



Summer's
EDGE

DEVIL'S NIGHTMARE MC
Next Gen

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SUMMER'S EDGE

DEVIL'S NIGHTMARE MC NEXT
GENERATION

BOOK 5

LENA BOURNE



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PROLOGUE

Edge

I ain't had nothing much to live for since I was eighteen years old when my entire family was wiped out over a drug deal gone bad. Mine and my best friend's and it was all my fault.

So, yeah, there we were, me and Ruin—or Nick, as he still went by in those days, before he got his road name—riding across the country on one bike. My dad's Harley Davidson Road King to be exact, customized to perfection and the only thing I had left of him. Or any of my family. Nick didn't even have that much. We didn't talk about that. Tried not to think about it either. But Nick woke me almost each night by screaming in his dreams and I'm sure I was no better. We didn't talk about that either.

We turned a lot of heads on that bike and not in a good way. A couple of kids riding a bike we could hardly steer. The little money we had got us from Michigan to California. The plan was to get to a place where the weather was nice year-round. But by the time we reached San Francisco we were broke.

We'd started sleeping in the wild then, on beaches and in parks, sometimes just by the side of the road. And it's a good thing we did. Otherwise, we wouldn't have been there to save that poor, sad girl from throwing herself off the Golden Gate Bridge. Melody. She had lost her whole family too.

And for a while I tried to fool myself into thinking saving her life was the good deed that erased my guilt over ruining Nick's life and destroying our families. But a deed like that didn't exist. My guilt would never be lessened. Not by anything. And it would never be washed clean.

The three of us couldn't all fit on my dad's bike. And we couldn't afford to keep riding it either.

So, I made the decision to sell it at the first seedy biker club we ran across. I thought I was real clever asking ten thousand for it. The bike was worth a lot more than that. Too

bad we were just a couple of scrawny teenagers and a pretty girl. Too bad I was too stupid to realize my mistake in time.

By the time I had, the “buyers” lured us into the alleyway by the bar, five towering bikers with leering smiles and soft promises. I figured the bike was as good as sold given how in awe of it and all the customizations they claimed to be. But then a fist collided with my kidneys hard enough to take my breath and make me see stars. It was the first punch of many.

I could hear Melody screaming and Nick yelling and grunting as they beat him up too. But it was as though I was standing beside myself, looking at another mess I made, another thing I’d never be able to fix. If I lived long enough to try.

“What the fuck is going on here?” a man said harshly in a deep, carrying voice.

He was tall and built like a mountain. The tag on his cut said Ice, the back of it said Devil’s Nightmare MC.

“What the fuck is it to you?” the guy kicking me in the stomach growled.

I saw it all very clearly because I was still standing right beside my bleeding, shivering body on the cold ground.

“They’re just kids,” Ice said.

He wasn’t alone. Four other guys in Devil’s Nightmare MC cuts were beside them.

“Not your problem, man,” the guy kicking me said and kicked me again. I almost lost consciousness then. But I still saw it all clearly.

“I’m making it my problem,” Ice said.

Then they did.

And when they were all done, it was the five guys who tried to rob us shivering and bleeding on the ground.

“You all right, kid?” Ice asked me, his face real close to mine. I wasn’t, but I nodded anyway.

“You got somewhere to go?”

I shook my head.

I couldn't speak, because my mouth was broken.

"Let's take them back to the clubhouse and we'll see what's what after Doc looks at them," one of the other guys said. His tag read Tank. And Vice-president right beneath it. So I figured we were in good hands.

And we were.

We stayed at their clubhouse, never left. That was ten years ago.

That's how I became one of the Devils. And that's why I owe Ice my life. It's also why I would never do anything to cross the guy. Above all, I would never mess with his daughter.

But that was before I did.

Now I might have to eat every promise I ever made.

Because she's made me want to live again.

Something I never thought would ever happen.

ONE

Summer

Piña coladas on the beach and one last weekend of partying with my friends before I have to return home to get locked up in my golden cage again. One last weekend of freedom before every halfway decent guy averts his eyes each time I pass, and I have the same five conversations with everyone over and over again. Or maybe it's more like one conversation because lately all our conversations end up on the same topic: War. Death. Of everyone we love.

Even after Hunter and Trixie's wedding, the one no one thought would ever happen, that's all we ended up talking about.

I love my family, I do. But freedom is better. I thought I would finally have that when I got my first real job in LA. Junior makeup artist for one of the year's top blockbusters and the single best experience of my life.

I got the gig off a makeup video I posted that went viral, but even before that I'd been applying for years to every such job I could find. It took me months to persuade my parents and everyone else to let me do it.

My dad's not big on letting things go. Especially his daughters. And now that Devil's Nightmare MC has gotten wrapped up in an all-out war with too many other MCs to count—as my mom tells it—I doubt I'll ever see the outside world again.

The bodyguards he had trailing me on set weren't even trying to blend in, which drove everyone crazy, especially me.

Biker Club Princess was thrown around a lot. Mostly behind my back. Until I owned it. Now it's an inside joke with my friends—the people I spent almost every waking hour with for the last three months of filming.

You tell your own story. You don't let anyone else tell it. Just one of the many things my dad taught me over the years.

I just wish more of it was actually applicable to the real world and not only to the biker world he's so dead set on sheltering me from.

I didn't think this getaway to Tijuana would be sanctioned, so I didn't tell anyone I was going. I successfully ditched the bodyguards by dressing up as Princess Staeia, the lead character in the movie. I walked right past them in a sparkling green, skintight evening dress made of latex. The dress they noticed. The lioness mask covering my face they did not.

My plan exactly. I'm not a Biker Club Princess for nothing. And one thing I know is that all bikers will sooner notice a hot body than a pretty face. And my dad's MC brothers, well, they've spent so much time *not* looking at my body that I could walk past them with just my head covered and they'd wouldn't recognize me.

None of them followed me as I slid into the back of my friend Marcia's convertible, and we sped off the studio lot and down the highway to Mexico.

We were already sipping the first round of Piña Coladas before they noticed I was gone. That's when my dad's angry texts started coming.

Stuff like,

This is no time to act stupid, Summer.

And, Where are you? I'm coming to get you.

And, At least fucking answer me so I know you're alright.

I did, but only to keep him from going insane. And I did add that I'm twenty-five years old and would like some damn freedom.

Then I turned off my phone.

"They already missing you, biker princess?" Luis asks, his thick French accent somewhat softened by the amount of booze he's already consumed.

He'd started drinking in the car and the hot sun beating down on us on this beach isn't doing him any favors.

“Let them miss me,” I say as I toss the phone into my bag.

“That’s my girl,” he says and toasts me with his half empty bottle of rum.

I smile, clink my glass against it and say nothing.

I could tell him I’ll never be his girl like I’ve been forced to do since we met a month ago. He’s been trailing me like a lovesick puppy ever since then, but nothing’s ever gonna happen between us. He’s a nice guy, but definitely friend-zone material. And if I’m gonna be with anyone while we’re here, it’ll be with one of the buff waiters wearing only tan-colored shorts, which are not loose at all.

The one who brought our drinks has been casting glances at me non-stop. The kind of glances that promise all sorts of passion in the bedroom later. That’s what I need, fun and laughter and sunshine and a guy who knows his way around a woman’s body.

Because soon enough I’ll once again be surrounded by gruff, brooding bikers who think life is just about killing and who all seem to be under strict orders to never even look my way. I don’t know if my dad ordered this for a fact, but I’m pretty sure he might have.

Luis stands up on very wobbly legs and extends his hand to me. “Want to dance?”

“Oh, leave off, Luis,” Marcia says. “You can barely stand, and Summer is here to have some fun.”

I gave her a grateful smile. She’d been instrumental in keeping Luis off my back these past few months.

“Summer in the summer,” Luis says as he collapses back onto the sand. He laughs like it’s the funniest joke. I barely managed not to roll my eyes.

“I think I’ll go for a swim,” I say and stand up. “My skin’s still all sticky from all the latex in the green dress. How anyone can wear that for more than five minutes...”

That sends Luis giggling and I make my getaway before he regains his composure enough to actually say anything. Sober,

he can be a pretty cool guy, drunk, clearly not so much.

“I’ll join you,” Marcia says and falls in step with me, wrapping her arm around mine.

She steers me away from the ocean though and grins when I look at her sideways.

“I thought we could go introduce ourselves to those hot waiters instead,” she says conspiratorially. “I am dying to talk to someone I haven’t spent the last three months living with.”

“I’m with you,” I say and grin too.

Marcia was the assistant to the assistant of the costume designer and worked her ass off fetching stuff and just being at constant beck and call. Just like me for the makeup department. We met on the first day of filming and were besties by the third. It’s gonna be hard leaving her behind.

“Hello, ladies,” the waiter who’s been making eyes at me all day says as we approach. “What can I do for you?”

His co-worker, an equally chiseled, golden skinned adonis with sparkling eyes and lips made for kissing, snickers beside him.

I extricate my arm from Marcia’s hold and extend my hand. “I’m Summer, what’s your name?”

“I’m Mario,” he says and the touch of his warm, callused hand in mine instantly sends shockwaves all through my body. Or maybe that’s from the way his soft brown eyes are caressing every inch of my face.

“This is Paolo,” he says, introducing his friend.

“And I’m Marcia.” She shakes hands with both of them too. “But the real question is, what are we doing later?”

She’s so damn forward. I love that about her. But right now, I’m hoping the heat in my cheeks doesn’t mean I’m tomato red in the face.

“Anything you girls want,” Mario says, his eyes swallowing me whole. “We get off at eight.”

“And then you’re taking us out on the town,” Marcia announces. “This place is nice and all, but I want to see the real Mexico.”

The two guys exchange glances, both grinning ear to ear.

“Anything you want, ladies,” Paolo says.

I’m sure they’re both thinking they’re getting some tonight, and they might very well be right, although...

“I don’t know if it’s such a good idea to go wandering around a strange city with a couple of guys we just met,” I say to Marcia once we’re walking back to our group.

“Oh my God, you are such a princess,” she says and laughs. “Come on, we’re a couple of street-smart chicks and Tijuana isn’t exactly LA. And it’s certainly not New York City.”

That’s where she’s originally from and I’m dying to go visit her there. But between my dad wanting me home for the foreseeable future and her talking about staying in LA indefinitely, I don’t know when I’ll get that wish.

“We can handle it,” she says and grins.

“It’s not that...”

I haven’t told anyone about where I’m from or that my dad’s a member of one of the most notorious outlaw biker clubs in the country. I certainly didn’t tell them that the MC is currently in the middle of an all-out war and that we’re all in danger of becoming casualties in said war. Especially us children.

Hunter almost died, Chance survived only because he’s the luckiest guy alive and bullets seem to just bounce off him, and Harper came so close to being sold off I don’t even want to think about it.

But isn’t that all the more reason to live it up now, while I still can?

“You’re not chickening out on me, are you?” Marcia asks.

I shake my head and smile. “Nah, we’re good. I can’t wait to get to know Mario and Paolo a little better.”

She nods approvingly.

My dad’s not wrong about me needing to be careful.

But who’s gonna look for me in Tijuana? It’s all tourists and college kids partying hard down here. I blend in perfectly.

TIJUANA IS NOT JUST BEACHES, it’s actually a city of two million people. But you’d never guess that from the side of it Mario and Paolo showed us. They’re actually neighbors and we started the night at their houses where they spent an hour getting ready, while Marcia and I sat on plastic chairs in the back yard talking to their grandpas, and moms, and a bunch of cousins, some barely a year old.

Then they took us for some real Mexican tacos, which were so hot and spicy my mouth’s still burning hours later. Then it was tequila and dancing. The Latin passion is something I could get used to very fast. I danced more tonight than I had in my whole life before.

I’m sitting at one of the outside tables of a small dance club called La Copa, enjoying the breeze on my overheated face and sipping water. I have a good view of Marcia and both the guys, dancing a slow dance on the nearly deserted dance floor just inside the club. Most of the patrons have come out to the sidewalk for a breather and no one seems in a hurry to get back to dancing. It’s almost two AM. I’m dead on my feet and I’m thinking I could just let Marcia have both of the guys tonight.

They’re nice, attentive, and passionate. But here I am, wishing I was surrounded by those brooding, gruff bikers that never look at me.

It’s just my way to want what I can’t have.

Since the party is dying down, it’ll soon be time to go. Either to another club, or, as Mario has been suggesting more

and more loudly, to his house. I don't know how to tell Marcia I'd rather just go back to the resort.

"You got a cigarette?" a hoarse voice asks, sending shivers down my spine. The voice belongs to a bearded guy with biceps for days, wearing a leather cut over a black t-shirt and baggy jeans. He's kinda hot, though there's an unforgiving kind of iciness in his eyes too. I go wishing for brooding bikers and one appears. But this one looks a little too brooding for my taste.

"No, sorry," I say. "I don't smoke."

"Good for you," he says and sits down on the stool next to me, bodily blocking me from leaving the table with his hugeness.

I stand up anyway and try to get past him. "I should go back to my friends."

He grins and eyes me up and down. "Come on, stay a while. You're the prettiest woman I've seen all night."

"Yeah, right," I say. Because that's a blatant lie. The women around here are all much prettier than me, both the locals and most of the tourists.

"You don't like being called pretty?" he asks, disbelief in his cold eyes.

All the warnings my dad's been filling my ears with since I took the job in Hollywood are a jumbled mess in my brain. My face is overheating all over again and the breeze isn't doing anything to cool me. I raise my hand to wave to Marcia and the guys, but the biker grabs my wrist and lowers my arm back down. And now it really is panic city in my head.

"I don't want to hurt you, but I will," he says in a hissing whisper. "You're coming with me."

"The fuck I am!" I yank my arm from his grasp, splash the water I was drinking in his face and try to duck past him.

But he just laughs as he wraps his arms around my waist. "You're a feisty one, I like that."

“Let me go, you fucking psycho!” Heads are turning our way, but Marcia and the guys are still just dancing inside, flailing their arms around and laughing.

“Nothing to see here,” the guy tells the onlookers. “She’s just had a little too much to drink.”

To my horror they go back to drinking their drinks and talking with their friends as if nothing’s happening. As if the guy’s not carrying me towards an all-black van. The kind nightmares are made of.

I scream and thrash around, but I might as well be perfectly still for all the good it’s doing.

“Open the back!” the guy yells.

Thankfully the back door of the van stays firmly shut.

“What the fuck?” he grumbles as he carries me there anyway.

And then he repeats the question, but in a completely different tone as my dad, and Tank, Hunter and Chance step from behind the van. A bunch of others are there too. I’ve never been happier to see them all in my whole life.

“I’m gonna need you to let her go now,” my dad says.

The guy releases me immediately and starts backing away, hands raised. “Now, Ice, I wasn’t gonna hurt her, I swear. I was just—”

Whoever this guy is, he knows my dad. But that’s not surprising. Most one-percenter bikers do.

The rest of his nonsense is cut off as my father punches him in the face so hard, he goes down like a sack of potatoes. My dad was the undefeated champion in the underground MMA fighting ring for years and it still shows. He hardly ever talks about those years, but I know all about it anyway. Everyone does. It’s the reason everyone knows who he is.

“I’m sorry,” I say to him. “But how was I supposed to know these creeps would follow me here?”

He shakes his head and turns to Tank. “We should take the creep too or what? Maybe he knows something.”

“Yeah, but it’s a hassle,” Tank says and instructs some of the guys to lift my unconscious kidnapper and put him in the van back of the van he tried to stuff me in.

I really wish he wasn’t dead to the world so I could tell him something like, “Who’s going into the back of the van now, asshole?”

“You get in the car too, Summer,” Ice says.

I glance back at the club where a lot more people are staring now, but Marcia and the guys aren’t among them.

“What about my friends?” I ask.

“You can just text them later,” Ice says snidely, probably referring to the texts we exchanged in which I told him I’m gonna spend the weekend partying in Tijuana.

Nothing’s gonna come of those plans now.

And nothing’s gonna come of me arguing with him about it, so I just slip in the back seat of one of the two cars they brought. My cousin Hunter and Chance are both giving me commiserating sort of looks, but what good are those? At least they get to fight in this stupid war that’s keeping us all so caged. Me, I’m just a dainty little bird in it.

My dad gets in the passenger seat and Ace takes the wheel.

“I want to stop in LA to get my stuff,” I tell him.

“We’ll see,” he says.

“So what, we’re driving all the way home?” I ask. “It’s the middle of the night.”

“Yeah, it is,” he says. “And this is a detour we didn’t need.”

Figures they’d be on some exciting mission down here, because how else would they reach me so fast. The Sanctuary, as the MC’s HQ is so aptly named lately, is over eight hours away from here.

“I already said I’m sorry.”

He finally turns to me, concern vying with annoyance on his face. “This was a close call tonight, Summer.”

I lean back and cross my arms over my chest. “I know.”

“We’re at war, and it’s time you start acting like it,” he adds. “But you’ll have a few days to think about that in the peace and quiet of the countryside now.”

“Where are you taking me?” I ask.

“Oh, a nice little cabin in the woods. You’ll love it.” He faces forward, chuckling. “It’s even quieter and more peaceful than back home.”

I’m not even gonna grace that jibe with an answer. He knows full well I moved to LA in part just to get away from all that peace and quiet back home. And all those pretty birds singing in the redwood trees, which still have a lot more freedom than I’ll clearly ever have.

TWO

Edge

Getting shot is no picnic. But taking a bullet for the president of your MC is an honor and also has its perks. Especially when that president is Cross, and the club is Devil's Nightmare MC. They always pay their debts. *We* always pay their debts. I've been a fully pledged, patched member for the last eight years. Only problem is, I'm in prison and the charges leveled against me are no joke. Grand theft auto, assault and murder. Several times over.

I've been hearing a lot about how I won't be locked up much longer. But I'm still stuck in a tiny cell, with only a single window right under the ceiling so I can't even look out.

Everything in my cell is clean and new, even the pale blue walls don't have much more than a scratch or two on them. The metal bed screwed directly into the wall hardly creaks and the toilet hasn't had thousands shitting in it yet like the rest of the toilets in this prison. I have it better than most here. I know that.

But all the newness and the pale blueness of my cell are starting to drive me insane.

I get an hour in the yard, half an hour in the morning and half an hour in the evening. The only guys outside with me during those times are white-collar prisoners. We don't talk. We hardly even look at each other. The small outdoor courtyard has walls so high you can only see the sky when you crane your neck all the way back and even then, the view is ruined by the thick, sharp razor wire on top of them. Sometimes I see a plane fly by. I've never yet seen a bird.

The rest of the time I'm in my cell. Alone. Doing everything and anything I can think of to not go crazy. At least my wound is now healed enough for things like pushups, sit-ups and jumping jacks. If I didn't have that, I'd probably have strangled myself with my bare hands by now.

I understand I'm in this solitary, new part of the prison for my own protection and that the MC made sure I was put in here and not gen pop. So many MCs have banded together to destroy Devil's Nightmare MC that I'd probably be dead within an hour of being put into the regular part of this prison.

But I've been here for almost two weeks and I'm starting to wonder if maybe I didn't survive getting shot at all. Like maybe this is some weird version of hell that I'm in.

The lock on my metal door rattles, the bar sliding open. But it's not time for my evening walk yet. Not time yet to stare and the sky and wish at least a pigeon would fly by just so I'd know there's still life beyond these walls. I have no watch, but I've developed a very keen sense of time since I've been brought here. A useless skill, since it hardly fucking matters what time it is in here. Or what day. Or what century for that matter.

"Get dressed," the guard says. "You have a doctor's appointment."

I was lying on my bed in just my boxers, letting my drab, light grey uniform dry from the workout that took care of most of the day.

"I don't need no doctor," I snarl, but get up anyway. Anything to break the sameness of days and nights in here is welcome.

"Not my call," the guy says and then just stands there watching me get dressed.

When I'm done, he leads me down the sterile-looking hallway lined with identical light blue metal doors—the same kind of doors that are on my cell. This place already looks plenty like a hospital as far as I'm concerned. Or an asylum, more like.

He leads me through a bunch of locked doors until we finally stop in a cramped holding area of sorts where two guards are waiting. One of them is holding shackles—the kind that bind your feet and your hands together. I've only ever worn those in court.

“What’s going on?” I ask. “I thought you were taking me to the hospital wing.”

The guard that brought me shakes his head. “No. The actual hospital.”

It’s weird because my wound is completely healed, but I don’t ask any more questions. I just let them put the shackles on me. The chance to at least see the world outside is too good to pass up.

Once that’s done, the guard that brought me here unlocks yet another door, this one leading to a loading dock where a prisoner transport van is waiting. He stands aside for us to exit.

One of the guards heads for the driver’s side door, while the other escorts me to the back of the van. He’s standing real close, so close I can feel his hot breath on the back of my neck and smell what he had for lunch. Something with onions. It’s disgusting.

“The key’s in your pocket,” he whispers, the smell of onions intensifying. “Be ready.”

Then he loads me into the back and slams the door behind me before I can even fully process what he said.

I was assured by the MC that I wouldn’t spend a lot of time in jail, but they didn’t tell me anything more than that. I guess this is it. Today’s the day I once again become a free man. Thank fucking God.

Be ready?

I’ve been ready for weeks.

And I gotta say, the smell of onions on someone’s breath might very well be my new favorite smell.

