts at the hospital to make ends meet. Now, Carter works the front desk after school and on weekend mornings for a few hours. In return, he gets free use of the gym and one-on-one training by my husband. The only catch? He has to keep up with good grades. I've come in twice now to Carter's textbooks wide open on the reception desk while he worked on homework.

The first time he was scared we were going to fire him for doing homework on the clock. Ringer shut that shit down immediately and told Carter that he actually required him to do his homework on the clock so he could make sure he was getting a good amount of sleep instead of doing it at home.

See? Sweetest husband in the world.

I may or may not have taken a liking to the kid as well, and may or may not be bringing extra dinner and extra treats for him to eat while he's working.

And it's quite possible I send extra home with him for his mom.

I stop at the edge of the mat and drop down to sit and watch the training session.

Watching Ringer work is the sexiest thing I've ever seen. I thought he was hot before. *Damn.*

Barefoot and dressed only in tight compression shorts, his muscles and tattoos glisten with sweat as he bounces around the mats. Watching him train is the hottest thing to witness.

But this Ringer? The coach side of Ringer? He melts me.

I may not ever want kids of our own, but the way he teaches the kids with such care and thought. It's amazing.

After watching Ringer and Carter spar for what feels like an hour, he finally breaks for water and smiles down at me. "Hey, Princess."

"Hey, Mrs. M," Carter calls.

“Carter, I told you to call me Lilah.”

He shrugs, blushing as he squeezes some water into his mouth before strapping his glove back on.

“Diner when you’re done?” I ask Ringer.

“Wanna take Carter?”

I nod, smiling at my husband.

I settle back on the mat with a clean towel as my pillow and get comfy while I wait for them to finish.

“Oh Jesus, I can see the balloons from here,” I groan as Ringer and I walk through the parking lot toward the gym where all of our family and friends are waiting for us.

Opening the door, every single person in our lives seems to be on the inside. Desert Outlaw family, bakery family, and now gym family, everyone is here to celebrate our anniversary.

“Happy Anniversary, baby,” Ringer says, looking down at me with a soft smile.

“I love you.” I press a kiss to his lips.

Ringer slips something into my hand and waits for me to see it.

I snap my head towards him. “What the hell is this?”

“A wedding band.”

I flash my ring at him. “I already have a wedding band.”

“Nah. That’s just your engagement set. This is our wedding, Princess. No matter how fucked up it is, this is our real wedding, and you deserve a real wedding band.”

I start laughing and work my small clutch open, pulling out a wedding band that I had custom-made for him. “Great minds think alike, I guess.”

I slip the tungsten band on his finger while he slips the diamond-encrusted band down over the top of my engagement

set. With a kiss, the crowd, who must have been watching us like hawks, lets out loud cheers, and someone cranks the music up.

The night is perfect. We spend it dancing, just like we did in Vegas on our real wedding night. Except this time, I don't drink enough to black out, and the next day, I remember every single detail of our wedding night.

epilogue two

Lilah

“AND IN THE BLUE CORNER, weighing one hundred and seventy four pounds, Carter ‘The Outlaw’ Pierce,” the announcer screams through the microphone.

Sitting in the front row of one of the most popular fights in Cage Fighting League history, I have tears in my eyes as Carter walks out with his previous belt win resting on one shoulder, and my husband walks next to him along with the rest of the Ringer’s Den team.

Carter’s mom Phoebe sits next to me, and we both have tears in our eyes as we watch her son in awe. She holds my hand in a death grip as we watch Carter climb into the ring. Ringer follows behind him, hyping him up, encouraging him, and giving him last minute tips as only a coach can do. Ten years later and I still don’t understand half of the shit they talk about.

When Carter turned 21, he entered his first fight. By the time he hit the CFL at 25, two years ago, he was 16-0. He hasn’t lost a fight yet, but every single time I watch him fight, I am sick to my stomach.

We’re back in Vegas for the fight tonight. The whole drive over here yesterday, I thought I was going to have to pull over and vomit from nerves.

I've known the kid for ten years, and you'd think he was my own kid, not a man that's only six years younger than me.

Sparrow sits to my right, and she, too, looks like she's going to vomit. Carter turns to face us and lifts his chin at me and his mom, but when his eyes land on Sparrow, they darken. He smirks around his mouthguard before he turns back to focus on Ringer.

"I'm going to puke," Sparrow says, running a hand over her little baby bump.

"He's going to do just fine, Spar."

"Tell that to my nerves."

"It's being back here that makes you queasy, not the fight."

Running her hand along her silk dress and holding a reassuring hand at her belly, she nods. "I think you're right."

Phoebe reaches around me and squeezes Sparrow's shoulder. "Our boy will be just fine, you just watch."

Sparrow smiles nervously at her mother-in-law and squeezes my other hand as we wait for the fight to start.

As soon as the first bell rings, Carter is light on his feet, bouncing around his opponent. Throwing a few punches at him, he connects a few, and his opponent, Johnny 'The Rocket' Spiers, rocks back on his heels.

By the end of the first round, my nails are already bitten to shit. I've pulled at least twenty hairs from my scalp, and my stomach ulcers are screaming at me to take some Pepto. But I don't pull my eyes away from the ring.

Ringer holds ice bags to Carter's chest and the back of his neck as he spouts more things in his face while Carter nods and sucks in lungfuls of air.

The second round goes much like the first, only much bloodier.