I DIDN’T WASTE any time. As soon as the van started moving, I fished the key from my pocket, nearly fumbling it twice, then undid my cuffs. Then I wrapped the chain around my right palm and waited.

Be ready is not much by way of instructions. But I am always ready. For anything. Anytime. It's how I've lived my life since I was eighteen. No regrets. No filter. No job too small or too tasteless.

We're on the highway, I can tell by the smoothness of the ride. No way the Devils will attack on the highway. But then the van brakes hard, making me slide down the sleek metal bench I'm sitting on and thump against the wall separating the cab and the prisoner area.

One of the guards up front is shouting. Before I can try to make out what's being said, a loud *thunk* silences him.

Then the back door opens and three of my brothers are standing there, bandanas covering their faces, their eyes serious and alert. I recognize them all. Hunter, Chance, and Ruin, my best friend from before.

"What the fuck took you so long?" I ask and can't help smiling widely as I leap from the back.

"We had to make sure you'd survive getting shot first," Ruin says. "Otherwise, it'd be a wasted trip."

I give him a huge bear hug.

"No time for chit-chat," Chance says. "Let's move."

I clap both him and Hunter on the shoulder anyway and I can't help smiling. I'm free. Now all I need is my cut, my bike, and a very long ride. And a lady or three. But I don't think I'll sleep indoors for at least a week.

There's smoke all around the van, but I don't smell fire. They probably used one of those fancy smoke bombs we make so much money selling these days, among other fancy weapons.

"This way," Chance says and sprints away from the van and into the smoke.

The others do the same and I follow. Seconds later, I'm in the back of yet another van, this one with a grimy window that I can't see much out of. But it's still the best window I've ever

looked through. I can't stop grinning, that's how happy I am to be free.

We're speeding down the highway and Ruin is in the van with me, grinning too.

He points at a black plastic bag in the corner of the van. "That's some clothes for you. And your cut. Change, then we can toss that prison uniform out the window."

"Can't wait," I say and take out my cut first and look at it for a few moments. This cut represents so many things for me, not the least of which is finally finding a place to belong after my whole world was destroyed, and freedom.

"How'd you guys break me out, anyway?" I ask as I start changing out of my prison uniform. "That must've been something."

"Oh, it was. You should've been there."

He laughs and I do too.

"But seriously, we arranged for you to be taken to the hospital for a check-up," he says. "That stuff was down to others, so I have no idea how it was done."

"Maybe Melody played a part?"

She's the girl Ruin and I talked out of jumping off the Golden Gate bridge what seems like a million years ago. She became a Devil's Nightmare MC club girl after we joined, but she's a full-on Doctor of Medicine now, an ER doc. I have her to thank that I'm still alive now. Her and the MC's Doc.

Ruin shakes his head. "I doubt it. She's living it up in LA... doesn't even have time to text much."

I understand the slight bitterness in his voice. Melody up and decided she needed to distance herself from the MC a couple of months ago. So, she took the job at the LA General Hospital. I get it, she doesn't want to be just a club girl forever, but I still kinda expected all of us to grow old together after everything we've been through.

"Anyway, I have no idea how that part was done," Ruin takes up the story again. "But twelve of us were in various

vans and pickups waiting for the prison transport van to bring you out.”

I’m done changing and stuff the drab grey prison uniform in the black bag. He pauses in his account of my prison break to open the van’s back window. Watching the uniform fly out is one of the best things I’ve ever seen. It looks kinda like a bird—one of those I didn’t get to see at all in the last few weeks.

“Wasn’t it a little risky stopping the van right here on the highway?” I ask, looking out over its four lanes, enjoying the breeze on my face.

He chuckles. “Not the way we did it. First, we surrounded the van, then we forced it to stop. We dropped about ten smoke bombs after that. Overkill, but they’re so much fun to use. Then the prison guard that gave you the handcuff key... the one on our side... took out the other one and the rest you saw.”

“You’re right, I do wish I was there for all of it,” I say and laugh.

We’ve exited the highway and are heading up one of the hills Cali is littered with. “We’re not taking the highway all the way back to Pleasantville?”

He shakes his head. “We’re not going home just yet. Getting you out of prison isn’t the only reason we’re down here in LA.”

I sit back down next to him, still unable to stop grinning. “Good. I am so ready for some action... let me tell you.”

“I bet. I don’t know how you could stand it, being locked up.”

“It wasn’t easy. A couple more weeks and I’d’ve lost my ever-loving mind for sure,” I say and it’s not a lie at all. “But let’s not go there... tell me everything I missed.”

He does, going over all the battles in this war we’re fighting with various other MCs that want revenge on Devil’s Nightmare MC. The club runs guns now, but back in the day, before Ruin and me joined, they were a band of mercenaries, killers for hire, and the best of the best at it. Other clubs hired

them to take out entire MCs and they always got the job done. But now the ones they left behind, mostly children of the ones they'd killed as far as I can understand it, want payback. What goes around comes around, I guess. But that doesn't mean we're just gonna take it either.

"I can't wait to get back into the thick of it," I say. "And it would've been nice to see Hunter get married too."

"He didn't want to wait, as I'm sure you understand," Ruin says and we both chuckle.

Hunter's the only son of our president Cross and the woman he married is his long time, on-again, off-again girlfriend Trixie. He's tried in vain to tie her down for years.

The van slows and after a short ride along a very bumpy road that cuts straight through the trees, we stop in the middle of a thick forest. There's only a wooden log cabin there that looks like it was hand-built about a hundred years ago. It's growing dark and the air smells of fresh earth, ancient trees and some kind of honey-scented flowers. The birdsong is deafening and I'm still grinning like a lunatic.

"What's this place?" I ask.

"It's where you'll be lying low while we do what we came down here to do," Ice says, coming out of the cabin. He shakes my hand. "Welcome back."

"Thanks," I say, wishing the gratitude wasn't so darkened by what he said before that.

"I'm ready to go with you and do what needs doing," I say.

Ice nods. "I'm sure you are. But it's too risky so soon after your prison break."

The guy saved my life ten years ago and he's been something like an uncle to Ruin and me ever since. Definitely more than just an MC brother. I don't argue with him if I can help it. But right now...

He chuckles. "Besides, I need to you to stay here and keep an eye on Summer."

And suddenly there she is standing in the doorway of the cabin. Summer, one of Ice's twin daughters and definitely quite possibly the hottest woman I've ever known. Her long dark hair is loose, falling like a curtain of velvet over her breasts and down almost to her hourglass waist. She's wearing jean shorts and a tight white tank top, neither of which leave a lot to the imagination.

Maybe it's just that I've been in prison, but I've never wanted a woman more than I want her right now. Too bad, though. Ice would never sanction a thing like that. His daughters are off-limits. He makes no secret about that. And I owe the guy my life, so I gotta respect that.

"You're the only one I trust to watch her," he says in a quiet voice. "To not take advantage, I mean."

Why me? Why not Hunter or Chance or even Jax? They're all a hell of a lot more trustworthy than me. And they're all taken. While I get a boner every time I see Summer. It makes it hard to talk to her most of the time. Spending the night alone with her will be pure torture.

I focus on the little heart shaped pendant she's wearing on the gold chain around her neck so I don't have to look at her piercing, upturned cat-green eyes. Or her cherry-red lips.

"Can't we just stash her in a hotel or something?" I ask.

"Yes, please, stash me in a hotel," she says, and I can't tell if the sarcasm in her voice is meant to mock me or her father. "Any place is better than this rundown shack. And the company is only so-so."

She's got a mouth on her. Real sassy, all the time. My cock and me both would love to teach her a lesson or two about that.

But that'll never happen. So, I can't even think it. I think she knows I am though, if that smirk on her face and the fire in her eyes is anything to go by.

"It's only for a couple of days, Summer," Ice says to her. "Then we're going home."

A couple of days? Shit!

She doesn't look too happy about that either as she mutters something under her breath and goes back inside.

Ice chuckles again. "She'll come around. Come on, let's get a barbecue going and you can tell us all about prison."

The rest of the guys have already gathered around an ancient looking grill, some sitting on rocks, others on the ground. They're retelling the story of how they broke me out of prison, and I can't wait to hear it again.

Maybe after we've eaten, I can even convince Ice to let me ride with them on whatever job they're heading for after this.

Because spending time alone in a cabin in the middle of nowhere will be hell all over again just like prison was. Only in a whole different way this time. I've never been any good at not going after the women I lusted for. And Summer's at the top of that list. Always has been. Forbidden fruit and all that.

I'd rather get shot all over again than try to keep my hands off her once we're alone here. Even my tiny cell back in prison suddenly doesn't seem so bad anymore.

But that's just my cock talking and making me freak out.

Nothing will happen between Summer and me.

I won't betray Ice like that and besides, he's right about wanting to keep us all away from her. She deserves a whole lot better than what I can give her.

THREE

Summer

After they dragged me out of Mexico, we stopped at my apartment in LA just long enough for me to pack up some of my stuff. The rest will be packed up by the guys and taken straight home to Pleasantville.

Then they brought me to this shabby cabin in the middle of nowhere and left me alone with my dad and the MCs intel specialist, Hawk. They spoke in hushed tones out on the porch all day, while I tried to get some sleep in the cabin's one bed, which was new right about the time this sorry place was built.

How he expects me to share this tiny place with Edge, I swear I don't know.

Though I have some ideas.

Ideas I wish I didn't still have.

I had a huge crush on Edge back in the day. And the longer I look at him, the more I'm starting to think that maybe I still do. But every time I tried to let him know how I felt, he always snubbed me. By the end I grew to pretty much hate him. He doesn't know that either. No one does.

I couldn't sleep or eat much for days when he got shot and almost died. I must've called the hospital like twenty times, asking for updates which they never gave me until on the third day a nurse finally took pity on me and told me he'll live a long life in prison.

She didn't say it in a nice tone, but I remember thinking, *Not if his brothers have anything to say about it.*

And here we are.

They're all outside now, about twenty of them, celebrating Edge's newfound freedom, the smell of burgers they're grilling thick in the air.

I could sulk in the cabin by myself, but what would be the point? This is no different than being back home and I'll be there soon enough anyway.

I love and hate how fast Edge's eyes find me the moment I step out on the porch. Even though I'm wearing a huge hoodie that comes down almost to my knees and hides my body completely. He has the most intense blue eyes I've ever seen. Like the deep ocean way up north somewhere where huge whales and sharks swim and where storms that few people ever get to see rage. Such power and passion in that cool gaze. I used to think a lot about his eyes. I was fifteen and just a dumb teenager when I fell for him, and he was eighteen. It's all coming back to me now. I wish it wasn't.

"Nice of you to join us, Summer," he says. "I was beginning to think you didn't like me anymore."

Thank God for the very dim light in the clearing, provided only by a large bonfire they built, because I know I'm blushing real hard right now.

"Whatever gave you that idea?" I say and accept the cold bottle of beer he hands me from a cooler on the ground. Someone else brings me a burger.

For all the ways they hardly seem to notice me every one of my dad's MC brothers has always been very attentive to me. My friends in LA weren't that far off the mark with my nickname. I've never been less than a princess in their eyes. And that's just one of the things I was trying to run away from when I took the job in LA.

We're suddenly alone even though the clearing is full of men. My dad's talking to Tank and Hawk by the fire. Ruin, Chance and Jax are watching something on Hunter's phone and the rest are similarly grouped together. But Edge has eyes just for me. And the look in them makes me think I'm about to see one of those storms few ever do.

"So, is having freedom again all you hoped it would be?" I ask and take a swig of my beer.

He laughs like I'd said the funniest thing. "Anything's better than prison. But I did hope for some more action."

"Instead of babysitting me, you mean?"

The words just tumbled out, I didn't mean to say them.

His face turns tight like maybe he didn't think it through before he spoke either.

"Umm... obviously that's not what I meant..."

"Yeah, you don't have to lie, not on my account," I say and drink some more of my beer. "I know where I stand."

It's times like these I wish I was more like my twin sister Eden. She's the good girl of the family—a label that includes my mom and dad too, if we're being honest. She's perfectly content running her little bookstore back home in Pleasantville, because books are her life, and the MC is certainly not. So, she never had to worry about the guys snubbing her, because she's not even interested in any of them.

"And I stand where I stand, Summer," Edge says, surprising me with some sharp honesty that's just beyond hearing in that statement.

"And where's that? Because as far as I can tell it's in the dark, next to me?"

I clearly can't help being catty with him, so why even try?

He laughs again, but it's not entirely unforced. "Let me try this again... I've been stuck in a tiny cell for two weeks and —"

"And now you're about to be stuck in a tiny cabin with me," I finish the sentence for him.

A hard, predatory look passes over his eyes and if he means it as a warning enough for me to watch what I'm saying, he's failing. Because damn if I'm not literally burning for him to shut me up. Preferably with a kiss.

He smiles instead. I really like how it lights up his eyes. It's like that rare bit of sunshine the north seas get.

"You're testing me, Summer."

"Wouldn't wanna do that," I say and smile too.

Seems I can't stop.

He averts his turbulent eyes and shakes his head.

“Actually, I’d like nothing better than to spend time with you here at the cabin.”

If it wasn’t such an obvious lie, I’d believe him in a second. As it is, I only kinda-sorta do.

And I’m all out of smart comebacks because of it.

Over by the fire, Hunter’s phone, the one he and the others were all viewing chimes with a text.

“I don’t know who it’s from,” Hunter says loud enough for everyone to hear. “There’s pictures attached.”

The mood among the guys has suddenly turned very cold and very tense. Where before they were all laughing and talking loudly, they’re now standing so still I can hear the wind in the trees and the fire crackling.

“See what it is,” Hawk says. “But don’t click on any links. They could be trying to trace us.”

There’s a war on. Of course. And we’re all in danger. How could I forget for a teeny-tiny second? But we all did. And now we all remember again.

“Fucking shit,” Hunter snaps. “They got Melody. They messed her up real bad. They sent a location to where she’s at.”

“Where is it?” Edge says, rushing over to Hunter. “We gotta go now.”

Melody was one of the club girls before she became a doctor. And she’s the only girlfriend Edge has ever had. I want them to help her if she’s hurt, I want them to save her, but I wish it didn’t sting so bad that Edge is the first in line to go do it. I thought we were getting somewhere. Clearly I was wrong all over again.

They’re talking, but it just goes right over my head.

Hawk and Ice think it’s a trap. Edge won’t hear of not rushing straight into it even if it is. To save Melody. Like he saved her once before. I’m pretty sure he loves her. Hunter, Chance and Jax all want to go too.

“Fine,” Tank finally says. “We’re going. But you’re gonna have to be very careful.”

“We will be,” Edge assures him.

Tank turns to him. “You’re staying here with Summer.”

“The fuck I am,” Edge snaps, that brutal storm back in his eyes.

Tank just stares at him for a few moments. But Edge is showing no signs of backing down.

“You’re staying and that’s an order,” Tank says. “Now stand the fuck down. We’re not gonna let anything happen to Melody.”

Tank’s the club’s Vice President and will be obeyed. Like his son Chance, he’s usually a very laid back kinda guy, but his tone right now clearly says he won’t hear any more of Edge’s arguments.

“Fine,” Edge says after a few more moments of fighting the storm in his eyes.

Then the rest start assembling, and he comes to stand next to me. I don’t even look at him, just stalk back to the cabin, tossing my untouched burger into the bushes as I go.

This is the last time he’s made a fool of me. The last time he’s chosen just about every other woman over me. The absolute last.

He better not try to talk to me again tonight. Or so much as step into the cabin.

FOUR

Edge

The brothers have all left. I can't even hear the echoes of their engines anymore, but a part of me went with them and I can't call it back. Even the enticing smells of the fire and the sweet scents of freedom in the form of all the other aromas of the forest—including the faint scent of lavender and roses that's all Summer—aren't enough to calm me.

Thing is, I'm a soldier. War is what I'm good for. The only thing I'm good for. Haven't I proven that to the Devils enough times in the last decade? Didn't I take a fucking bullet for our president? I'd do it all again in a heartbeat. Do they doubt it? So why leave me behind?

All things I should've said to Tank before he left.

And on top of all that I'm worried about Melody now. Not that they won't find her, because I know they will. I'm worried she'll already be dead when they do.

She's worked so hard to build a life for herself after her family was killed in a car wreck. I'd like to think I helped at least a little, first by stopping her from flinging herself off the bridge and then by killing the drunk driving monster that plowed into their car. It was the least I could do. I want to do more.

And then there's Summer.

While they were leaving, she stormed off into the cabin like she'd suddenly been attacked by a horde of fire ants or something. And now she's lying in there in the dark. I want to join her. But I can't.

Because everything from her upturned eyes to her bow-shaped lips, her curves for days and long legs that just beg to be spread, never fail to get my cock hard. It's already hard now. And the mouth on her. I swear that bantering with her is gotta be one of my top ten things to do.

But what the fuck am I gonna do alone with her here?

Not any of the things I want to do, that's for sure. That won't fly.

The fire is quickly dying down now that no one's feeding it. A part of me wants to just continue feeding it, get a blanket from inside and fall asleep right here, with the heat of the flames licking my face and the cool, sweet fresh air all around me. But that would leave Summer alone in the cabin. And that's not exactly guarding her, now is it?

If the assholes who started the damn war with the Devils found Melody, then they can find us up here.

So I get up and walk to the cabin, no idea what I'll find when I get inside. Not much of anything, as it turns out. The little firelight that reaches this far is illuminating a very sparsely furnished one-room space, with a metal-framed bed on one side, a small wooden table and four chairs in the center and a tiny barebones kitchen in the other corner. I'm pretty sure that's a coal-powered stove in there.

"Summer?" I whisper. "Are you asleep?"

She's lying on top of the covers on the bed, her long bare legs glowing copper in the firelight.

I'm standing in the doorway. If I move any closer to her then that'll be that, respect for her father be damned. Being in prison will do that to a guy. And I didn't have much sex for months before that either. I was too focused on the war. Fucking random women I didn't care much about just wasn't doing it for me anymore in the face of possible imminent death. Honestly, I'd begun to think there was something wrong with me for feeling that way. So I'm glad the lust is back. I'm just not happy it's for Summer.

I take a step towards her, the floorboards creaking under my weight.

"Don't think you're sharing this bed with me," she snaps. Even though I can't see her eyes, I can feel them boring holes into me. Her gaze hotter than the fire.

"But where am I supposed to sleep then?" I say, teasing her.

She scoffs. “Wherever you want that’s not this bed.”

As if to punctuate the point, she swings her long legs into the air and sits up, slamming her feet against the floor with a thud.

I can see her face now and the look in her eyes is every bit as fiery as I imagined it would be.

“All right, we’ll figure it out later,” I say and laugh. “It’s way too early for sleeping anyway. Come back to the fire. We can have another beer and catch up some more. I liked it.”

She shifts on the bed, making the springs creak and pop.

“Not as much as you hated being left here with me,” she says.

So that’s the problem. Me wanting to ride with the guys. I’m sure that’s significant. Just not anything I should be thinking about.

“Hey, you know me, where there’s action that’s where I’m happiest.”

“And where there’s women too.”

Again. Significant.

“You’re a woman too.”

I laughed, she didn’t.

“Come on, stop being so sour. It’s my first day of freedom. I want to celebrate.”

The silence drags for a few moments. But then she stands up and walks to me.

“OK, but only because you asked nicely,” she says and grins at me, giving me whiplash as most women always do.

How can they even live the way they run so hot and then icy cold at the drop of a hat?

She walks past me, brushing against me as she exits the cabin even though there was plenty of space for her to go around. I need a couple of minutes to stop thinking with my cock after that.

I find her sitting by the fire, holding two bottles of beer, the smile on her face more of a smirk.

“So, tell me all about prison,” she says as I sit down next to her.

“How about you tell me all about LA instead,” I say. “Prison ain’t worth talking about.”

Her eyes change, the feisty light giving way to something much softer as she starts talking.

Too bad I can’t actually hear what she’s telling me, because all I see is the shape of her lips and the way they move as she speaks. Like drops of water sliding down a glass pane, like a breeze moving blades of grass in the spring, like...

I lean over and kiss those sweet lips without even deciding to. Because I needed to. Because I couldn’t remember how to breathe until I did it.

And she’s kissing me back. Passionately like those sharp eyes and even sharper tongue of hers always promised. She tastes better than anything I’ve ever had.

But I can’t have *her*.

Her eyes are spitting flame at me as I break the kiss and stand up to get away from her.

“This was a mistake,” I mutter.

Lava has nothing on the heat shooting at me from her eyes.

“Yeah. Clearly.” She stands up too.

“Summer, come on...” I say to her back as she stalks back into the house. “Your father—”

“Isn’t here,” she snaps, her long silky hair fanning out as she turns to me. I just held that hair seconds ago.

“He saved my life,” I mutter.

“Yeah, well, that doesn’t mean he can tell you how to live it. You’re a man. Be a man.”

She waits a few moments, then scoffs when I don’t say anything, turns back around and continues to the cabin.

“Don’t follow me.”

Her words are full of sharp finality. So why do I think she wants the exact opposite of that? Or is that just what my dumb cock still wants?

But I won’t do it.

Some things you never come back from. And getting another taste of Summer is one of those things. No matter how much I want to show her exactly how much of a man I am.

FIVE

Summer

That's probably as close as I ever got to throwing myself at Edge over the years—or throwing myself at any guy, for that matter—and the rejection stings a million times worse because of that.

Why did I even have to get up when he came in?

I could've just dozed off on the bed, and to hell with everything else.

Now I've embarrassed myself so badly that I'll probably never sleep again. Especially not on this smelly, lumpy old mattress. I have no idea what it's stuffed with, but parts of it are poking me much harder than a mattress should poke.

I practically begged him to keep kissing me. What's wrong with me?

I can hear the fire crackling outside. I can hear the breeze in the trees and an owl hooting somewhere near every once in a while. I even imagine I can hear him breathing. And eventually all that turns into a lullaby.

Though mostly I'm just so sick of thinking about all the ways I've made a fool of myself in the last day or so. First nearly getting kidnapped in Mexico, then ending up here and flying off at Edge like some sex-obsessed banshee.

I'm sure I'm only acting this out of control because I'll be back home soon. Safe, ensconced, my wings once again clipped.

And that's pretty much what I dreamed of when I finally dozed off.

I dreamed of walking in the vast redwood forest surrounding Sanctuary and finding a bird that couldn't fly. It was just lying there in the grass, staring up at me, its black eyes like two pretty glass marbles, its delicate wing bent at an awkward angle. I couldn't just leave it there. And I was too scared to pick it up, afraid I'd hurt it even worse if I tried.

I couldn't decide what to do, so I just woke up instead.

It's the dead of night and the sounds outside somehow seem more ominous and distant, although they're virtually the same as the ones I fell asleep to. Except for the crackling of the fire. The locked heart pendant I wear around my neck and hardly ever take off is very hot against my skin.

My mom got it for me when I turned sixteen, making me promise I'll always be careful about who I give my heart to. Over the years, I've rarely taken it off, since giving my heart away to anyone was such a slim possibility. It became the symbol of my captivity, so it makes sense it's burning now that I'm about to return to my golden cage back home.

I get up, the creaking of the floorboards adding yet another note to the eerie, secluded feeling as I walk to the door. The fire has died down to just embers glowing under a pile of ash.

The larger dark pile by it is Edge sleeping on his side.

The white, artificial glow of my phone's flashlight takes some of the eeriness away. But it quickly returns as I notice that Edge is murmuring and shaking as he sleeps. The latter has nothing to do with the chill... it's not cold. It clearly has everything to do with whatever he's dreaming. And it's nothing good if the shakes and the mutters are anything to go by.

He's talking to someone in his nightmare, begging them to stay home, to stay safe, to not go somewhere... somewhere where they will die. Where everyone they love will die. Where blood will flow like water and there will be no winners. Only losers. Only losers forever. His pleas get more and more heated, more and more desperate.

The words cut me deep in the chest even though they make no sense to me. Even though they're clearly just the result of a bad dream and I'm still plenty mad at him for rejecting me the way he did. He's in pain. And I feel it too.

So I crouch down and lay my hand on his shoulder.

"Wake up, Edge," I say quietly as I squeeze his shoulder gently.

He wakes up with a full body jerk and is on his feet the next moment, the sheer speed of his movement making me topple backwards on my ass.

“What is it? What’s wrong?”

He’s looking all around, but I get the distinct feeling that he has no idea where he is. Or why. Or with who.

“We’re in the woods,” I tell him, shining my flashlight at the cabin so he can see it better. “Nothing’s wrong. You were just having a nightmare.”

He looks at the cabin and then down at me. I can barely make out his face, but I can still tell he doesn’t quite know what’s happening yet.

“My name is Summer and you’re Edge,” I tell him and smile. “Why don’t you sit down now?”

He does, planting down on the ground with a thud. But he also finally grins. “Nightmare, you say? Yeah, I get those.”

“It sounded like a bad one. Do you wanna talk about it?”

He shakes his head and scoffs. “No, not at all. And if I made a fool of myself, I’m sorry.”

He’s impossible. But that’s only a very distantly annoying thought.

“You were fine,” I say, deciding to tell him what he clearly wants to hear.

He scoffs like he doesn’t believe me, but doesn’t say it.

“So, you’re not pissed at me anymore?” he asks. “We’re good, again?”

“Yeah, we’re good,” I say.

Because why not? We’ve known each other for a long time, and we’ve been through a lot. But I can’t help adding, “For now.”

He chuckles. “Until I say something else stupid, you mean?”

“Or do something stupid,” I say, thinking of the kiss. Which was not stupid at all. Stupid was him ending it.

He shifts and lays his arm around my shoulders, pulling me close. “Oh, Summer.”

Despite being a very short sentence, most of it composed of just my name, it’s still very loaded with meaning.

But I don’t have to unpack it now. I can just sit here, with his arm around my shoulders and his taut, muscular body to lean on. Because I like this. And I won’t like the answers he’ll give me if I ask my questions.

He’s fiercely loyal to my dad. And that means more to him than fucking me does. I suppose I should be happy it’s like that. I suppose there’s no need to take it personally because it isn’t. It’s just the way it is.

Just like I’m that bird with a broken wing from my dream.

I think that’s what we both are.

“So, what’s keeping you from sleeping?” he asks after a while, sounding like he really cares.

But then he follows it up with, “Were you scared?” before I can even decide if and how to answer.

“I had a bad dream too,” I say, meaning to poke him a little. “Though not as bad as yours was by the sound of things.”

He tenses and loosens his grip on my shoulders.

“Yeah, what was yours about?” he asks.

I consider telling him about the bird with the broken wing that I don’t know how to help, but I decide not to. He’ll probably just poke fun at me if I do, and he didn’t sound like he actually wants to know.

“It was just about how trapped I am back at home and how I don’t know how to leave for good,” I say.

“You wanna leave for good?”

He sounds as shocked as my dad would be and it's a bitter and sobering thing.

"Not like leave-leave. I'd still visit all the time," I say. "I just want my own life. You know?"

He removes his arm from around my shoulders. Probably for the best because it was just resting there uselessly anyway.

"No, I don't know. I'm more than happy at home," he says. "I can't wait to get back."

"So, you had your nightmare because you're not there yet?" I ask scathingly.

He flashes me a sideways look that is large part exasperated anger. "You don't want any of that, Summer. Just leave it and move on."

"Oh, right, you're trying to protect me. That's why you're pushing me away. That's some classic bullshit right there," I snap. "I can make up my own mind, you know. My dad doesn't get to decide how I live my life."

Damn it. I swore to myself I wouldn't return to this conversation. Yet here I am.

"And that's why we're stuck in this cabin right now," he says. "Because you're so great at disobeying your dad."

"This is just a blip in my plan... because of the war and everything... but as soon as that's done—"

"You're flying the coop?"

Funny he should say that. Like he knows I've been comparing myself to a bird all night. But he's probably actually calling me a hen.

"You don't want none of my life, Summer," he says, sounding both very serious and very far away. "You wanna know what my dream was about? It was about the night mine and Ruin's family were killed for messing with shit they shouldn't have been involved in. And it was all my fault because I'm the one who introduced them and suggested they do the shit they got killed for."

I never knew this part of the story. Only that he and Ruin were best friends from way back when and that they both lost their families on the same night during a drug deal gone bad. And that Edge saved Ruin.

“You and Ruin got away though,” I say quietly, wondering if I should speak at all. I suddenly feel very alone here, even though he’s sitting so close I can feel the heat rising from his body. “Thanks to you.”

“Sure, we got away, with just the clothes on our backs and my dad’s bike. It was the least I could do, but it wasn’t in any way enough.”

“What happened?”

He looks at me sharply. “Doesn’t matter. It’s done. And it can’t ever be undone.”

“Tell me,” I insist, not even sure why.

“The short version is, Ruin’s parents were a couple of yuppies down on their luck. They were dabbling in cooking meth and growing weed to try and make ends meet. My family had some ties to the biker world, so I introduced them, and they found a buyer. My folks were there to facilitate the sale and get a commission. But those asshole buyers had no intention of paying for shit. They were just there to take out the competition. Even though it was no competition at all. Just a couple of dumb, broke middle-class people who bit off more than they could chew.”

He’s breathing heavily after saying all that fast. Once he’s done, he continues looking into the embers and not at me.

“I had no idea... but what happened isn’t on you... it’s on those assholes. Who were they?”

He scoffs. “Doesn’t matter. They’re all dead. The Devils helped me get my revenge. Your father was right beside me as I gutted the guy who killed my mom. So you see—”

“Why you can’t ever go against his wishes? No, I still don’t.”

“I was gonna say, why you don’t want anything to do with me,” he says. “I’m a killer who’s devoted his life to killing. I’d fuck you in a heartbeat. You’re the hottest woman I know, and you get my blood going like no other woman can. But that’s all it’d be. A good time fuck and nothing after. I don’t know how to do after. I have no soul left. And you deserve better. I respect you and your father too much to do that to you.”

Maybe it’s the near total darkness that’s making him so brutally honest. So, I might as well be too.

“Fine, Edge, you gave me fair warning. But my mind kinda got stuck on all that about *the hottest woman* and *blood pumping*. And I’ll prove to you that you still have a soul. And that you can have everything you want and then some.”

He scoffs and shakes his head. “You don’t know what you’re saying.”

“I know exactly what I’m saying.” I stand up. “It’s getting cold out here. You’re welcome to join me in that nasty bed inside if you feel the same way. Nothing has to happen. We can just sleep.”

Then I walk away, holding my breath while my heart thunders in my chest as I wait for him to say something. But he doesn’t.

And he doesn’t follow me into the cabin either.

SIX

Edge

I meant every word I told her. But it sure is cold out here without her now. Made even colder by her invitation to join her in bed. I poke at the embers, trying to rouse a flame, but nothing happens. They're too dead, too cold, too extinguished. Just like me.

She's wrong. There's nothing to resurrect in me. And letting her try would be the worst thing I've ever done. And I've done bad things. Many very bad things. Things that give me nightmares where I'm the villain and not someone else.

If I let her into that darkness she'll never come back out. There's nothing here for her. Nothing for me either if I let her in. Except the knowledge that I've fucked up yet another life. Ruined yet another life.

All those points are perfectly valid. And they keep multiplying in my brain, each more true than the last.

But I got up and walked into the cabin anyway.

I can tell myself it's because of the cold all night long, but the truth is, I've been a lot colder. I could also lie and tell myself it's to keep her safe. Or that I don't want to offend her by ignoring her invitation.

And I do tell myself all those lies as I lie down next to her and cover myself with half the thick, scratchy blanket that she'd left on my side of the bed. I tell myself that her being asleep and not noticing I've come in is a good thing too.

But the damn truth is, it's been a very long time since I've faced my demons the way I had tonight. A very long time since I've told anyone the whole of my hellish story. And her brave offer to show me a different way, a way out of the hell I've been living, is a first.

Sincere or not, no one's ever offered me that.

So how was I supposed to know how much it'd mean to me?

But it fucking does. And I don't know what to do with that.

Except lie here next to her, perfectly still so as not to wake her. So as not to hear her take the promise back. No idea why it's like that. I'm not a sentimental idiot. I'm not looking for anything. I know she can't do what she promised me.

Somewhere between nearly losing my mind in prison and finding her and all her sweet promises for the taking, I must've gone insane for real.

But I'm sure I just have to sleep it off.

The brothers will be back soon and then we'll go home, and everything will be the way it was. Normal. I just have to hold on until then.

SEVEN

Summer

Last night was one strange night, that's for sure. Maybe it was the darkness, or nearly getting kidnapped the night before, or the sleeplessness or the fact that I was finally alone with Edge after all the years of pining over him, but I laid it all on the line and I don't know if that was a good idea.

By the time he finally came into the cabin I'd already given up waiting for him. And I was done getting rejected, so I just waited for him to make his move. Or not. Turns out that *not*. We didn't even wake up holding each other like I kinda half expected would happen.

In fact, I woke up in bed alone.

He wasn't anywhere in the cabin either, or anywhere near it outside. For a second, I thought that maybe he split, that maybe all that heart-felt sharing last night and the kiss were too much for him and he just left. But he'd never do that. He promised my dad he'd watch over me, and that's another promise to Ice that he'd never break.

Damn.

I get a coke from the cooler next to the burnt-out remnants of the fire, then sit on the porch stairs sipping it, wishing I had an extra tall latte instead. Or a way to take a long bath to wash the country and the rejection off me.

The coke's warm and the black soot and charred wood that's left in the fire pit quickly starts reminding me too vividly of the life I thought I was finally building for myself. That's all in charred ruins now too.

Marcia was all shocked that I was almost kidnapped right under her nose, and happy that my family was there to save me. But she hasn't been replying to my texts since. None of my other new friends are either.

Only my sister Eden is. And she keeps going on and on about how terrible it is that I was almost kidnapped. I can just picture her, wearing one of her summer dresses with some

lovely floral print and a sensible neckline, surrounded by the books she loves so much. Those romance books she can't stop reading that are nothing like real life.

For example, a rough, brooding type of biker in his prime would never say no to a young woman on the night he finally gets out of prison in one of those books. I could ask Eden to confirm that, but it would just send her into an even bigger spiral.

She's tried to call me a few times, but the reception up here is so bad that every other word she said was swallowed up by static.

I'm still trying to wrap my mind around the fact that for the last three months I was living the dream, assistant to the head makeup artist of a major Hollywood movie and now I'll once again be stuck doing it on myself on TikTok and YouTube like I'd been doing for years. I might get the occasional themed wedding gig, or Halloween party to do make up for, but that's the best I can hope for. There simply isn't any demand for the kind of work I like to do in Pleasantville.

I can transform anyone into anyone else using my makeup skills. My videos get hundreds of thousands of views and likes, but it all ends with me wiping it off my face right after I'm done filming. All that got me the job in Hollywood, but it's just too bad I won't be able to take another one anytime soon.

I complain about that to Eden. She just texts back that I need to come home where it's safe for now and that it's the most sensible thing to do. She tries to comfort me by saying even the war won't last forever, but our conversation fizzles after that and I let her go once I notice Edge approaching.

He's wearing just a pair of jeans, his t-shirt slung over his shoulder and his hair is wet, glistening a deep gold every time the sun's rays reach it through the canopy. There's a huge scar on the left side of his stomach from where he took a bullet for Cross, and it only makes him look more enticing. There are tattoos across his chest and stomach and down his arms, some

of which I've never seen and all of which I would very much like to study more closely.

I wish he was smiling at me as he approaches, but he's holding a burner phone in his hand and frowning down at it like it's done him a great personal wrong.

"What's going on?" I ask once he's within earshot. There's a war going on. Maybe it's bad news. I regret thinking all those other silly things now.

"Nothing," he says sounding like he'd rather growl it.

"Is everyone OK?"

He nods. "Yeah. They got Melody back safe, but something else came up. It looks like we'll be stuck here for at least another couple of days."

"You don't have to make it sound like it's a death sentence," I snap.

He looks surprised at my tone for a split second, then he grins, while his eyes remain very dark.

"You like roughin' it then?" he asks wryly. "Fine then, I found a small steam where you can wash. It's just about ice cold."

I point behind me. "There's an outhouse shower type thing in the back with a sun warmed water tank. I'll just use that."

He shrugs, gets his own can of coke from the cooler and joins me on the steps. "My way is better. More natural."

"Yeah, I should've told you about the shower sooner," I say and grin at him. "Sorry about that."

He shrugs then chugs the entire can of coke, crushing it in his fist once he's done.

"What the hell are we gonna do now?" he asks.

"I have some ideas," I say snidely.

He just shakes his head. "I meant for food and such. They didn't even leave us a car."

"We could go for a hike and find a store, I guess," I say.

He looks me up and down, like he's about to make some sarcastic remark, but then his gaze turns real soft and desirous as his gaze caresses my bare legs. "You ever been on a hike?"

"Are you kidding me?" I say and stand up. "I'm from Pleasantville. Getting to school was a hike with all those ancient redwood forests everywhere."

I'm grossly exaggerating the situation and my only pair of anything resembling hiking shoes is a pair of dress sneakers with platform heels. But anything is better than spending another day sitting in this cabin bickering with him and trying to keep my hormones in check.

Sometime during my chat with Eden, I realized that's all last night was. Out of control hormones. I haven't been laid in months and that's not counting the three I spent working twelve-hour days in Hollywood. I need some. But he's not gonna give it to me and that's that. I really shouldn't have promised him I'd save his soul, or help him find it, or whatever nonsense I promised him in the dead of night.

"Besides, you can carry me if it comes to it," I say and smile down at him.

He groans as he rolls his eyes.

"What, are you saying those muscles are just for show?"

He tosses the crushed coke can on the ground and stands up, towering over me.

"Oh-oh," I say and can't stop grinning. "Did I say something wrong?"

The look in his eyes is a mixture of exasperation, indignation and passion.

"They are not just for show," he growls.

Then he lifts me up like I weigh nothing and slings me over his shoulder. I shriek and laugh as he carries me into the cabin and deposits me on the bed. Not gently, but not hard either.

And I'm sure I'm about to get exactly what I wanted from him since I first saw him last night. The hungry, predatory

look in his eyes promises as much anyway. His gaze is like fire, swallowing me up and I take back all I was thinking about just being hormonal before. I want *him*. All of him and only him. Right now, and for a good long while after. Maybe forever.

But he takes a step back and runs his hand through his hair, looking everywhere but at me.

“Get dressed, now,” he says, his voice hoarse like it was burned away by that fire that nearly consumed me just now. “We have a long way to walk.”

Then he retreats back to the porch, picks up his T-shirt and puts it on, his tats and his muscles disappearing from view.

I just sit there stunned for a couple of moments.

It’s not rejection. He wants me as much as I want him.

I know that.

I’ve also known him for a long time, maybe not well, but enough to know he’s no gentleman and not a guy who’s particularly in control of himself most of the time. Or one who keeps his cock in his pants, for that matter. Doing it now is clearly taking all he’s got.

Maybe I’ve been wrong about him all this time. Maybe he is the forever type.

But be that as it may, this is still frustrating as hell. He really got me going and now I have to walk for miles and miles with a hard-on, for lack of a better word to describe it.

“You’re a real tease, you know that?” I say as I’m tying my shoes.

He laughs. “Now you know how I feel.”

I do. And it’s not great. But that’s OK. Because I’m gonna do something about it.

EIGHT

Edge

For the first mile or so of the hike I can barely understand what she's saying although I seem to be answering her questions just fine. Trouble is, my mind is still reeling from how close I came to ripping her clothes off and fucking her on that bed. I came so close that a part of me seems to have torn off and is doing it right now, like in some weird alternate universe. Trouble is also that I want this universe to be that one.

My cock is still rock hard and it's not getting any better, making our trek through the woods that much more annoying. Good thing the town of Fairview is just a couple of miles from the cabin. Bad thing is that it'll be all uphill going back.

"We're here," she says, sounding a little disappointed.

Probably because she was having so much fun poking at me and my resolution to do exactly as her father would want. For her own good.

The town doesn't look like a huge one and there's a large chain supermarket right where we came down the hill.

"Ice wants me to wait here while you go in and do the shopping," I tell her. "But we're not gonna do it that way."

It's totally priceless how the look of total confusion on her face gives way to open-mouthed indignation.

"So, you don't always do what Ice tells you?" she asks, trying to sound sassy but it's too snappish for that.

I like pissing her off way too much. I should stop.

"What can I say, I eat a lot and I can't have you carrying that much by yourself. Plus, I don't trust you to get everything for that same reason."

She's still staring at me with her mouth open. And now I'm picturing her lips wrapped around my cock and I should stop that too.

“Seriously, we’ll be in and out. No one will recognize me,” I say and start walking towards the supermarket. “Also, you’re paying, since I don’t have any money on me and I can’t have you do all the shopping and paying for it on top of it.”

“You’re just such a gentleman, aren’t you?” she says as she catches up to me. It sounds like an insult.

I grin at her over my shoulder. “When I want to be.”

She huffs and falls in step with me.

“I wish you weren’t,” she mutters, and I can’t help laughing.

Just yesterday morning, while I was still stuck in my tiny cell, I figured I’d probably never laugh again. Hell, for the last ten years, I haven’t laughed fully. But it’s easy to do it with Summer. Probably because this whole situation is just an anomaly, just a stolen little piece of time that will end soon and won’t ever come again. So why not make the best of it? Why not take full advantage?

I should stop thinking that too.

It’s around noon on a weekday so the vast supermarket is blissfully empty. Except for a couple of bored-looking cashiers the place is virtually a ghost town. I grab the first black baseball cap I see—an LA Kings hockey club one, of all things—and put it on, pulling it low over my face.

“Can you even see anything now?” Summer asks in her signature sassy style.

“I see just fine.”

“I could’ve given you a total makeover before we came here... I wish I’d thought of that,” she says. “Then no one would recognize you... unless I made you look like Brad Pitt or something.”

“I’d never let you put makeup on my face.”

She looks put out for real by that. So much so she’s struck speechless.

“Let’s get a move on,” I add.

“I don’t even know what we need,” she says, leaning over the handles of the cart and looking this way and that. “Or where anything is.”

I scoff. “Don’t you women all have like a sixth sense about where stuff is in stores?”

She gives me a shocked look. Maybe I went too far trying to be funny. But the thing is, with every minute that passes in this place I see my stupid tiny prison cell growing closer again.

“I survive on coffee, soda, chips and the occasional frozen something,” she says. “But something tells me you’re not big on that. What with your muscles to upkeep and your two percent body fat and whatnot.”