Carter has a visible gash at his right eyebrow that is pouring blood down the side of his face and the beginnings of

gnarly bruising on his ribs. The Rocket has similar bruises peppering his body too.

The third round is where things get interesting. Johnny has Carter pinned against the cage as he rains blow after blow down on him, but Carter doesn't give up. He throws hit after hit whenever he can and fights his damndest. It happens in the blink of an eye, but Carter squeezes free and turns it around on Johnny, regaining the upper hand. Bouncing back on his feet, you can see in his face how exhausted he is, but he doesn't give up. Johnny takes one wrong step forward, and Carter reaches out at the perfect moment, plowing a right hook right on the edge of his jaw, causing Johnny to immediately crumple to the floor.

“And the winner by total knockout, Carter ‘The Outlaw’ Pierce!” The beautiful words echo across the stadium, and I can barely focus on the ring through the sound of Phoebe, Sparrow, and I screaming.

He did it!

Our boy did it again!

He is the first and only man to ever make it to 23 wins undefeated in the CFL.

Tears stream down our cheeks, and as soon as my eyes lock on my husband, I can see the tears tracking down his cheeks too.

Goddamn softy.

The minutes feel like hours by the time Ringer gets us to bring us in the ring to celebrate with Carter.

His arms immediately lock around Sparrow, lifting her up and spinning her in circles before kissing her face. Blood and all, they're too excited to care how gross it actually is.

Behind us, the entire Desert Outlaw family cheers at the edge of the cage as one of our own members just set a world record.

Ringer wraps me in his arms and kisses my cheek before pressing his forehead to mine. “I love you,” I shout above the

cheers and celebration.

“Better than the dream?”

“Way better, Emmett. What about you?”

Looking around at the huge stadium where a kid from the wrong side of the tracks that he has gotten to coach for the last ten years just made history and where the entire family is cheering, his chest hiccups, and another tear makes its way down his cheek before landing in his blonde beard. “So much fucking more than I ever wanted.”

“I love you, big guy.”

“I love you too, Princess.”

The end.

afterword

I dedicated this book to my Papa. In the middle of writing Ringer, my Papa lost his long battle with dementia and boy was it a tough one. It sucked the motivation straight out of me. He's the guy that always believed in us, no matter what we did. Even with the content that I write, he couldn't have been more proud. You don't really want your almost ninety year old grandpa knowing you write romance and sex, but it didn't matter. I could've been writing hot garbage, and he'd still be so proud to tell anyone that cared to listen.

To say finishing Ringer took a lot out of me, would be putting it mildly. It took many people in my life pushing me to finish, and I'm so grateful they did. For every single person that had a part in giving me that extra shove towards the finish line, I owe all of it to you.

Thank you to my husband for forcing me to get off of the couch when all I wanted to do was cry alone.

Thank you to my editor for helping keep me on a tight ship, I owe you the world. I've told you before, but you are worth your weight in gold.

Thank you to my kids for reminding me why I work so hard.

Thank you to the rest of my family for being so amazing and truly the best family a girl could ever ask for. I couldn't have gotten through those horrible days without all of you.

Stacy, Kim, Sandi, Amanda, Debbie, thank you for being those extra set of eyes and hyping me up with each book, you ladies are amazing!

RIP J.B.G.

1-16-2023

about the author

Bailee lives in the sunshine state with her husband, two kids and fur babies. Between being a mom and working towards her dream to get her stories out to the world, she can be found with her nose in a book, traveling, or partaking in the many crafting hobbies she comes up with.



also by bailee james

Flame's Touch

Bunny's on the run from something, following a strict set of rules to save up enough money for art school as she stays hidden from the past. She stumbles across a small town and takes the first job she finds in a place she never imagined herself working– the strip club owned by the local motorcycle club. What happens when the shy new girl meets the tattoo artist?

Flame's always been a love 'em and leave 'em type of guy. But as soon as he lays eyes on the new girl in town, he offers her a ride home on the back of his bike. What makes this girl so special that he keeps letting his defenses down, one by one? Bunny is full of surprises, and when he finds out she's also an artist, all bets are off as he takes her under his wing to teach her the ways of tattooing.

Can Flame survive working alongside Bunny every day, or will he stop at nothing to get her beneath him?

Does Bunny take off for the hills at the first sign of trouble, or can Flame be the one who helps her set down roots in a place that finally feels like home?

Trigger's Forever

Trigger

A few months of pleasure that's quickly ripped away from him.

After growing up in the foster system, Trigger never pictures himself as a family man. He instead finds the family he needs through the club, his motorcycle club. Imagine his surprise when he catches the attention of his late club brother's daughter. It was only supposed to be for fun, but one night changed everything. Trigger's every desire now hangs in the balance, just out of his grasp.

Pebbles

For as long as she can remember, Pebbles has wanted to open her own dance studio. Growing up around the badasses in her father's motorcycle club, she was forced to learn how to be strong and independent. With a mother who could care less what she did, Pebbles took care of herself and did what she had to in order to survive. Becoming a stripper wasn't at the top of her to-do list, but she easily slipped into the role. Pebbles can handle herself on and off the stage, but can she control herself when a biker with honey-brown eyes sets her body on fire? And what will happen when forces beyond her control threaten to destroy the relationship they build?

Can Trigger convince Pebbles that she deserves happiness, or will Pebbles continue to go through life convincing herself that she isn't worthy?

If there's one thing about Trigger, he doesn't give up easily.