“Two percent? I wish.”

She narrows her eyes at me, and I wish I hadn’t tried to be funny again.

“All right, I’ll get the meat and the vegetables, and you get the snacks,” I suggest.

“Fine. But just don’t get more than you can carry.” She winks at me and rolls the cart away towards the chips and such aisle.

I make short work of getting some meat to throw on the barbecue, stuff to marinate it in. I also pick up potatoes that will bake nicely in the embers, along with butter and sour cream to go with them, and assorted veggies.

She’s already waiting for me near the cash registers when I’m done, my arms shaking from the weight of everything. The cart is about half full of chips and dips, cookies, a bunch of cokes and way too many cartons of iced coffee.

“You do realize we don’t have a car?” I ask her.

She runs her hand over my right biceps and squeezes, her touch electrifying.

“But you’re as strong as Thor.”

For some reason, and even though I know she's just teasing me, the compliment feels good.

"Yeah, we'll see how much I can actually carry," I say and start emptying the cart onto the cash register belt. "You're paying, after all."

She laughs, then stands between me and the cashier lady who looks half asleep as she slides each item over the register.

The stuff we bought fills six shopping bags and the handles start digging into my palms painfully before we even clear the empty parking lot. She takes two of the bags from my hands without saying anything and without taking my protest that I got it seriously.

"I like to pull my weight," she says and grins at me.

But she's breathing hard and is red in the face halfway up to the cabin and doesn't have the energy for sass anymore.

Me, I'm perfectly content watching the muscles on her long legs ripple and her perfect round ass sways this way and that as she walks. So content I don't even feel the weight of the bags after a while. Or maybe that's because my hands have gone numb.

We bought enough food for at least a week, maybe longer. Might be some sort of unconscious wish to stay here longer than the couple of days it'll take the Devils to come get us. Or not so unconscious on her part. She's made it no secret what she wants from me.

The more I watch her and the harder her breathing becomes, the less I know why I'm even denying her.

But I do know.

She'll get nothing more than a good fuck out of it. If nothing else, I almost got killed in this war once and it could very well happen again.

And I'll lose her father's trust and respect.

Not something I'd give up happily.

So for the rest of the trek, I focus solely on thinking about the war I'll hopefully be rejoining in a few days.

I didn't tell her everything I know about why we're stuck here now. Ruin is with Hunter and some of the others dealing with the guy who messed with Trixie the last time they were down in LA. Ice, Tank and Hawk are dealing with the trap that abducting Melody had been the opening act for.

Either of those jobs sound great to me.

The cabin finally comes into view and not a minute too soon.

Summer dumps the bags she was carrying on the porch and sits on the steps with a thud. She digs in one of the bags she was carrying, pulls out a neon blue sports drink and proceeds to drink about half of it.

"I really should do more cardio," she complains between large gulps.

Her face is glistening with sweat, her chest heaving and the only way this sight could be even greater would be if she were naked. In bed. Under me.

Damn it, no.

"I think I'll try out the shower now," she says.

I clear my throat, because the picture of her naked just got a whole lot clearer in my mind.

"I'll start the grill."

I don't wait for her to say anything, just busy myself with my task. Only after the creaking of floorboards tells me she went to take her shower do I start taking care of the meat and the rest of what we bought.

None of it works to keep the image of her naked, wet body out of my mind. I ignore it as best I can. Which isn't working very well at all.

NINE

Summer

I got about two seconds of warm water from the sun-warmed tank then the rest of my shower was icy cold. Not how I like it. And maybe I spent longer than I needed to under the cold spray hoping Edge will finally change his mind and join me.

No such luck.

The clearing in front of the cabin smelled wonderfully of barbecue wings when I rejoined him there, and Edge was manning the grill shirtless, wearing just his jeans, a beer in one hand and the meat fork in the other.

“You took your sweet time,” he says. “Come on, these are done.”

He’s also had time to make a salad that’s more than just regular lettuce. There’s tomatoes, peppers and even some corn mixed in.

I join him by the grill, holding out two paper plates.

“If I didn’t know any better, I’d say you’ve done this before,” I say.

“Oh, tons of times. Normally I’d let the wings sit and marinate overnight, but this is good too.”

“I never knew you were such a cook. It looks delish.”

He looks at me from the side of his eyes, clearly trying to see if I’m teasing him again.

“I mean it,” I tell him. “Can’t wait to dig in. I’m starving.”

He loads the plates with the wings and the salad, and we retreat back to the porch steps to eat. For a while that’s all we do.

“I haven’t had a home-cooked meal in ages,” I say.

My fingers are all sticky from the slightly spicy sauce as are his.

“You really should take better care of yourself, Summer.”

I almost ask him if he's volunteering for the job, but I've teased him enough. He's given me his answer and I'm enjoying the pleasant easiness between us. Teasing him just puts him on the defensive and isn't leading anywhere.

"Where'd you learn to cook like this?" I ask instead.

He shrugs. "Here and there. My gramps, mostly. He made killer wings. This sauce is his recipe... or as near to as I can remember it."

"Must've been nice to have grandparents," I say. "I never knew mine. You already know my dad's story and how he lost his whole family in the attack. My mom left home when she was still a teenager and never looked back."

"But you had the whole MC as your extended family. And some of the old-timers make great grandpas."

"Yeah, they do," I say, remembering Bear who we just lost a couple of years ago and how he always had some fun trick to show Eden and me whenever he saw us. He was the closest we ever had to a grandpa. "But it's just not the same, you know. It's nice knowing where you come from."

"It sucks when you lose it all because of a stupid mistake too," he says. "Knowing where you come from doesn't do you any good then."

The sudden shift in mood from pleasant to dark is accentuated by a huge, thick cloud rolling over us, blocking out what's left of the sun.

"You found a new family with the MC too," I say. "So, it's not all bad, right? It could be worse."

He grins and takes a bite of his last chicken wing. "You're absolutely right. It could always be worse. So I try not to dwell on the past. I'm usually doing much better than this."

"You're OK," I say and lay my empty, sticky plate on the step next to me. "Now come on and show me that stream you found this morning. I have to wash all over again."

He lays down his plate too. "So, you're saying that the shower isn't better after all?"

I shake my head. “Sadly, this is no five-star hotel. So, if I gotta wash with icy cold water, I’d rather do it in the wild, with the birds singing around me and the wind in my hair.”

He doesn’t need any persuading beyond that, and a few moments later we’re walking through the trees again. He’s moving with the surety of someone who knows the way perfectly even though this is his first time in these woods. I love the way the muscles in his back and arms all work together as he moves, and I miss the sun illuminating that perfect picture with shades of gold.

The place where he washed this morning isn’t just a little stream that I’ve been picturing, but a whole pool, fed by a small waterfall flowing over rocks.

“We could swim in here,” I say just as lightning flashes in the sky. A second later it’s followed by thunder that echoes loudly and ominously off the trees all around us.

“Not right now,” he says, eyeing the sky with a worried expression on his face. “We should get back to the cabin. Hurry up and wash.”

I step to the waterfall, cup my hands to catch the water then splash it on my face. He does the same beside me. And for a moment it all seems like scene straight from the Garden of Eden, or at least one of my sister Eden’s Highlander novels—just two young lovers savoring all that untouched nature has to offer.

Only we’re not lovers and we’re about to get struck by one of the lightning flashes that keep illuminating the sky if we don’t hurry. The thunder is making the earth beneath my feet shake.

But not as much as him taking my hand does. “We should run back now.”

He sounds worried, but I’m not. Not with him holding my hand and leading me back to the safety of the cabin.

We reach the porch just as the first fat raindrops of the storm start falling. They’re making the smoldering embers on the grill hiss and white smoke rise.

“Good thing I took all the food inside,” he says looking around. “We should go in too. It’s gonna get worse.”

He’s still holding my hand and I let him lead me inside.

And then we just stand there in the doorway of the dusty, rundown old cabin. And just as he’s supposed to pull me into an embrace and give me another of those kisses that I’ve been thinking about all day today, he lets go of my hand and walks around the cabin, closing all the windows. I know how much he wants to kiss me. I can feel it in every look he gives me, especially the ones he doesn’t know I see. So why isn’t he? Frustrating doesn’t even begin to describe it.

It was dim before but now it’s almost pitch dark. There’s barely any light coming from outside, so I switch on the one inside. It casts a deep yellow light over the interior.

“What do we do now?” I ask and get a very shocked look from him. Shocked and full of lust that is. He knows exactly what we should be doing to pass the time.

“Tell ghost stories perhaps?” I add, grinning.

Because that other thing is still impossible, as far as he’s concerned. I can read that in his eyes too.

“I probably know enough to last the night,” he says and sits down in one of the rickety dining chairs. The one farthest from the bed.

“All right, so let’s hear one,” I say as I join him at the table. “But I warn you, I don’t scare easily.”

A part of me wants to just sit in his lap and get that kiss and all the rest that I’m craving. That we’re both craving. But then I’d probably just land on my ass on the hard floor and who needs that?

My mom, Barbie, told me how she had spent her youth always picking the wrong guy before she finally met my dad. I think I inherited that gene from her. But at least Edge is fun to hang out with, makes me feel safe and cooks. It could be worse, like it was for my mom.

But it could also be better. A lot better.

TEN

Edge

I lied. I don't know a lot of ghost stories. Except the ones that feature the ghosts of my family. So that's what I've been talking about for the past three hours, while the storm raged outside. I hardly ever talk about my family.

My parents died in a shootout with a bunch of lowlife Mexican gangsters who also killed Ruin's family that night. But my grandparents and my little brother died in a house fire later that night when those same Mexican scumbags burned our house to the ground aiming to also kill anyone who might know their faces. Namely Ruin and me.

But we weren't there.

We'd already taken my father's Harley and ridden off, fearing that those Mexicans would come after us. Our plan was to lie low for a while, then come back and make sure they paid for what they did.

We eventually did make them pay, but not until years later with the Devils at our backs.

But those aren't the stories I told Summer.

I told her about teaching my little brother to ride his bike and play catch in our back yard. I told her about cooking with my grandpa, about fishing with my dad, about my mom's singing and my grandma's love of animals. At one point she had two dogs, four cats, a ferret and a bearded dragon living with us.

"But yeah, my mom had the most beautiful voice, and she'd sing all the time. While cooking and cleaning, in the shower, you name it," I say. "I completely forgot about that. Her voice was good enough to go pro."

I run my hand through my hair to look at Summer secretly, wondering if she's bored to tears yet. She's looking at me very intently though, her eyes glowing in the overhead light are kinda wet. I haven't heard her munching on her tortilla chips

for a while. Man, I hope she doesn't start crying. By why would she? I'm not talking about sad things.

She slides her hand across the table and takes hold of mine.

"I'm so sorry about everything you lost," she says.

"Nothing for it now," I say in a choked off voice.

This is why I don't talk about my family, and I don't think about them. It never ends well. I have no idea why I just did.

"So, what MC did your dad belong to?" she asks. "Why didn't they ride to avenge them?"

I chuckle and shake my head. "His club was just a group of guys and ladies who liked to ride. White Eagles MC... they did charity drives, made sure kids got to school safely and stayed off drugs, that kinda thing. They also held get togethers... these huge barbecues and whatnot for the whole town almost every month."

"So, in other words, they were no Devil's Nightmare MC?" she asks wryly.

I shake my head. "You could say they were exactly the opposite."

She's still holding onto my hand, and I like it very much. More than I ever thought I could. I also like spending time with her alone here. More than I ever thought I'd enjoy spending time alone with a woman.

"So how did your folks get mixed up in that drug deal that went bad?"

I hate talking about this part. Because it's all my fault. But I've laid it all out for her already, so what's telling her more gonna change?

"My mom and dad both lost their jobs within a couple of months of each other, the same as Ruin's folks did," I say. "Keeping kids off drugs meant they were familiar with all the local street gangs, and Ruin's folks had a lot of product to move. I figured it'd be a win-win. We were gonna lose the house. My grandparents had almost no money. We'd all end up

living on the street. So, I made the introductions. And got them all killed.”

I pause to take a break and make the mistake of looking at her. Her eyes are glistening even worse as she squeezes my hand. “It’s not your fault. Yours and Ruin’s parents should’ve known better.”

“I sold the idea so hard though,” I mumble. “But, of course, they were in over their heads. And that much quality meth...”

“Where did they get the meth from in the first place?” she asks.

“Ruin’s mom was a chemistry teacher, so she made excellent stuff... of course no one was actually gonna pay them.”

“So, she was like that guy from that TV show Breaking Bad or something?”

I nod. “Yeah, that’s probably where she got the idea... but reality is not some tv show, right? The gang they were trying to sell to were actually gonna kidnap her and make her cook. But she dove in front of a bullet meant to finish off her husband before that could happen. My folks were already dead by then.”

I feel like I’m just telling her someone else’s story, not my own, not describing the most terrible thing I’ve ever seen. I’m sure a shrink would have a lot to say about that.

“You and Ruin witnessed all this?” she asks, her voice low and whispery. Full of awe and shock. Nothing compared to the shock I felt that night. I felt like I was standing beside myself, looking at the brutal scene unfolding. Looking at the shots fired. Looking at my parents going down. My mom was lifted off her feet by the shot that killed her—the shots plural because the bastards had semi-automatic weapons. Looking at all the blood. I will never forget all the blood.

I feel like I’m beside myself now too.

“Yeah, we were looking at it through the window,” is all I manage to say.

She stands up, comes to me and wraps her arms around my neck, holding me close. I never put much stock in hugs. Not since I was a little kid. They're just a nuisance. Something women like to do. But this hug is powerful.

It's like I can give her some of my burden. Like I can lean on her. Which I do. All the way to the bed where she leads me.

Not to fuck. Just to lie there. Together. Which we do. Her arms wrapped around me, mine around her.

"You do know none of that is your fault, right, Lucas?" she whispers after a while, using my real name, the name no one's called me by in many, many years. I didn't even realize that she knew it. Hearing it feels good, but at the same time not.

Because now a part of my mind is even more stuck in the memory I was sharing with her and how the rest of the night played out. How Ruin and me climbed in through the basement window after the Mexicans left. How Ruin tried to do CPR on his mom even though her chest was riddled with bullet holes. How I tried to do the same with my parents. How I somehow managed to find enough sense to grab my dad's keys. How we mounted his bike, covered in blood, and rode off, promising to return as soon as it was safe.

We'd called the cops and the ambulance. But we knew it was too late.

How we hid out in the forest near our town. A forest much like this one. Dense, unpopulated, empty. But with healing powers. Just like this one.

And how a few days later we returned to town to find the rest of my family gone, burned down with the house that had been my home.

And how we rode out of town, with no direction, no plan except to get as far away from all of that as we could. We didn't even talk about it. I might've told some of the story to Ice and the Devils when we first met. But I doubt I told them everything like I told Summer tonight.

But that was a long time ago.

I still don't think Summer had to hear it all. But she heard it.

"It kinda was my fault though," I mutter in answer to her question which seems to have come a long time ago too.

"You shouldn't have to carry that burden alone," she whispers and holds me tighter.

She seems to be offering to share it, which is complete nonsense. But the idea feels good. So, I'll let it linger. For tonight.

Thunder is still rumbling outside, and fat raindrops are pelting the roof. But it's safe and warm in her arms and in this bed. Almost kinda like home.

ELEVEN

Summer

He fell asleep, but I couldn't, not for the longest time. I just lay there, listening to the rain hitting the roof and thunder cracking outside and tried not to imagine what he'd been through. I had it so easy compared to him. Two loving parents. A support system counted in the hundreds all of whom would die for me. I felt very small over the way I'd acted when I first found out we'd be stuck here together. And over how I acted when I ran away to Mexico without telling anyone.

I have an obligation to my family. An obligation to stay safe, if nothing else.

I fell asleep with the promise to never put myself in danger recklessly again. And to never take anything or anyone for granted ever again.

The knowledge that we're at war also hit very close to my heart. Closer than ever before. I guess I was just living in a bubble, pretending it wasn't as bad as it is because I couldn't face it. But everything can be taken away so fast. Everyone I love can be taken away in a second.

And I have to accept that.

It wasn't easy to fall asleep with that thought, but I somehow managed it.

A particularly loud crack of thunder woke me what feels like minutes later. But it's already day outside and Edge is no longer in my arms. He's standing with his back to me in the open doorway of the cabin. Beyond him, sheets of rain are making everything look like one of those impressionistic paintings.

I sit up in bed and the creaking makes him look back at me.

He's drinking one of the iced coffees I bought straight from the carton.

"Good morning," he says and grins. "Sleep well?"

“Sure,” I say although it’s kind of a lie. My dreams were super vivid and super anxious. I remember none of them, but I know that.

“Yeah, it got kinda heavy last night,” he says, averting his eyes and smiling sheepishly. I’m pretty sure he blushed too. “Sorry about that.”

“Don’t be.” I walk to him and take the coffee from his hands, taking a long gulp. “You needed to get it off your chest and I think I needed to hear it. I’ve been acting like a total creep, to you, to my dad, to everyone. I’m the one who should be sorry.”

“A creep?” he says and grins. “I wouldn’t go that far. Spoiled brat, maybe.”

I gasp in indignation, but then smile too. “I deserve that.”

He shakes his head and lays his arm around my shoulders. “Nah, you’re fine. But let’s try to do something fun today. I hate dwelling on the past.”

I peer up at the sky. It’s just one giant mass of grey cloud.

“Do you think it’ll stop raining soon?” I ask anyway.

He chuckles. “I seriously doubt it.”

Of course, there is something that would be a whole lot of fun that we could be doing. Kissing to start with. His heavy arm around my shoulders is making me want that very much. But I’ve turned a new leaf and I’m sticking by it.

“I know what we could do,” I say glancing at the stack of my suitcases in one corner of the room. “You could let me give you a makeover. I could use the practice.”

He grimaces, giving me the same look most of my guy friends always give me when I suggest this. “Makeup’s not for me, Summer.”

At least he’s not being totally dismissive.

“You don’t really know what I can do, do you?” I ask. “I’m not saying I’ll turn you into a girl. Even though I can do

that too. But no, I can make you look like anyone. Like Hulk, or Thanos or Joker, or Frankenstein even... “

“Those are all villains,” he says, grinning. “Is that how you see me?”

I shake my head. “But I think that’s how you see yourself. So how about it? I got all I need right there.” I point at the heap of suitcases and bags. “But I can also make you look like someone pretty. Thor maybe?”

He laughs. “Nah, I’ll take Joker. He’s a badass.”

“I’m glad you said that. I can do a mean Joker.”

I rush over to get my makeup kit, a large cooler-looking black box that holds everything I need to make my creations. But his laughter makes me look back sharply, worried he’s gonna tell me he was just fucking with me.

“What?” I ask.

He shakes his head and sits in one of the kitchen chairs. “Nothing. Have at it.”

To start with I have him move the chair to the door for the light. And then I get to work.

I start with the white foundation, which I apply in several layers to his entire face. Then the black around the eyes. And finally, the jagged, red smile which stretches from ear to ear. I don’t have to look at any inspiration photos and I don’t have to imagine much when I work on the smile, since he’s already grinning from ear to ear.

“Can I see?” he asks a few times while I’m working.

“Nope, not until I’m done,” I tell him every time.

And now I am almost done. Much too soon.

He has the best skin for applying makeup to. Supple and thick and much smoother than I’d give him credit for.

I finish the look by slicking his hair back from his forehead, using a mixture of hair gel and foam with just a hint of brown color to counteract the blonde in his hair. He gasps as my fingers touch his scalp and I think I know why. I felt the

surge of electricity too. It was like a flash of lightning. I'm just standing here, frozen to the spot, waiting for the thunder.

"Can I see now?" he asks.

I hold up the mirror without saying anything. He takes it from my hand and whistles appreciatively.

"You got some real talent," he says. "I barely recognize myself. Where'd you learn to do this?"

"YouTube, some from my mom, and I took a few courses," I say as I snap a couple of quick pictures of my creation. "But mostly I just figured it out by myself."

He looks at his face some more. "This is so awesome. I look like I just walked off the set."

"Thanks," I say, feeling my cheeks heat up.

He looks at me over the rim of the mirror. "Now you just gotta make yourself look like Harley Quinn and we're all set."

"Set for what?" I ask, but I think I already know. That's stark desire and lust in his eyes. The kind that won't be stopped.

"For this," he says, takes my hand and pulls me into his lap.

He kisses me deeply, hungrily, with a wild passion befitting Joker himself. I taste all the layers of makeup I put on his face. But not as strongly as I taste him. He tastes like rain on a hot summer day, like laughter, like sweets you're not supposed to have but can't resist.

"I just thought of something else fun we could do today," he says when we finally come up for air.

"Yeah?" I ask, moving so I'm straddling his lap, his hard cock poking me. "Took you long enough."

"Never said I was smart." He kisses me again right after. Harder, more passionately than before, his cock pulsing beneath me.

His hands are in my hair, and under my shirt, on my ass and my thighs and my breasts. Every touch of his fingers

makes lighting flash. And this time thunder isn't far behind.

He stands up with me in his arms and carries me to the bed, kissing me the whole way.

Then he uses his mouth and his hands to undress me slowly, kissing every inch of skin he reveals. My neck, sending rivers of pleasure straight through my core. My nipples, the pleasure coming in almost unbearable jets. My stomach, the pleasure softer, filling every nook and cranny of my body. My clit, the pleasure so intense it's electrifying.

My hands are in his hair, messing up my creation, but I don't care. His licks, nips and his tongue work on my pussy have my whole body tingling, the pleasure and bliss mounting until I care about nothing other than getting more of it.

And just like that, he gives me that too.

He rises up, grinning at me as he slides a finger into my pussy and then another, making me gasp and moan and crave more. He hooks them and starts pumping, hitting that pleasure spot each time, hitting it expertly, just hard enough, just soft enough, just perfect.

I'm writhing on the bed, moaning loud enough to drown out even the loud sound of the rain pelting the flimsy roof. The pleasure he's giving me keeps mounting, keeps intensifying, quickly reaching fever pitch.

Everything's blurry, but I can still see his face perfectly despite the makeup covering it. Or maybe because of it. Because he's wearing a mask and so can be himself. Totally and completely. Maybe. It's a distant thought, one burned away by the intense bliss of the orgasm he gives me. The pleasure rips right through me, burning away all thoughts.

It leaves me heaving and moaning, my whole body tingling and crackling as though I was just hit by a thousand lightning strikes at once.

He stands over me as I regain my senses, smiling down at me and not just because I drew that smile on. He's shirtless, wearing just a pair of jeans. But that's too much clothes.

I sit up and run my hands down his stomach, enjoying the feel of the hard dips and valleys there. The scar doesn't take anything away from it. In fact, it adds to his attractiveness, to the air of danger and the forbidden around him.

I smile right back at him as I unhook his belt and slowly free his cock, button by button, sliding his jeans and boxers down.

His cock pops free, rock hard for me and pulsing. It's thick, almost too thick to fit into my mouth. Yet it's also just right as I wrap my lips around the head and lick. He groans, his hands tangled in my hair, his whole body taut as though he's trying real hard not to ram his cock down my throat.

He doesn't have to. I do it myself.

And choke on it much too soon. But that's something I can work on. Something I can practice now that I finally have him all to myself.

I've fantasized about this moment. Mostly I fantasized about kissing him, but this too. And what comes after.

I take my time, licking his cock up and down, taking the head in my mouth and going down as far as I can, only coming up for air when I absolutely must.

Time seems to slow then becomes completely inconsequential. His groans and the pounding of the rain are one. I'm one with him and he with me. We're both one with the forest around us. The taste of him and his girth filling me makes goosebumps rise on my arms and my pussy pulse with my need to have him inside me.

He cups my chin and slides his cock from my mouth, smiling down at me. "You ready?"

I'm not sure I can take him. I've never had anyone this huge. But I'm about to find out.

I nod, glancing at his cock because I'm suddenly not entirely sure anymore, but definitely willing. That makes him smile wider.

"I thought that's what you wanted," he says.

“I did... I do.”

He lays me down on my back on the lumpy bed, and spreads my legs, standing between them for a few moments, his chest heaving as he admires the view.

Then he's on top of me, his cock pressing against my pussy, demanding entrance. I gasp as he enters me, the sensation at once scary and incredibly exhilarating.

He keeps going, only pulling back slightly, then going back deeper.

All the pleasure of his kisses before combined is no match for this.

“More,” I whisper amid moans and drowning in the electrifying pleasure that is his cock inside me.

He takes it as a command, picking up the pace, thrusting into me harder and deeper, filling me so completely and so perfectly I forget how to breathe more than once.

I wrap my legs around his hips to draw him closer, deeper. It does nothing to slow his powerful thrusts.

I didn't know sex could be this way. We're completely in tune with each other, riding the waves of pleasure together. Waves that keep on rising and rising, higher, faster, like that raging storm in deep ocean that no one ever sees.

Soon it's too much. Even though it will never be enough. That's all I really know.

We come together. His cock buried deep inside me, my pussy pulsing around it, my whole body one giant blob of bliss.

I can't feel my arms or my legs or anything else. Only his cock inside me. Only his weight atop me. Only his strong, racing heartbeat that matches my own perfectly. And his lips on mine as he kisses me again. Deeply and gently. Exactly like I always pictured his kisses would be. Perfect.

TWELVE

Edge

It's the dead of night, the rain has finally stopped falling and I can't get enough of Summer. Can't get enough of her lips on my cock, my lips on her, or my cock inside her. Or any variation of those things.

She's sleeping now. She needs it. But in a minute, I'll wake her because I need *her*.

As soon as I let myself accept that it was like a dam broke loose in my mind. And then there was no stopping me from having her. Not for anything or anyone.

I've been attracted to her since the first night I met her. Ice had invited me and Ruin over for dinner with his family—his wife Barbie and their twin daughters Summer and Eden. They were fifteen, I was almost nineteen. It was so hard keeping my eyes off Summer all night, but I did it. And I locked the thought of ever having her so tightly into some dark chest in my mind it never came up again. Until last night.

At one point, I asked her if she had any protection. She said she was on the pill. And I went and blurted out that it's a pity because I kinda want her to have my babies. She didn't say anything, but she gave herself to me even more completely after that. And she tasted and felt too good to worry about Ice killing me if I ever got her pregnant.

I'm standing on the porch, naked, enjoying the feel of the cool, fresh, clean night air on my skin. Drops are falling from the soaked leaves, some glinting silver in the moonlight as they fall. I don't think this night could get any better.

But then I hear her footsteps on the floorboards behind me. I don't turn and a few moments later, she wraps her arms around my stomach and leans against my back, her hard nipples pressing into my skin.

"Come back to bed," she whispers in a sultry voice. It sends a shiver straight through my entire body.

“Man, you really can’t get enough, can you?” I say with a wide grin on my face.

She runs her hand down my stomach and across my cock, which instantly rises to attention under her soft touch.

“Is that a problem for you?”

I grab her hand and spin her around, pressing her against the wooden pillar that holds up the roof over the porch.

“Not at all,” I say then kiss her fiercely, hungrily, my tongue warring with hers.

I lift her up, keep her balanced against the pillar as I hook my arms under her knees and impale her on my cock. She screams as I enter her, but it’s a yell of pure bliss as the smile on her face clearly tells me.

She tries to kiss me again, but I only let her get a small peck in before I start thrusting into her pussy, burying my cock to the hilt, the velvety softness of her pussy all I truly feel. And her nails digging into my back as she holds on for dear life.

She’s screaming again. Screaming my name. It echoes off the trees, louder than thunder. She screams until her voice is just a hoarse whisper.

The whole cabin is shaking from the force of my thrusts, and I still need more of her. Need to be deeper inside her. But it’s no use trying to hold back. She feels too good.

I bury my cock deep in her as I come, holding her close, her pussy gripping my cock like a vise, her fast erratic breaths tickling my neck as she comes too.

We stay like that for a good long while. At least that’s how it feels like.

Her legs are a little wobbly as I set her back down.

“Was that too much?” I ask as I smile at her.

She smiles right back, her eyes shining silver in the moonlight.

“Nope,” she says. “It was exactly what I wanted.”

Then she takes my hand and leads me back to bed, where she falls asleep the moment she rests her head on my chest. This was exactly what I wanted too. And I wish I'd told her that before she went to sleep.

But that's OK. Tomorrow is a whole new day. And there's plenty of tomorrows coming after that.

THIRTEEN

Summer

The sun is shining, birds are chirping, and we're sitting on the porch steps, wrapped in the blanket and sharing one of the cartons of iced coffee. The blanket is covered by the stains of the Joker makeup, but none of it remains on his face. And yet he's still holding me, still sitting so close that our bodies are literally glued together.

"I should probably throw something on the grill," he muses. "I'm starving and you must be too."

"After that workout last night, who wouldn't be?" I ask and grin at him suggestively.

"You ready for more?" he asks, disbelief heavy in his tone.

Fact is, I can still feel him inside me, but I could take more.

"I never knew sex could be that good," I say and lean my head on his shoulder.

He chuckles. "I love hearing that kinda thing."

I look at him sharply and he averts his eyes, his cheeks growing rosy. "Bet you've heard that a lot, haven't you?"

"Not gonna lie," he says. "But as far as I'm concerned, it's right back at you. I never had it that good either."

I continue looking at him trying to see if he's being serious. I see no lie in his eyes. Or anywhere else on his face.

But how could there be? He told me he wants me to be the mother of his children last night and he meant it. Jumping the gun quite a bit, sure, but it was amazing to hear anyway. Though I wonder if he even remembers it. The way he said it sounded more like he was just voicing a thought, not trying to have an actual conversation.

"I think we should go wash up first," I say and stand up. "At that waterfall you found."

He stands up too. “Hardly a waterfall, but, yeah, let’s do that.”

I only dip inside for my towel then take his hand and let him lead me through the woods. We’re naked, we’re completely alone and we’re laughing. I don’t think I’ve ever felt as free and alive as I do right now. Even being locked up in my metaphorical cage back home would be alright, if Edge was there with me.

The rain swelled the little pool, and the waterfall is now rushing over the rocks.

“Man, that’s freezing,” I say as I dip my toe in the water. “Maybe the shower at the cabin is a better idea.”

“Nonsense,” he says and leads me into the water, ignoring my shrieks and protests.

He leads me to right below the waterfall, cutting my protests short with a soft kiss. The cool water is washing over my hair and back and his lips are so deliciously warm I don’t want to move a muscle.

“There. Was that so bad?” he asks once we break apart.

“No, that was just perfect. But you’re not wet enough yet,” I say and splash some water on him.

He does it right back and for a while we’re just a couple of kids playing in the water, laughing and splashing and shit talking.

Pretty soon I’m shivering, but laughing so hard I can’t stop. And I swallowed way too much of the water, but that’s fine.

“I think we’re clean enough,” he says. “Your lips are blue.”

“I am pretty cold,” I admit.

He wraps me in a huge hug, which does help a little bit, even though his skin is as icy as mine.

“Now don’t be alarmed by the shrinkage,” he says once we’re standing in the soggy grass, and he releases me.

“What?”

He looks down between us at his cock.

“Oh, look at that, how cute,” I say. “It looks like it’s gone back into its little shell.”

“I’ll give you *cute*,” he says and reaches for me.

But I duck under his arm and start running back to the cabin. He’s right at my heels but doesn’t catch me until we’re in the field by the cabin. He wraps his arms around me, tackling me to the ground, but making sure I don’t land on anything harder than his taut stomach and the muddy grass. We’ll need to wash all over again, because we’ll be covered in mud when this is over, but I’m not thinking that far ahead. Because this moment is all sorts of perfect just as it is.

My heart’s thumping, I’m warm again and his deep hungry kiss takes care of the last coldness in my body.

There’s nothing cute or small about his cock as he slides it into my pussy. He rolls his hips back and forth, sliding his cock in and out slowly, making love to me right there in the mud, with the sun shining down on us and birds singing all around.

He silences my moans with his kisses. Makes me moan even harder as he kisses my neck. The orgasm building inside me is soft too. But it flows through my body like water, like the sweet, soft water we just washed in. Only this water’s not cold, it’s exactly perfect and I wish I could just stay in this moment forever, for all eternity. Just like this, with his cock deep inside and his soft kisses caressing my skin.

But it ends. In an explosion of bliss that echoes through my entire body, crackling and urgent, yet as gentle as a summer breeze. And if it must end, that’s the perfect way.

FOURTEEN

Edge

I outdid myself on the burgers I grilled for us, even if I do say so myself. Which I'm not. Summer said it often as she wolfed down two whole paddies. I forgot to eat mine for a while as I watched her lips move and realized that if I could just do that for the rest of my life, I'd die a happy man.

All the raining has dropped the temperature considerably, and now that the sun's gone and the first stars are starting to appear in the sky, it's getting cold. I started a fire in the pit, and we're huddled together under the blanket next to it and I pray I don't start telling her any more of my stupid ghost stories.

"So, you really liked being in Hollywood, didn't you?" I ask.

She nods exaggeratedly. "Oh, yeah. It was a dream come true. I can't wait to go back."

She gasps and turns to me sharply, her eyes wide, reflecting some of the stars. "I mean after the war's over and it's safe to leave home again."

Home. I've successfully put that part of our immediate future out of my mind. Everything that was impossible before will still be impossible when we go home. The last two days were just a happy little bubble of something that shouldn't have happened.

But I don't want to tell her that. I don't want the bubble to pop.

"We'll take care of it soon enough," I say instead. "Then you can go back to living your dream."

She looks at me skeptically. "I'm not an idiot, you know. The war's not ending anytime soon. Half the time you have no idea who'll strike next or from where. I heard Hawk and Ice talking about that before you got here."

I grin and shrug. "Nothing much gets past you, does it?"

She shakes her head. “Especially not when it’s something as scary as this war. I mean, my dad tries to shield me from it, but I am a grown woman.”

“That you are,” I say and cup one of her boobs in my palm.

“I’m being serious,” she says. “Promise me you won’t go diving in front of any more bullets.”

“That bullet I took for Cross is one of the best things I did with my life.” The words just come out, no matter how much I didn’t want to go into ghosts of my past territory tonight.

She nods knowingly. “I get it, I really do. But it was so scary waiting to hear about whether you were alive or dead. I must’ve called the hospital like twenty times asking about you.”

That makes the breath I was taking lodge in my throat. “You did? Why?”

She narrows her eyes at me. “Because I was worried about you, dummy. And no one knew a damn thing after you’d been transferred to the prison hospital.”

“That place was a nightmare,” I say, remembering the drab grey everything in that room, from the metal beds to the sheets and the stupid gown I had to wear. Come to think of it the cell they put me in afterwards was just more of the same, minus the sour-faced nurses, transfusions and beeping monitors.

“But they fixed you up,” she says and leans against me. “Gotta be grateful for that.”

And I am. I’m glad for her warm, lithe body pressed against mine too, and the wind in my face and the fire, and the moonlight on the grass.

“Thank you for worrying about me,” I say.

“Someone had to.”

She always has the perfect sassy comeback. Just spicy enough. And if my cock wasn’t so sore, I’d take her again right here and now. But just holding her is enough too. Never had that with a woman before either.

I steer the conversation back to her work and Hollywood. Before long she's telling all about her big plans for the future, how she's hoping to work on many more movies before settling down and maybe opening her own school to teach anyone who wants to learn, whether they have money or not.

She's really thought it through.

I'm glad she's got her future mapped out so well and so completely even without me in it. Because I won't be there. It's a bittersweet realization. More bitter than sweet, actually.

What we had these last two days was amazing. I've never had better. But it won't last. It can't.

If nothing else, I won't be the escaped convict asshole standing in the way of her dreams. And that's just the tip of the iceberg of all the ways I don't deserve to claim her.

I feel too good to think of all that right now. But it is a dark cloud off to the side somewhere. And growing darker.

FIFTEEN

Summer

We spent another day and night alone in the cabin. Naked most of the time. Making love on just about every available surface and everything in between. Every time I look at him I want to hug and kiss him. And every time he looks at me, he does exactly that.

I've told him all about my dreams and he's told me all about his past. Stuff I doubt anyone, except maybe Ruin, knows. Though I doubt it. I think it's more stuff that has been cluttering up his mind, stuff he didn't dare say out loud to anyone. Until I came along and listened.

The morning sun is blindingly bright and I'm alone in bed. I can hear him outside, cleaning the grill, humming a song to himself. A song I know too, but can't name right now.

The bed is so wonderfully warm and smells like him—like wood, fire smoke and grass—that I really don't want to get up yet. But his arms around me are better so I do.

I grab the last of our iced coffees and walk out on the porch, just watching him work and hum for a while. He has no idea I'm here and starts singing the song he'd been humming for real. I finally recognize it as an old rock ballad that I used to listen to on repeat when I was in junior high.

"Every rose has its thorn," I join in the singing on the chorus.

Unfortunately hearing me shocks him into silence.

"Keep going," I say. "I didn't know you could sing."

"I can't," he says. "As you just heard."

He's being modest. He can sing. Probably inherited the talent from his mom.

He drops the rag he was using to clean the grill and walks over, wrapping his arms loosely around my neck and leans down to give me a good morning kiss. Those are always the sweetest.

“We should make the trip to the store again,” I say. “We’re running out of coffee. And chips.”

He just gazes into my eyes, his kind of soft and unfocused like he didn’t hear what I said.

I’m just about to repeat it, when he says, “Ice and a couple of the others are coming to get us in a few hours.”

Hearing the words makes me feel like I’ve swallowed a bunch of cement and now it’s hardening in my stomach.

“OK, good,” I say. “Then we can finally go home.”

“You’re going home with your dad, I’m staying in LA to help Hunter with something.”

“What?”

“Something about getting Trixie’s engagement ring back,” he explains.

But that’s not exactly what I meant by my question. I leave his embrace though I miss his arms around me the second they’re gone.

“Do you have to stay here? Can’t you come with me?”

That’s more along the lines of what I meant by my question.

“This is what I do,” he says. “If they need me, I’m always there. Besides, I haven’t seen any action in months. I miss it.”

I just nod along, since I’m all out of things to say. Obviously, I can’t keep him from MC business. I never thought I would even try. What I really want is for us to just stay at this cabin indefinitely. But I know that’s impossible.

“And I don’t think we should tell anyone about what happened here,” he adds, his voice so low I can almost pretend not to have heard him.

Except that it sounded like a scream.

“What do you mean?” I snap.

He looks down at the grass and kicks at a tuft of it. “I just think we should keep it on the down low, you know... not

everyone needs to know... ”

I close the distance between us and lift his chin so he's forced to look at me. “Was this just a little fun for you?”

He chuckles. “Wasn't it fun for you?”

Oh, man, I don't think anyone's ever made me as mad as he just did by answering my serious question with a stupid one. And the worst part is his eyes are all closed off to me again. I don't see the vastness of what we shared in them anymore, don't see the cool waters of our pool, the soft grass under us, the moonlight making our skin glow as we made love all night. Night after night. Don't see the vulnerability as he told me his deepest, darkest secrets and hurts.

I just see the same guy who said he could never be with me because he respects my father too much.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” I explode, because I can't handle any of that. Can't accept it. “Are you saying this was a one-time thing? That everything goes back to the way it was now? What the fuck?”

He looks shocked and more than a little anxious.

“I had a really good time... I'll never forget this...”

But before he can string more dumb words together, the roaring of engines fills the clearing as a van and a pickup park beside it.

Great, Ice is early.

He steps out of the pickup, grinning at us, the cabin reflected perfectly in his shades. “Oh, good, I see you two survived.”

Ruin is also with him, as are Hawk and Tank.

I could just throw my arms around Edge and claim him for all to see. And he's eyeing me like he's afraid that's exactly what I will do.

But I can't do that to him. I know how complicated everything is for him around Ice. And I know my dad. He needs to be eased into finding out.

“*Barely* survived,” I say, giving Edge a dirty look.

He seems to sigh in relief, his eyes full of gratitude.

“We’ll talk about this later,” I whisper to him then turn on my heel and storm into the cabin to pack up.

If he thinks he’s done with me, he has another thing coming.

SIXTEEN

Edge

The plan is simple. Ruin and me are riding to LA to help Hunter get his ring back, and Summer is going home with her father and the others. And as soon as this job is done, that's where I'm going too. But I don't think we're gonna do a lot of talking once I'm there. There's nothing more to say.

"So, Summer, huh?" Ruin asks as we reach the main road that'll lead us to LA.

Seeing the supermarket where Summer and me shopped not so long ago is making me feel weird. Nostalgic, I think they call it.

"Summer and me what?" I ask, my voice all hoarse.

"Summer and you got together up at that cabin," Ruin says. "That's what."

"No, we—"

"Don't bullshit me," he says. "It was all over your face. I've never seen you look at a woman like that. And I've seen you look at a lot of women."

Great, now I gotta worry about my face betraying me. I hope Ice didn't see it too.

Ruin chuckles at his cleverness, or whatever the hell he thinks he's being. But I kinda like him knowing. Because the farther away from the cabin and Summer we get, the more it's starting to seem like it was all just a very nice dream.

"Yeah, we got together," I say. "And it was awesome."

He shakes his head but is smiling from ear to ear. Kinda like the red Joker smile Summer painted on my face.

"You dog," he says. "You know Ice'll be pissed."

"That's why he'll never find out."

The smile vanishes from his face. "How you gonna make that work?"

“I ended it with her.”

Kinda. I tried to anyway. But the words just wouldn't roll out of my mouth. But I did the best I could and I figure distance will take care of the rest just fine.

“Dude, why?”

“What do I got to give her? And like you said, it would piss Ice off.”

That shuts him up for the moment. He knows I'm right. I got nothing to give her. I live my life day to day, care about nothing beyond being the best damn MC brother I can be and kill as many of our enemies as I can. I live in a small room at the clubhouse where the only personal belongings are my clothes, my weapons and my cut. I'm wearing it now, over my T-shirt, the one that still smells like Summer from the night she fell asleep leaning against me on the porch steps. I carried her to bed without waking her. And then fell asleep beside her.

Just a dream. One I should start to forget.

“You saved Cross' life,” Ruin says. “You can have anything you want now. Even Summer.”

“She's not a thing to be given away,” I snap.

He lets go of the steering wheel to put his hands up in surrender. “Don't bite my head off. I'm just saying. You don't gotta worry about Ice.”

“The guy saved our lives, of course I care what he wants,” I say. “Or did you forget?”

He gives me a shocked look. “Of course I didn't forget. I'm just saying. If you found the one, don't come up with a bunch of bullshit excuses why you can't have her.”

Ruin and I have been best friends for a long time. Sometimes he knows what I'm thinking even when I don't. But this isn't one of those times.

“What the fuck do you know about finding *the one*?” I ask.

He just grins stupidly and won't meet my eyes. He's probably talking about Ariel, the sister of Chance's girlfriend.

They've been seeing each other for a while now, but it's been rocky. So he's not one to talk.

"Are you and Ariel getting serious?" I ask anyway. Might be I missed something.

He nods. "I think so."

"And that just sums up exactly why I don't need advice from you."

He doesn't look offended, which is a bad sign. He's just got that stupid soft grin on his face that's supposed to what, make me reconsider? Fuck that. I've been reconsidering. Every day and night while Summer was asleep in my arms.

We ain't got a future. One way or another I'll fuck it all up.

I just wish I didn't miss her so much already. I miss her soft lips, her soft body, her laugh and the way she can always say the exact right thing to get my blood pumping.

But what happens at the cabin stays at the cabin. Forever.

We're only about twenty miles out of LA. Once we get there, once I'm back in my element, killing and keeping my brothers from being killed, Summer will fade too.

"I'm just—"

"We're done talking about this, Ruin," I say warningly, coldly. "Tell me about the job instead."

This wipes the stupid grin off his face and it doesn't return. And after a few moments of silence, he does what I asked him to do.

It sounds like we're heading for a nice and dangerous job. Just what I needed. Perfect for forgetting.

SEVENTEEN

Summer

I'd be lying if I didn't get a little choked up a few times on the six-hour ride to Sanctuary. But my mother taught me never to cry over a guy. Because if he was worth my tears, he wouldn't be making me cry. That's my mom's logic. It never made a whole lotta sense until just now.

I wish I could tell her about Edge. She'd probably know exactly what I should do. But I can't, because I'm sure she's as much behind keeping all members of Devil's Nightmare MC away from Eden and me as my dad is.

So instead of going straight to see her once we get home, I have my dad drop me off at my apartment. It's not far from Eden's bookstore.

"Mom'll be expecting you for dinner, though. Eight o'clock," he says like I'm a little girl and not twenty-five years old.

"I'll be there," I say and then wait while he and the guys carry my stuff into the apartment.

As soon as I'm alone, the ache of missing Edge and the cabin becomes a physical presence. It's in the walls that seem to be closing in on me, in the sound from the cafes and shops on Main Street that my living room windows overlook and in the tears I will. Not. Shed. For him.

Because it's not over.

I don't shower, even though I probably should. I don't want to wash his scent off my skin yet. Even though I probably should.

Instead, I head over to Eden's bookshop. It's called One More Chapter, and she drew the sign of a long-haired girl with no face reading a book amid tall redwoods herself. It's probably an auto portrait, actually.

The bookshop closes at seven PM and it's already five past, so I expected to find her sitting in one of the many plush

armchairs, lost in a book. I was definitely not prepared for how I did find her.

She's wearing leggings and a crop top, her hair is in a messy bun, her cheeks are red and her face glowing as she moves boxes around, muttering to herself. Nearly all of the many bookshelves around her are empty.

"What's happening?" I ask. "Are you closing down?"

She shakes her head. "No, never. But I made a mistake. I wanted to try online sales, so I created some TikTok videos to advertise, and they went viral. Now I have so many orders that I can't fulfil them all. Help."

She looks like she really needs it, so I don't hesitate to help her stuff boxes and envelopes.

"The worst thing is, I love all these books so much," she says. "I don't want to let go of them."

Looking at Eden, my younger sister by about five minutes, is like looking in the mirror. We have the same dark hair and the same green eyes, nearly identical bodies and sometimes we even sound exactly the same. But on the inside, we probably couldn't be more different. She loves staying in, lives in her books and always does everything right. I crave the excitement of being bad once in a while and I don't have the patience to read more than a page or two of a book in one sitting. I love working with my hands and she loves working with her mind. But we complement each other perfectly. Probably because we're single egg twins so we were actually supposed to be one person. Everyone calls me weird when I say that, but I don't see it as a bad thing. It means she's my other half, my soul mate and my best friend and I hers. She's the only one who truly understands me.

About five minutes into the task, I realize that dinner with the folks will have to be cancelled. She has a printed list of orders that we're trying to fulfil and before we even get done with a third of it, I know she doesn't have enough stock.

"There's six more boxes of books in the basement and I have a few overnight shipments coming," she says as I point

this out.

“Why are you even going to all this trouble?” I ask. “You don’t need the money.”

This whole building, which houses the bookstore, and her apartment upstairs, is owned by the MC, so it’s all rent-free. She sells enough to pay the bills and order all the new books as soon as they come out.

“Someone told me I should try standing on my own two feet,” she says.

“Who said that?”

She blushes, brushes a strand of her hair off her forehead, says, “Never mind,” and goes back to packing.

“Come on, tell me, who was it?” I insist.

It sounds like maybe it was a guy and Eden doesn’t really date. And she certainly doesn’t let guys tell her what she should be doing.

“No one, drop it,” she says. “It’s not the time.”

She starts packaging up the books with renewed speed and I know I won’t get anything on this subject out of her tonight. She’s nothing if not stubborn and single-minded. And that’s something we do have in common.

It’s almost two AM by the time we have everything packed up. We didn’t get through her entire list because not all the books are in yet, so we’ll have to finish up in the morning once those overnight shipments come through. The store looks like she’s closing it, which makes me sad even though I know it’s not true. Eden started this place when she was sixteen and I can’t imagine her without it.

We drank so much coffee to stay awake and work that my hands are shaking, and I doubt I’ll sleep for the rest of the week.

“I could really use a beer right now,” I say as I sink down in one of the armchairs. “But you probably don’t have any, right?”

“I do, upstairs,” she says, taking me completely by surprise. The only times she drinks is for special occasions and even then, she’ll only have maybe a glass of wine.

I stand up. “Let’s go then.”

She blushes and leaps out of her armchair. “I’ll just go get it.”

Then she rushes out the back door where a set of old wooden steps lead to her apartment upstairs. Come to think of it, she hasn’t let me go upstairs at all tonight. She’s been bringing down all the coffee and snacks.

“Are you hiding something up there?” I ask when she comes down, carrying a six-pack of Bud with two cans missing. “Or someone?”

She blushes even harder than before.

“Is it a guy?” I ask. “Are you seeing someone? Who?”

Sometimes bombarding her with questions works.

“It’s nothing like that.”

I get the distinct feeling she’s lying. Even though my sister almost never lies and when she tries to, she’s really bad at it.

“All right, fine, you’ll tell me in your own good time,” I say as I twist off the cap of my beer. “But it better be sooner rather than later, OK?”

She has trouble removing the cap from her beer, so I help her.

“And you? How was it at the cabin with Edge?”

Lots of words come to mind. Amazing. Blissful. Perfect. Unreal.

That last one stings. Because that’s how he wants it now that we’re out in the real world again.

“We hooked up,” I say, but that doesn’t even come close to describing what we shared. She gasps anyway and looks at me with very wide eyes.

There's always been an innocence and purity to Eden that I don't have.

"And I think we fell in love a little bit," I add and take a sip of my beer.

She gasps again. "Are you serious? That's so amazing."

"It really was. But... "

"You're afraid what everyone else is gonna say?" she asks, uncharacteristically harshly. "Don't be. It doesn't matter."

"Actually, it's not me that cares," I say. "He does."

"Oh," she says and takes another sip of her beer.

"Yeah, oh," I say. "He tried to break up with me before I left, and I don't even know where we stand now. Except that I do know. I can't wait to see him again. He really opened up to me. Told me so much. Trusted me with his deepest and darkest secrets."

She nods knowingly.

"I bet you know exactly what I'm talking about from all those books you read."

She smiles. "Sure, yeah, books."

And there's that little smirk on her face that can only mean one thing. She's seeing someone and she's fallen hard.

"But if you two made such a connection then you can't just let him flitter off," she adds. "Men usually don't know what they want when feelings are involved."

"Tell me about it."

"So, you have to show him. Don't let him get away."

"I'm not planning on it," I say and smile. "But, of course, there's also the issue with Dad. Edge seems to think he'd never allow it."

She rolls her eyes, something she hardly ever does and especially not when talking about our parents. "He needs to know we're grown women. And he already likes Edge a lot. So, half the battle is won."

I slap my forehead. “Why didn’t I think of saying that to him?”

She laughs. “Probably because he shocked you.”

I laugh too. “In more ways than one.”

“Tell me everything,” she demands, leaning forward in her chair.

I don’t think I’ve ever seen her this eager to talk about men. But I more than want to oblige her. So I do.

I leave out the more sordid and sexual stuff. To my mind that’s just the physical expression of the passion and connection that we shared up there. But I tell her all about the latter.

“Wow, so you think it was the Joker makeup that made him drop all his reservations?” she says. “Interesting.”

“I think it played a part,” I say. “Because the floodgates opened after that.”

Reliving it all as I told Eden about it has made the longing to have him in my arms right now a much more urgent thing.

“I’m worried he’ll do something stupid now,” I say. “Like get himself killed.”

She shakes her head. “Don’t worry. I think he has too much to live for now. Whether he knows it or not.”

I wish she was right. I wish it with all my heart.

But what if she’s wrong? What if everything I’m so sure he feels for me exists only in my head?

“He’ll be back before you know it, you’ll see,” she says, magically reading my mind like only she can.

We talk for another hour, since despite all I’ve already told her I still have more to tell.

Then I spent the night in her bed, happy, but kind of dismayed not to find a guy hiding there. The place is a mess. Maybe that’s why she’d been so keen on keeping me from her apartment. But I doubt that’s the whole reason.

Eden has a secret. And I think it's a lot bigger than mine and Edge's.

EIGHTEEN

Edge

The rest of the way to LA was pretty painful with Ruin returning to the subject of Summer every chance he got. Or maybe it was painful for other reasons. But what else can I do except cut her loose?

Hunter has chosen an old, abandoned side-of-the-road compound as their HQ for this job. He has about ten brothers with him, all their bikes hidden from view behind a surprisingly sturdy metal wall.

“What took you so long?” Hunter asks as we exit the pickup. “I wanna move on this guy tonight.”

“What guy?” I ask. “There’s nothing around here but a bunch of desert.”

It’s not exactly desert, but it’s all very arid and Ruin and I didn’t pass any inhabited buildings for miles after turning onto the road that led us here.

“And there’s a bunch more desert, as you put it, between here and the house we’re hitting,” Hunter says. “Didn’t Ruin explain the job to you?”

“He told me some, but mostly he just kept tiring me with other nonsense,” I say and give Ruin a dark look.

He doesn’t look cowed. “I would’ve just confused him. You know how I’m no good at explaining plans.”

Ruin’s not wrong in his self-assessment, so Hunter shrugs and tells me to follow him into the building. He’s our president Cross’ son and will make a fine replacement as our president one day, even though they’re nothing alike. Where Cross likes to play things close to the heart, keeping the rest of us on a need-to-know basis, Hunter is all about including everyone in everything. Or maybe it just seems that way to me because we’re good friends, and I respect Cross too much to assume that kind of familiarity with him.

“So, the thing is, this guy Clive Krueger messed with Trixie and is still messing with some friends of mine now,” Hunter explains as we walk. “He also took Trixie’s engagement ring.”

“The thing you’ve been carrying around for the past ten years?” I ask before thinking better of it. But they’re married now, the guy’s gotta have some sense of humor about their turbulent past by now.

He proves me right by grinning at me over his shoulder. “Good, so you see my point that it’d be too much of a waste to let the thing stay lost. Chance, for example, doesn’t.”

“I never said that,” Chance grumbles since he was meant to overhear. “I just think that maybe we need more guys for this job, and that looking for a ring is a side quest we don’t need to go on right now.”

He’s our VP Tank’s son and a loose cannon on the best of days. Hearing him say we need more backup is practically unheard of, so I’m thinking we should maybe listen to him.

He’s standing next to our newest hacker recruit, Gene, who is busy typing something into his computer. All I see on the screen is an endless line of code though, so I have no idea what he’s actually doing.

“Can you bring up the photos and plans so we can go over the plan again?” Hunter asks Gene, but the guy shakes his head.

“Gotta let this program run so we’ll have eyes inside the place,” he says.

“Alright,” Hunter says and turns to me. “It’s not that complicated anyway. We’re hitting a large house about two miles down this road. The plan is to go in, take out all the bodyguards and kill the man living there.”

“This Clive guy?”

Hunter nods.

“Don’t forget we gotta make him give us the ring first,” Chance chimes in.

“Sounds like a pretty straightforward job,” I cut in before Hunter can reply to Chance. “Unless we’re talking like fifty bodyguards.”

Chance and Hunter exchange a look. The kind that doesn’t mean anything good.

“We counted thirty,” Gene says when neither of them replies. “And once I hack into the security cams on the premises we should know where all of them are at all times.”

“OK, that sounds good,” I say eyeing Hunter and Chance who are still not saying anything. Jax and Ruin have joined us now too.

“What’s not so good is that these bodyguards are heavily armed, well-trained and they’re gonna try and keep Clive alive at all costs,” Hunter explains. “He owes them a shitload of money.”

“And while I don’t doubt we can take them, I still think we need a bigger force,” Chance adds.

“We ain’t gonna get it,” Hunter says. “They’re needed up north.”

Asking what’s happening up north is on the tip of my tongue, but I don’t want to sound disloyal. Hunter needs me. He’s always been there for me, he just helped get me out of prison, for one thing, and he doesn’t need me second guessing him now.

“If we’ll have eyes on the inside, it should be straight forward,” I say instead. “So you wanna move tonight?”

“It has to be tonight,” Hunter says. “As soon as Gene gets us access to the cameras. Because who knows how long that will last.”

“I’m good at this shit so they won’t notice for a while,” Gene says. “But I can’t promise you more than four hours. Five tops. They’re pros.”

“All right, so we go in tonight,” I say. “I’m gonna need some weapons.”

I could also use a change of clothes and I really want my bike, but that's not in the cards for me right now.

"Yeah, we got those for you, don't worry," Ruin says. "And we'll have you back home in no time."

"Right, it's been a while for you," Hunter says.

"But everything's still the same," Chance adds.

"Only not exactly," Ruin pipes up. "A lot has happened."

I'm sure they all think he's talking about the war heating up and all that. But I know better. And I don't need him insinuating it. I know very well that I want to get back home so I can see Summer again. Feel her soft skin under my fingers, taste her, bury my cock deep inside her as I come so hard that all I really know is her name.

Maybe all those cravings will pass with time. But they haven't yet. And I doubt they ever will, if I'm being totally honest.

I never thought I could be myself with a woman as I can be with the brothers. But I was more myself with her than I've ever been with anyone. And as I suit up for the job, stuffing as many guns and knives as my outfit will allow, I'm starting to miss that guy. Not because I'm not a hundred percent committed to this job and the MC, I am. But because it's not actually a hundred percent of who I am.

It makes no sense. There's no way Summer and me can have anything but a secret relationship from here on out. But there it is.

GENE'S HACKING job on the cameras went into effect at just before two AM. We then spent another hour watching every room of the huge house, committing it to memory. Of the thirty bodyguards, twenty were on patrol at all times while ten rested. Two of the ones on duty manned the control room with all the security camera feeds. Part of the hacking job also includes jamming those cameras and showing them footage

that won't include us as we enter the house and take them out one by one.

The plan is to break in through the main gate using some sort of high-tech gadget that can bust any lock and makes virtually no sound. I have no idea how it works, I just hope it will.

Then three of us will take care of the sleeping guards while the rest take out the twenty on patrol.

A simple plan.

All sorts of shit will probably go wrong before it's done though like it always does. But like always, I have no doubt we'll leave having done what we came here to do.

We rode at just after three, all equipped with earpieces for easier communication.

We didn't take the bikes to avoid making too much noise. Instead, we squeezed into the pickup and a van. The drive was short. Tension was so thick you could cut it with a knife and as I looked at my brothers' masked faces, I realized there were very few places I'd rather be.

Back in the day, I'd say there was no place I'd rather be. But that was before Summer and the cabin.

I pushed the thought out of my mind as soon as it rose. Distraction can get you killed. And I wanna live to see Summer again. Hear her sweet voice whispering in my ear, feel her soft touch and her tasty lips on mine.

We left the van about half a mile from the house and trekked the rest of the way on foot, keeping to the shadows, walking as silently as ghosts.

"All clear on the cameras," Gene's voice floats through the earpiece. "They don't see you and there's no one in the yard. Break the gate."

A short high-pitched buzz is followed by a sound like pressurized air being released. Then the gate slips open.

"Fan out," Hunter says. "You all know what to do."

There's no unnecessary talk. The brothers just all leave to do their assigned tasks. I stay with Hunter, Chance, Jax and Ruin. We're going after Clive and the ring.

The guy is in a bedroom on the second floor. He was sleeping in a huge king-sized bed when we left our compound. He's guarded by five men at all times, but those are the only guards on the second floor, which should make our job a little easier.

"Don't make any unnecessary noise," Hunter says as we enter the house via a basement door that leads to the service stairs and the second floor.

There are no guards on the stairs. And before we even reach the first-floor landing, shouts and shots ring out from other parts of the house.

"A guard from the second floor is coming towards you, Hunter," Gene says over the headpiece. "The rest are still bunched together around Clive."

"Is anyone hurt?" Hunter asks.

"No, doing good," Gene says.

Hunter signals us to follow him up the stairs, then stops right beside the door that will lead us to a utility room and then the second-floor hallway.

"What's the status?" Hunter asks.

"The guard's heading back to Clive's room," Gene says. "If you hurry, you can take him down before he reaches it."

Hunter needs no more direction than that. He bursts through the first door and then into the hallway, the rest of us right behind him. The guard is walking down the hallway, but turns as soon as he hears us running towards him.

I reach him first and stab him in the throat before he can make so much as a peep.

"One down, four to go," I say quietly.

It's not that I enjoy killing, I don't. But the ability to do a job well while helping my brothers carries its own satisfaction.

“What’s happening in Clive’s room?” Hunter asks Gene.

“Two in the anteroom, two in the bedroom,” he says. “They seem to know you’re coming.”

“Let’s not keep them waiting then,” Hunter says and kicks down the door.

We were ready, but so were the bodyguards. A bullet whizzes past my head so close it singes the hair on my cheek. But I only notice that in a *by the way* sorta sense.

For all their supposed superior training and fighting skills, the two guys are dealt with quickly. There’s still no movement from the bedroom where the rest of our targets are, though I can hear a guy repeatedly asking what’s happening on the other side of the door.

“That’s Clive,” Hunter says darkly. “I’d know his asshole voice anywhere.”

“Sounds like a total wuss,” I say.

“He is. He likes hurting defenseless women.”

Trixie’s ring isn’t the only reason we’re here tonight. That’s just icing on the cake as Hunter put it. The main reason is that we’re breaking up what’s left of Clive’s sex trafficking operation and putting the guy out of business for good.

“Let’s bust in,” Chance says. “No time like the present.”

This time, the door doesn’t yield as fast as the first did under Hunter’s kicks. But after a few more kicks, it does. This time, there are no bullets flying as we enter. And the room is so dark I can’t see anything but a very fat man’s wide-eyed, sweaty face. The room smells of sour fear smell and medicine.

“One’s by the window, the other by the closet,” Gene’s voice comes through the headphones just in the nick of time before one of the guards comes at me from the left.

I manage to block his first punch, but the second lands in my stomach, momentarily taking my air. Ruin fights him back and away from me, but by the time I regain my wind, he’s losing the fight too.

Cornered men fight fiercely. That's always been true and it's very true right now. Hunter, Jax and Chance have managed to down the one by the window, but the one Ruin and me are fighting just won't go down, no matter how many punches I land on his face and head.

Ruin finally finds an opening and plunges his knife into the guy's stomach.

Over by the bed, Hunter is holding his own knife to Clive's throat. "Where's the ring?"

"What ring?" the guy asks.

He's trying to sound tough but he's stuttering. Sweat is rolling down his face in fat drops.

"You can die fast or slow," Hunter says. "Tell me where the ring is and I'll make it fast."

"How about I don't die at all," Clive suggests.

"Oh, you'll die," Hunter says menacingly.

Clive falls silent after that, his labored breathing drowning out all other sounds in the room. This could take hours. We don't have hours.

"The ring?" Hunter asks and cuts the guy's bicep, making him yelp in pain.

Clive glances at the nightstand by the bed and I rush to it on the off-chance that I'll find the ring there.

The top holds a lamp, a fancy watch and a tissue, but something glimmers in all the colors of the rainbow as I open the drawer.

I find the source and pull out the ring.

"Is this it?" I ask Hunter.

I've seen the ring before, but only once right after Trixie gave it back to him the first time he asked her to marry him.

"Yeah," Hunter says and stabs Clive in the heart with no further talking.

He lets him fall and takes the ring I'm holding out to him.

“Are we finally done here?” Chance asks.

Hunter pockets the ring. “We’re done.”

“Then let’s get the fuck home,” Chance says.

Home. That word never held as much promise as it does right now. Because home is where Summer is. And I shouldn’t be thinking that at all. But I can’t stop.

It doesn’t have to be forever between us.

It just has to be.

Over and over and over again until I get her out of my system. And out of my thoughts, because damn it, I can’t stop thinking about her. Even in battle. Even when I need all my wits about me, she’s there. Front and center. Whispering in my ear. Calling me home.

NINETEEN

Summer

After another day spent helping Eden package up the books then carting them to the post office, where it took another two hours to mail it all, I'm finally home in my apartment. My mom and Eden came by and aired the place out occasionally while I was gone, and probably did some cleaning too, since the place is spotless and a lot of my stuff is not where I usually keep it, but it's still stuffy and smells like no one's lived here for a while. I hadn't planned on living here for a good long while yet either.

Muffled rock music is coming in through the open windows from the bar downstairs now, along with the fresh, tangy scent of the redwood forest that surrounds this little town. By rights, I should be dead on my feet from all the work I've done, and the traveling. But I feel jittery and have enough energy to run for miles.

I don't even wish I was back in LA. I wish I was at the cabin. I wish I had more time to get to know Edge there. I wish I didn't miss him as much as I do, and I wish I was more confident that this isn't the entirety of my life now. I wish I still had the hope that I will get all those things that I had last night.

I don't wallow though. I learned a long time ago that it just sucks me down and won't let me come up for air for a good long while if I do.

So instead of worrying and wishing, I started unpacking. And putting everything back the way I like it. My fridge is empty, but that will have to wait until tomorrow, since there are no open 24-hours stores in Pleasantville. The town has come a long way from being the sleepy little village it used to be when I was born, but it's still got nothing on a larger metropolis.

It's after midnight when I finally run a bath and sink into it. The hot water feels amazing, but the cold pool by the cabin was better.

I resolutely push the thought aside as I wash thoroughly, including my hair, letting the conditioner sit as I just lie in the water, thinking of nothing, just being in the moment.

It's relaxing enough that I actually fell asleep. Because the loud buzzing of my doorbell bell wakes me. I quickly rinse out the conditioner then get out of the bath, wrap a towel around myself and walk to the door, my heart thumping. The buzzer is still going strong, and I don't get visitors in the middle of the night. Except occasionally Eden. And I doubt it's her now.

I'm not scared, since I know the MC is watching over all of us now that the war is on. My heart's beating so fast because of how much I hope it's Edge.

My heart starts thumping even harder as I look through the peephole and see that my wish has finally come true.

"Who is it?" I ask anyway.

"It's me," he says and hearing his voice sends shivers down my spine. In a very good way. "Open the door."

"Why should I?" I ask. "I thought we wouldn't—"

"Because I need to see you," he says, cutting right through my resolve to make him grovel a little longer. It was the sincere emotion in his voice as much as what he said that makes me unlock the door and open it wide.

He's wearing his cut over the same T-shirt and jeans he left the cabin in and his scent is filling the hallway intoxicatingly. His eyes are bright, like a light is shining in them just for me.

"Can I come in?" he asks.

I stand aside a little and it's enough for him to barge in and grab me, kissing me deeply and hungrily. My towel slips off as he lifts me and deepens the kiss even more. I'm transported back to the clearing by the cabin with the sun shining on us while we kissed just like this. Only this time the sun is shining just for us.

"God, I missed you," he mutters right before his lips find that special spot on my neck that only he's ever been able to

find. The one that causes time to stand still and makes tickles of bliss run over my skin.

“I missed you too,” I say as I slip his cut off, deciding on total truth, because honestly, what else but that matters? “Come.”

I take his hand and led him to the bathroom.

He chuckles as he sees the full bath. “You’re saying I need to wash?”

“Yeah, kinda,” I say and let go of his hand to step into the water.

I sink back into the bath and watch his perfect body appear from beneath his clothes.

There’s plenty of room in the bath for the both of us and he sinks into the water with a satisfied sigh. “Now that’s what I’m talking about.”

I lather up the sponge and start washing his chest and his neck and his muscular arms and the rest of him. He lets me for a while, but then takes over, barely rinsing off before he lies back down and pulls me on top of him, his lips finding mine again.

His cock is rock hard, it’s been that way since he got into the water. It’s pressing against my pussy now, pulsing in time with my racing heartbeat and a part of me is thinking this is just a dream. That’s how perfect this is.

But the other part of me, the one that knows I’m wide awake and that one of my biggest wishes has come true is savoring every second of this moment.

I shift my hips and let his cock slide into me, joining us completely. We just stay that way for a few moments, kissing deeply,

But I feel his cock growing inside me. He grabs my waist as thrusts deeper, making me moan into his kiss.

The moans only get louder as he continues thrusting into me, taking me with all the urgency of now, and all the pent-up need that we clearly both felt.

I give myself to him completely, water splashing over the rim of the bathtub as his cock transports me back to the glorious, blissful quiet of the hillside where we made love for the first time, and everything was simple.

This is simple too. This perfect bliss. This seamless joining. This mind-blowing pleasure.

I surrender to it, come hard on his cock, once, twice, three times before he's done too, exhaling raggedly and hoarsely as he thrusts his cock into me one final time.

His heart is thumping in time with mine, the water is growing cold, but I could stay just like this forever and I think it's the same for him. I hope it's the same for him.

But that's a wish for another night. This one is already perfect just as it is.

WE MADE love four more times, falling asleep with our bodies tangled together worse than the sheets. The apartment no longer smells stuffy and unlived in. It smells like us, like our new beginning. The music from the downstairs bar has long since gone silent. All that's coming through the open windows now are the night silence and the faint scent of redwoods that's growing stronger as dawn breaks.

He's awake too, running his fingers through my still damp hair, breathing lightly and evenly. He kissed me lightly on the lips and forehead and that's what woke me. I'm expecting him to kiss me again, harder this time, as I open my eyes fully and smile at him. But he doesn't. He just looks at me for a few more moments before whispering, "I gotta go now."

He gets up with no more warning than that then walks into the bathroom to find his clothes. He's dressed when he comes back into the room and sits on the edge of the bed to pull on his boots.

"You have a meeting or something?" I ask talking very quietly, I don't even know why. Probably because I already

know the reason isn't anything as simple as that.

"Sure, later, maybe," he says.

"Then why do you have you to go now?" I ask, finding my voice again.

He just looks at me instead of answering, his eyes kinda soft and fixed on my lips and not my eyes.

"Because I have to sneak back out so no one sees me," he finally admits.

I shake my head. Here's a grown man, a tough, no-nonsense killer no less, talking about sneaking around. He takes what he wants, when he wants it and doesn't apologize. So what is going on here?

He stands up and kisses the top of my head. "It'll be easier once I take up your guarding duty."

He's already by the door by the time I finally figure out how to respond. I rush after him.

"So that's how it's gonna be?" I ask. "Sneaking around? Keeping secrets?"

His eyes take in my nakedness, his chest heaving. "Yeah, that's how it's gotta be."

"What if I don't want that?"

He shrugs like it's a take it or leave it kinda thing for him. But his eyes are telling a different story. They're literally drinking me in, begging me to agree to this foolish plan.

"So it's no?" he asks.

Finally, the tough guy comes out. If I say yes now, I might never get him again. I know that. However hard it would be for him. And I'm not ready to let him go yet.

"Just go," I say. "We'll talk later."

He grins, kisses me again while grabbing my ass and grinding his hard-on into my belly, whispers, "I'll miss you," then leaves.

My head is spinning. I want him again and in a lot of ways I don't even know what just happened. I'm not one to let things I want just slip out of my hands. But if I try to hold on to him too hard that's exactly what will happen.

Maybe it's best to just think of this as a good time thing. A once in a while kind of thing. A no strings type of thing.

Too bad it's more of a long-time wish coming true for me.

No man has ever swept me off my feet quite this badly. And no amount of pretending otherwise will make me not want him all to myself, out in the open, day in and day out.

TWENTY

Edge

After the successful raid on Clive's house, we spent the next day lying low and making sure there was no retaliation. In the evening we met up with Rogue, the president of Rogue Angels MC and Melody's man. He's the one we were helping by eradicating Clive and those bodyguards of his. As far as I understand it, Rogue Angels MC's main occupation is going after the criminals no one else is going after, for one reason or another.

I'd hoped to see Melody while I was there to make sure she really was OK, but she was working at the ER and Rogue gave me the dirtiest and most possessive possible look when I suggested I visit her there. I was sure he'd fight me over it if I insisted on going to see her. And it was that possessive look more than anything else that convinced me not to push for a visit. She's clearly in good hands and that's all I need to know.

Ever since I talked her out of killing herself all those years ago, I've felt very protective of Melody. I don't think she knew, but I always made sure no one treated her bad at the clubhouse. I also made sure the bastard who killed her family got what he deserved. But now, I think Rogue will do just fine making sure she's taken care of.

And if he doesn't, I'll pay him another visit. No need to warn him ahead of time. I'll just show up.

While I was figuring all this out, Summer was constantly front and center in my mind. Mainly in the sense that I will end anyone who so much as looked at her the wrong way. Or in a too friendly way.

So as soon as I got my bike from the clubhouse garage, I left the guys, saying I needed a good long ride. But I headed straight for her apartment. She lives at the edge of Main Street, over a bar called Woodstock that caters mostly to yuppies these days, but usually plays a good selection of music.

It wasn't hard to slip past Trench who was guarding the entrance to her building, but it also wasn't hard to break in via one of the bar's back windows. The storage space of the bar shares a staircase with the rest of the building and that's something that needs to be corrected if we're gonna keep her safe. If I'm gonna keep her safe.

Which I very much intend to do.

I got no sleep last night after she opened the door for me dripping wet from her bath. A bath we later shared.

"You smell like a bouquet of roses," Ruin says as we're assembling for a short meeting to learn what's what now. At the end of this meeting, I plan to get myself on Summer's security detail and stay there for the foreseeable future.

"Did you have some fun last night?" Ruin adds even though I'm ignoring him as hard as I can.

"Yeah, Ruin, I did," I snap. "Now drop it."

"Dude, love has certainly not made you any more pleasant," he says, grinning at me.

"I'd love to wipe that stupid smile off your face, that's what I'd love to do."

It just makes him grin wider. "That bad, huh? Well, you know what you gotta do."

"What's that?" I ask despite myself.

We're standing by ourselves at the back of the clubhouse bar, but the place is packed and the longer he keeps talking the more of a chance someone will overhear and start asking more stupid questions.

"Go for it," he says like it's the most logical thing in the world. "You only live once."

Ice walks in just then, right on cue, and the way his eyes dart straight to me makes me sure he already knows all about me and Summer. But then he nods a hello and I nod back and the queasy feeling in my stomach lessens.

“You’re acting like a stupid teenager,” Ruin says. “All the guy wants is for his daughters to find men who will treat them like queens and take care of them. And I’m sure he’d prefer you for the job over any other guy in here.”

Tank, Cross and Rook, our Sargent at Arms, followed Ice into the bar, Hawk and Scar bringing up the rear.

Ruin is now treading on very thin ice in terms of all the other guys in here figuring out what we’re talking about. Especially since the room has quieted down now that the execs are here, so I just give him a hard look and don’t reply.

“We’re all here, so I’ll make this quick,” Cross says, his voice booming and his piercing black eyes scanning the room. They seem to settle on me for a little longer than the rest.

“There is no easy way to say this, but it needs saying,” he goes on. “We have a rat in the club.”

The room erupts in hushed conversations and angry shouts. I join the latter.

Cross gives us a few moments to calm down, his piercing gaze scanning the room the whole time. I’m sure the rest of the execs are watching us just as closely.

“We became aware of the possibility that someone is feeding our enemy information after the battle in the old mining town,” Cross continues. “More recent information has removed all possibility of doubt. Someone’s talking and we will find him. And he will pay.”

No one speaks but there’s a new kind of tension in the air now. Distrust and anger are almost palpable as we all look at each other.

“What’s the point of telling everyone they suspect this?” Ruin asks.

“To make the rat panic and make a wrong move,” Hunter answers. I didn’t even notice him walk up to us.

“It could also make him burrow even deeper,” I add.

Hunter shrugs. “Things are moving real fast now. But the problem is, we gotta find this person before we can do

anything else. The job Ice and Tank went to oversee while we were in LA... that took a nasty turn too. They barely got out alive.”

“And they have no idea who it might be?” Ruin asks.

Hunter shrugs. “I’m sure they have some idea. They didn’t tell me anything though.”

Cross bangs on the counter behind him and the room falls silent again.

“We’ll be questioning everyone, starting today,” he says. “So don’t go anywhere. You’ll get instructions shortly.”

That concludes the meeting, and the brothers start dispersing. The conversations are still tense and the looks that are darting across the room mistrustful. We’re all alive and standing in this room because we trust the brothers who have our backs implicitly. I dare not imagine what happens when that trust is gone. But I think I’m about to find out.

“I’m gonna volunteer to be questioned first,” I say. “I want this over with.”

Hunter shakes his head. “You’re in the clear. You took a bullet for Cross.”

I nod, but Ice walks over before I can thank him for the trust he’s shown me.

“I hear the LA thing went over smoothly,” he says.

“Not so much as a cut on our side,” Hunter says. “A few bruises though. And the Rogues now owe us big time.”

“Good. We needed the win,” Ice says, scanning the room with a very worried expression on his face. “Because this shit is gonna divide us right when we need to be united the most.”

No one knows what to say to that. It’s just one of those cold hard truths that can’t be softened.

“All right, I gotta go,” Ice says. “But we’ll need all three of you up at Sanctuary later so don’t go far.”

We all nod, and Ice starts making his way towards the exit. It’s probably not the best time to be making my request, but

I'm feeling a little high from the trust placed on me, so I follow him.

"Ice, can I run something by you?" I ask as I catch up to him in the glaring sunlight outside the clubhouse.

Somehow what I'm about to say doesn't seem like such a great idea anymore, but he's looking at me expectantly so there's no going back.

"With all the shit going on, I'd feel better if I could be in charge of looking after Summer," I say. I have no idea how my voice isn't shaking.

The look he gives me is about a thousand percent too knowing. And to top it off, I can't stop seeing her naked body, water dripping across her hard, candy apple red nipples from her wet hair.

"They already came after her once and I just... I just want to be sure she's all right," I add. "And doesn't do anything stupid like run off to Mexico again."

Ice just keeps looking at me with that knowing look. But the rest of his face is completely unreadable and he's definitely not smiling or anything of the sort that would tell me I haven't overstepped completely.

"The thing in Mexico wasn't related to the war," he says. "The guy that tried to take her just chose her randomly because she was alone on the street. He was the VP of Satan's Dogs MC out of Texas. Their specialty is abducting women tourists in Mexico and selling them in the US. Nothing to do with us or the war."

"But she's still in danger... they've been going after the children..." I say. "I just wanna make sure they don't come after her."

"I appreciate the offer, Edge, I really do," he says. "But there's so few that we know can be trusted now. We need you for something else."

"What?"

“Cross will tell you later. But don’t worry, we got the town locked down tight. And Summer knows the dangers of acting out.” He claps me on the shoulder. “I’ll see you later.”

“Yeah, you will.” That’s all I can choke out.

He walks to his bike and leaves me standing in the midday heat and blinding sunlight. There goes my perfect plan of seeing as much of Summer as I need to.

I should be worrying about the rat, I should be basking in all the trust being placed in me and in the exhilaration of rising in the MC’s ranks. But all I’m thinking about is how it’s all gonna keep me from Summer and how annoying that is.

Clearly, I don’t deserve the trust. A few weeks ago, I’d kill for it. It’s all I lived for then. Now, a part of me doesn’t give a flying fuck about any of that. And I don’t see it changing anytime soon.

TWENTY-ONE

Summer

We're at The Grove, a restaurant/bar located in a forest clearing, surrounded by redwood trees the smell of which is mixing nicely with that given off by the crackling bonfire. It's not just Edge and I, but all us MC kids, including Harper who is singing one of her beautiful songs. Trixie is here too, leaning on Hunter while he talks to Jax and Chance. She looks calmer and happier than I've ever seen her and I'm glad for it. She's had a hard life and deserves to finally have peace.

Edge has been skillfully avoiding being alone with me for more than a stolen kiss or two in the darkness, which drove me mad at first, but the way he's been looking at me the whole time more than makes up for it.

His gaze is always on me, and it feels like I'm being warmed by the fire even when I'm nowhere near it. He seems to feel where I am or where I'll be at any given time and there he is too, watching over me, desiring me, the passion that we're denying ourselves like a thick rope connecting us.

I could get used to this sneaking around. Especially since I know there'll be fireworks in bed as soon as he lets me take him home. But maybe I just can't wait that long.

He's leaning against the side of the log cabin that houses the bar and looks a lot like the cabin we shared in the woods near LA. Ruin is with him, but I think he knows about us, if his smirk as he sees me watching them is anything to go by.

I've been sitting with Eden, Veronica and her sister Ariel by the fire, but I get up, tell them I'll be right back—which is a lie, if I have anything to say about it—and walk slowly in the general direction of where Edge and Ruin are standing.

Edge's eyes on me are like a burning rope pulling me closer and closer. Ruin grins and leaves Edge's side before I'm even halfway there.

The heat in Edge's gaze only intensifies as I draw near. Once we're side by side it's almost impossible to fight the

pull, but I manage it. I walk past him, smiling at him over my shoulder as I make a beeline for the darkness under the trees.

He doesn't follow right away. Pretty soon I can't see a damn thing in front of me and the roots are snagging at my feet. But I keep going. I know he's right behind me, I can feel the heat of his gaze all along my back. I can hear his footsteps too as he lumbers after me.

Once I judge that we're far enough from the others I stop and lean against one of the wide tree trunks and wait for him. As soon as I see him, I slip off my panties and twirl them on my finger for him to see.

He comes to me with a whoosh of heat, wrapping his arms around me and giving me the deepest, most passionate kiss yet.

"What took you so long to get here?" I ask once his lips leave mine to kiss my neck.

He kisses me again without answering, his tongue invading my mouth as his hands pinch my nipples through the dress, making them hard and making me moan.

His hand glides up my thigh and cups my pussy, sliding two fingers in, making me whimper, the sound muffled by how deeply he's still kissing me.

"You're so wet," he mumbles.

"Yes, for you," I whisper. "I need you right now."

"Someone will see," he says, but his fingers are playing with my pussy, so I know he's only half serious.

"Let them," I say and undo his belt, reaching for his throbbing cock and stroking it before he can think of more ways to fight this.

"You want it right here?" he asks hoarsely, harshly.

I smile at him and bite on my bottom lip. "Yes, please."

He yanks his fingers from my pussy, making me gasp as he spins me around and bends me over. "Fine, but just make sure you don't scream."

“I will scream. You make sure no one hears,” I tell him as he presses the pulsing head of his cock against my opening.

He chuckles darkly, then clasps one hand over my mouth while thrusting his cock into me at the same time. His hand barely muffles my scream.

He’s got one arm around my waist, the other over my mouth and his cock is doing things inside me I never thought possible. Fireworks don’t even come close to describing it. Unless they were made of pleasure and lit by bliss. Colors are sounds and sounds are things as his thrusts get wilder, deeper, his cock lifting me right off the ground as I struggle to hold on to at least a little bit of my mind as I drown in the pleasure he’s giving me.

But why struggle? What’s the point?

I give up all control and come so hard I forget even my own name for the few glorious moments that the pleasure has me.

My whole body is vibrating as he sets me back down, pulls his cock out and turns me to face him.

“How was that?” he asks in a hoarse voice.

“Amazing,” I whisper. “And now I want more.”

He grins. It’s funny how it’s completely dark around us, but I can see him perfectly anyway. It’s that fire that binds us. It gives light to see by too.

“Let’s go back to my place,” I suggest.

He shakes his head. “I can’t. We’re riding real early tomorrow.”

They’re going on another job. To fight another battle in the stupid war. That’s why we all met up today. To spend some time together in case something terrible happens.

I lay my fingers over his lips. “Shh, I don’t want to talk about the war. I’ll let you sleep. Just come home with me.”

My voice actually cracks as I say it, the sadness and fear that I’ve been fighting all evening finally getting the better of

me.

“I...”

“Let me at least have this, Edge,” I say. “You won’t acknowledge me, you won’t tell anyone we’re together... what am I supposed to do if you don’t come back? Cry and be sad in secret? At least let me fall asleep beside you tonight. Is that too much to ask?”

He runs his hand gently across my hair, holding me tight with his other arm. I’m sure he’s about to tell me no again.

“It’s not too much to ask,” he says instead. “Let’s go home.”

And once we rejoin the party, he doesn’t try to make us leave separately. He just announces he’s taking me home then leads me to his bike, taking me for a ride I’ve been waiting to take since we came back from the cabin. Or even longer. Ever since I first realized I liked him much more than any other guy.

The rumbling of his huge bike beneath me, and my arms wrapped around his waist as I lean against his broad back... that’s all sorts of dreams coming true for me right there. They might very well all get slashed and dashed tomorrow. But at least I’ll have this. This ride. This night. This soul connection. Even if we’re the only two who know about it. I’m glad we’re on the same page about it. At least for tonight.

TWENTY-TWO

Edge

It's five AM. The MC's assembling at six at an abandoned rest stop about five miles out of town. Only the inner circle is going and the twenty-five members whose loyalty is beyond reproach. We're to go there separately, so as not to alert the rat. I'm supposed to be on my way. But I can't leave Summer's warm bed. Or her.

She's awake too, looking at me with her gorgeous green eyes that look brown in this half-light. Brown and sad.

"It's time," I say, more to convince myself than her, and sit on the edge of the bed.

My clothes are in a heap by the foot of the bed where she ripped them off me just three short hours ago. They seem to be miles away and I have no energy to stand.

She rises too and wraps her arms around me, her warm, soft body pressed against my back.

"Do you have to go?" she asks.

"Yeah, I do." And what's more, I want to. I just can't seem to move.

"Please come back," she whispers into my ear. "Because I think I love you."

The words make my whole body tense up. Because she said what I've been thinking too. And because it's the most stupid thing I've ever heard.

I free myself from her arms and stand up, facing her.

"You know we have no future, right?" I ask.

"We can have any kind of future we want," she snaps, her eyes now merciless, angry, but still kinda sad.

"You want someone who will be there for you, someone who will take care of you, not someone who just likes to fuck you," I say, the words sort of sticking in my throat. "You don't want me."

“You just want to fuck?” she asks, much of the force gone from her voice.

“Yeah.”

I don't look at her as I say it. I don't look at her while I dress as quickly as I can. I don't look at her because then she'll see the lie.

But I can't have her waiting for me. I can't have her wanting things that she can never have.

“I'm going now,” I say and still don't look at her as I walk out of the room.

She catches up to me by the front door, the light of dawn making shadows play across her curves.

“You're heading to battle so I forgive you for saying all that nonsense back there,” she says. “But take this.”

She presses something warm and sharp into my palm.

“It's to remind you of me,” she adds. “And to make sure you come back to me.”

I open my palm. She gave me her heart shaped pendant, the one she never takes off her neck. “I can't take this.”

“Yes, you can,” she says. “You have the key to my heart, so it's yours.”

Even if I wanted to, I can't argue anymore.

So, I just squeeze the pendant tightly in my fist, so tightly it cuts into my flesh, kiss her one last time and leave.

She doesn't try to stop me again. If she did, I'd probably just stay and fuck everything else.

HAWK HAS LEARNED that the leaders of the war against us are meeting in the middle of nowhere right on the Nevada California Oregon border. It took us all day and part of the

night to reach the place and we've been lying in the dirt scoping the place out for several hours now.

The meeting's in an old farmhouse with a steeped roof and a lopsided porch. According to Hawk, the house belongs to Star Riders MC, and it used to be where they auctioned off kidnapped women and mafia brides to the highest bidder.

Now that their only concern is the war against us, that line of business has fallen to the wayside. At least something good has come out of this war.

At least ten presidents of the MCs that have banded together to take us out are in the farmhouse. Along with over thirty guys whose sole job seems to be to form a human wall around the house while the meeting takes place.

Cross is with us, so are Tank and Ice and even Scar. The speech Cross gave after he laid out the plan and before we came out here to surround the place was very inspiring. It made me proud to be one of the Devils. But I see now why the speech had to be such.

There's no fucking way all of us are surviving this battle.

The necklace Summer gave me is around my neck. And the heart shaped pendant feels heavier than a boulder. I never should've taken it. I should've finished my goodbye to her and left. Then she'd be too angry at me to mourn me when I don't come back. Which could very well happen.

The farmhouse is lit up by an old gas-powered generator, so our plan is simple. Take out the generator and plunge everything into darkness then light up the place with a few well-aimed bazooka shots. And kill anyone who tries to run from the house.

"We're ready," Cross says over the earpieces. "Everyone prepare. Take out the generator."

The last instruction is meant for Traps who was an explosives specialist while still in the Army. He's already in position to carry out the order.

The pop that follows is barely audible, but the house is plunged into darkness almost immediately.

Before my eyes can even begin to adjust to the night, Cross gives the next command and the bazooka projectiles start whizzing through the sky hitting the house or landing in front of it and lighting up the night like a failed fireworks display. Fire engulfs the farmhouse almost immediately, men are shouting and screaming, some running out of the house fully ablaze.

It's an image that'll stay with me forever. One of many I do not want to burden Summer with.

"Move, now, go," Cross shouts. But I'm slow to follow that command.

Fire took my little brother and my grandparents. Fire while they slept. Or did they run out of the house, burning like these men are?

It's a question I'll never have an answer for. All I have are the nightmares of them all dying in flames.

But the only way is through.

The only way back to Summer is past all this horror.

I run to join my brothers, aiming a shot at one of the burning men. I hit him square in the chest and he goes down. A mercy killing that almost costs me my own life as a bullet narrowly misses my neck.

After that it's just kill or be killed.

I know nothing but what's right in front of me, the stench of burning wood and burning flesh heavy in the air, the smoke making my eyes water.

I kill at least three more men. I bumped Hunter and Ruin out of the way of bullets. My arms and chest are soaked in blood from using my knife after running out of ammo.

And then suddenly all is still and almost quiet. Burning wood makes a lot of noise. The moaning of dying men too. My arm is burning for some reason and the fire isn't strong enough to illuminate the whole of the carnage.

"Anyone down?" Cross asks over the earpiece. But I hear him normally too because he's standing right beside me.

I'm afraid to look around to check.

But then my brothers start checking in one by one. Nothing to report. All good.

"All accounted for," Tank says after a while. "But Edge is bleeding."

I look down at my arm that is aching as well as burning now. There's a gash across my upper arm that doesn't look too deep.

"Just a scratch, nothing to worry about," I tell them.

"Good, get a count of how many we got," Cross orders.

Hawk and a couple of the others start checking our fallen enemies.

"The count's off," Hawk says after a while. "Some got away."

"We regroup at the safe house and figure out what to do about them," Cross says. "I'd sooner take out as many as we can while we're up here than have to come back. Let's go."

We run back into the darkness, away from the burning house and towards our bikes. The air is full of a quiet sense of a job well done, of success, of righteous revenge. It's the only thing I lived for before I let Summer in. But now I'm afraid it won't ever be enough again.

Her pendant is still as heavy as a boulder around my neck. But I also know I'll never take it off again.

TWENTY-THREE

Summer

Eden, Harper, and I are restocking the bookstore. We've already unpacked about a dozen huge boxes of books, and we still got a dozen left.

"I just love the smell of new books," Harper says as she flips through one before putting in on a shelf.

"I know, right," Eden says, but of course that's no surprise coming from her. She loves everything books.

"So, no more online selling?" I ask her with a grin. "You're just keeping all these beauties for yourself?"

She grins too. "That was a very exhausting little exercise. I still get a trickle of orders and I'll fulfil them as they come, but no more advertising on social media."

"How about you, Summer, made any wow makeup creations lately?" Harper asks.

"Not since Joker," I mutter without meaning to and now they're both staring at me. Must've been something in my tone.

I can't stop thinking about Edge no matter how hard I try. I really laid it all on the line the morning he left, and I expected at least a text while he was gone, but it's been a day and a half and nothing.

"I must've missed that one," Harper says. "Was it one of your boyfriends in LA?"

She chuckles as she says it and Eden shoots me a look that plainly says she's bursting to tell Harper about Edge and me.

"No boyfriends in LA," I say. "I was too busy for anything like that."

"So who then?" Harper persists.

"It was at the cabin," Eden says, then clasps her hand over her mouth, her eyes very wide and apologetic as she looks at me.

“Oh, it was one of our boys,” Harper says. “Do tell more.”

Both of them are now looking at me expectantly and, honestly, I don't even know why I'm still trying to keep this a secret. Maybe because I'm now very afraid that nothing will come of it. That once he comes back there'll be nothing to tell anyway.

“It was Edge,” I say. “We... ummm... well, I sorta, kinda fell in love with him.”

“You've been in love with him for years,” Eden says. “You just got him on the same page as you are now.”

“I wish.” I place the book I've been holding on the shelf and sink down into one of the plush armchairs. “But he's still trying to tell me he's no good for me, even though I know he maybe, kinda loves me too.”

Harper sighs and sits down on the armrest, taking my hand. “I know a little something about that kinda nonsense talk. It's so frustrating. Jax did the same to me for years.”

“But he stopped now?” I ask, hope oozing from my voice.

She nods. “Yeah, he stopped now. But it took years. You just have to be patient. And call him out on his bullshit. I wish I had better advice to give you.”

“What is it that makes these guys so damn unable to admit their feelings?” I ask. “It's like I know he cares about me, but he can only show it when we're all alone and even then, only when we're not talking much.”

“It's all the killing,” Eden says sagely. “It makes them very hard.”

The silence that follows is fraught with things best left unsaid. And sadness.

“There's also our fathers,” Harper adds, chuckling.

It works to lighten the mood. Her father is Scar, the MC's torturer and a very scary dude to anyone that's not part of his family.

“I know, right?” I say. “All Edge could talk about in the beginning was how he doesn’t want to disrespect Ice by being with me. I mean, what the hell? Ice isn’t that bad, is he? Do our dads actually go around ordering the guys not to even look at us? I thought maybe it was more like just a guideline or something.”

The look on Harper’s face tells me I’m wrong even before she says, “Scar forbade Jax from seeing me. It’s why he left and got himself thrown in jail.”

Eden and I just stare at her with our mouths open. “For real? And what did you do?”

“I had a talk with him,” she says. “But I also got kidnapped and saved by Jax. That helped a lot.”

She’s smiling as she says it, but her eyes look scared.

“Great, so all I gotta do is get myself kidnapped and then all’s gonna be OK.”

Harper’s not smiling anymore. “I wouldn’t recommend that.”

Eden looks shocked as hell too. “Stop talking crazy, Summer.”

I smile at both of them. “Relax, I was kidding. Besides, we’re being watched 24/7 again. How would that even happen?”

As if to prove my point, a couple of bikers drive past the open door of the bookstore, going slow, the visors of their helmets pulled low over their faces.

“It is annoying,” Eden says. “But I feel better knowing they’re around. This war... it’s nothing to joke about.”

And here we are again. Talking about the war. The painful twist near my heart at the mention of it says all I want said about it.

“How do you do it, Harper?” I ask. “How do you stay calm while Jax is away fighting?”

Her eyes tell me that her heart is twisting as badly and painfully as mine. But she smiles a sad little smile anyway. “Honestly, I’m a wreck. But keeping busy helps. And hanging out with friends does too. Let’s finish up in here and get some dinner.”

She leaps to her feet and picks up an armful of books from the box at her feet and starts placing them on the shelves.

Eden and I share a look and then Eden places a hand on her shoulder. “We’ve got at least another day of unpacking to do. Let’s get that dinner now.”

“And no more talk of war, please,” I say, the pain near my heart reminding me I’m the one who brought it up.

“Yeah, no more,” Harper says. “But how about dinner *and* drinks just to make sure we don’t end up wallowing in depression.”

I wish it was as easy as saying that to make the anguish go away. But I’m sure we’ll make do. What other choice do we have? These men we’ve chosen, they’ll never stop fighting and they’ll never stop living dangerous lives.

WE WERE JOINED BY VERONICA, Ariel and Trixie for dinner and ended up making a night of it. Unfortunately, none of them had any better advice for coping with the waiting and worrying when the guys are away fighting. Or coping with their guys’ reluctance to form a bond that goes beyond the bedroom.

I told them about me and Edge. And we drank many shots toasting to our future. And all our futures. And everything in between.

I’m more than a little tipsy as I walk down the dark, quiet sidewalk back to my place. The rest took an Uber, but my apartment isn’t far from the bar we were at and I needed the fresh nighttime air to clear my head at least a little before I try lying down. My head’s spinning as I walk, and I imagine it’ll

be a million times worse when I try to sleep. I'm not ruling out puking. I overdid it with the shots. I usually do. But what's interesting is that my sister was right there with me. Trixie who only drank soda is making sure she gets home all right.

I guess I'll have to ask my mom how she copes with dad being in so many near brushes with death all the time. Though I'm starting to suspect this was one of the main reasons she'd rather Eden and I find partners outside the MC. And outside the biker world if at all possible.

The town is deserted this time of night and in LA I'd be scared to walk alone at night, but my hometown is a sleepy one. And I'm sure there are at least two MC guys assigned to watching me at all times. They are really good at staying out of sight. They always were back when I was still in high school and had round-the-clock protection just like all the rest of us kids.

The night wind is chilly, since summer is starting to turn into autumn, my favorite time of year.

I spend some time fantasizing about all the wonderful fall rides Edge and I will be taking this year, along roads bordered by gold and copper-colored trees, the mists of morning not quite dissipating until the afternoon, making everything look magical and fairytale-like.

There's an eeriness to autumn too, though. The winds change, growing stronger and louder as they blow over the dense redwood forest. It's already happening tonight. The wind is howling in the distance, but it's just a soft, though cold breeze when it reaches me here on this dark street. I suddenly feel very alone out here. And very lonely. Forsaken almost.

The feeling came on the cold wind and now it won't leave.

What if Edge died?

What if my father died?

What if...

I feel very watched too. But when I look around, I'm alone on the street. In the distance, at the very end of Main Street

where my apartment is, a biker is sitting on his hog, looking my way.

There's nothing to worry about. I'm safe here.

And when my phone chimes with a text and that text is from Edge all the eeriness disappears.

Returning now. Can I come see you?

I have the reply of *Yes!!* All typed up, but then I remember how he left me hanging for two days.

I take a couple more zigzagging steps down the sidewalk towards my apartment building, my heart racing and my head starting to spin even worse.

It's because I really want to see him. And because I don't want to play games with him. While the girls didn't have any concrete advice, they did tell me that playing games won't get me far.

So, I take a deep breath, text the *Yes!!* I've been wanting to text from the start and walk as fast as I can to my door. The biker I saw from a distance is gone from the street, but I'm sure he's not far.

I could use a cold shower before Edge gets here, both to sober up and because I've been working at the bookstore all day.

Or maybe a hot bath. That idea is prompted by the fact that the cold wind followed me into the lobby and up the stairs. And also, because the last bath we shared is one of my best memories ever and features in my daydreams often.

The automatic light on my floor won't come on as I reach it, but enough moonlight is coming through the large window at the end of the hall to see by.

My door is unlocked.

And my stupid drunk brain thinks it's Edge who broke in. I sway backwards and run smack into the hard chest of a tall guy.

I even smile for a split second before the door to my apartment opens wide, just as arms grab me from behind. Not lovingly. Certainly not gently.

“Hello, Summer,” the guy in my apartment says.

He has the same cold eyes as the guy who tried to kidnap me in Mexico had. And the same wavy dark hair. And kinda the same face minus the beard. But it can't be that guy. That guy is dead. He didn't get far from the back of that van they stashed him in. I don't know what happened, but I'm sure the Devils took care of him.

“What do you want?” I ask and wish I wasn't slurring as badly as I am.

“This is for my brother,” he says.

Then he slides a black hood over my head and presses something wet and smelly over my mouth as I try to scream.

Chloroform. Or something like it.

My whole body goes limp like a rag doll's and I can't control it well enough to open my mouth, let alone scream. But I'm alert, my mind's refusing to shut off from the drug they gave me.

So I'm fully aware as they drag me down the hall, back down the stairs and via the storage room of the bar to the small courtyard behind the building. I just can't move my body. I'm hoping my MC bodyguards will swoop now. But the only sound I hear is the scraping of my kidnappers' boots against the rough concrete, the howling wind in the distance and my own hoarse breathing as I struggle to hold on to consciousness.

I'm tossed hard into a van, my shoulder colliding painfully with something sharp sticking out of the floor. The pain's good though. It solidifies my grip on consciousness. But I pretend I'm passed out, so they won't think to dose me with the chloroform again.

We're moving. Now I can try to get free. There are many ways to escape from the back of a van. My dad taught me about ten.

I just wish my arms and legs would start working again.

TWENTY-FOUR

Edge

Tracking the ones that got away from the burning farmhouse took us the rest of the night and well into the next day. Funny how fast and how far men can run when they've got nothing to lose. Or everything to lose, actually.

The two guys that got away had help though. Someone picked them up on the side of the road. But we found them anyway. Hiding in a huge compound surrounded by barbwire topped metal walls and so much noise coming from inside it sounded like there were hundreds in there.

Much too many for even us to take.

The place was surrounded by tall pines that gave us plenty of hiding places to watch and wait for an opening. But it never came. The gate in the metal wall stayed firmly shut, no one came or went and the noise of the many people talking and music playing on the other side of it didn't die down.

I volunteered to go in and find out what I could but was shot down.

"We only take risks like that when there's no other way," Cross said.

For some reason, it sounded like the best praise I've ever gotten from him.

In the end it was decided that we'll need a bigger force to hit the compound. A fight for another day, in other words.

All the way back to Pleasantville—actually for the past two days—I fought the urge to call Summer. Stringing her along isn't fair. On top of everything else, at the rate we're going in this war, I probably won't see thirty. My arm got grazed by a stray bullet. Five inches to the left and it would've gone straight through my heart. Two inches up and one to the left and it would've gone through my neck.

I never used to worry about shit like that. I used to laugh it off, enjoy the scar and get real drunk to celebrate surviving

another day.

Now all I can think about is Summer mourning me when I die.

So it's no fucking surprise I lost the battle and texted her when we were about five miles out of Pleasantville. The minutes while I waited for her to text back, watching the phone instead of the road, seemed to drag for eternity.

Truth is, if she hadn't texted back, I'd still show up at her door. But I figured she deserved more respect than that.

Her *yes* meant more to me than I'll ever admit to anyone.

We entered Pleasantville the same way we left, coming in from different directions, in no more than groups of two. Ruin didn't ask any stupid questions when I said I'm going in alone.

I took the shortest possible route to Summer's apartment building and parked out back, by the dumpsters. Only two of the apartments in the old brownstone walkup where she lives are rented out, so I wasn't surprised that all the lights were out.

What did surprise me was that no one had fixed the lock on the bar window. And that it was wide open besides. I figured Ice would take me telling him about that easy access to Summer's building more seriously. But it's no matter. I'll fix it myself first thing tomorrow morning.

For tonight, she has nothing to worry about because I'll be with her.

The light on her floor is busted.

And the door to her apartment is wide open, the room beyond it illuminated only by silver moonlight.

Maybe she's hiding inside, waiting for me to find her.

"Summer!" I call out as I step inside, blood whooshing in my ears from how hard my heart's beating.

She doesn't answer no matter how hard I hoped she would. No matter how much I wanted to hear her voice. No matter how fiercely I wished my worst nightmare wasn't coming true.

I quickly check the apartment anyway. She's in none of the dark, cold rooms. There's a pile of ash on the dining room table and about five butts, extinguished right there on the tabletop. It makes me so mad I see red, even though ruining her table like that is the least of the bad things that happened here tonight.

I call her cell next, hoping against hope she never came home tonight and something else spooked the smoker from her apartment.

It just rings and rings. The sound of her voice on the voice mail makes my heart burst in the kind of pain I haven't felt since I watched my parents get killed. The kind of pain I haven't let myself feel because I never got close enough to anyone to feel it after that.

Yet here I am, my hands actually shaking as I call Ice.

"Summer's gone," I tell him. "Someone took her."

"What are you talking about?"

"Who was watching her?" I ask. "She's not at her apartment. Someone was here, waiting for her. They took her."

His shocked gasp and the silence that follows holds a million questions.

"I'll be right there," he says. "Trench was on her detail tonight."

I call Trench as soon as Ice hangs up, but the call goes straight to an automated voicemail.

A couple of minutes later the sound of many bikes riding up to the building rents the night's silence. It continues to echo as boots thud up the stairs.

Ice rushes in first and checks the apartment himself, calling for his daughter.

Cross stops in front of me, piercing me with his hard gaze. "What are you doing here?"

There's suspicion in his tone bordering on accusation.

I look at Ice who's standing by the kitchen table, also waiting for my answer.

"I fell in love with your daughter at the cabin," I tell him. And almost add, *I'm sorry*, to the end of it.

But I'm not sorry. Not at all. So, I won't say it. I'm just sorry I didn't have the guts to tell her all this.

Ice doesn't say anything, his face an immovable, unreadable mask.

My phone chimes from a text, the sound defining in the silence.

It's just a bunch of letters strung together incoherently. But I think I can make out *Bro* and *Mex* among them.

"It's from Summer," I say and hold up my phone.

"I think it's the same assholes who tried to take her in Mexico," I add while Ice is puzzling out the letters.

"We dumped those guys in the river before we crossed the border. They couldn't've survived. They didn't even know her name."

"Seems they found out," Cross says. "We gotta trace them. Now."

"Already on it," Hawk says as rushes over and places his laptop on the kitchen table. "But I'm just gonna trace her phone first. Good thing the idiots didn't take it from her."

The minutes while he does that drag by slower than decades.

"Got it," Hawk finally announces. "It was on the move a moment ago, but now it's just sitting there in the middle of the woods. Here..."

He turns the screen so we can see it on the map. And he's right, the yellow dot that is her phone's signal is just flashing alone amid a sea of green.

"They must've taken her phone and tossed it," Hawk says. "Sorry."

“I’m going there to check,” I say already heading to the door.

“Wait, Edge, we gotta be smart about this,” Ice says but there’s nothing in the world smarter than going after Summer and saving her. And nothing he can say that will stop me.

“I’m going,” I say and exit the apartment then run down the stairs to my bike.

Ice is right behind me when I reach it.

“You can’t talk me out of it,” I tell him.

“And I won’t try,” he says and mounts his bike. “Let’s go.”

We’re not going alone. Hunter, Chance and Jax all come too. And Ruin. Even Cross and Tank.

With all these men behind me, there’s no way I can fail in finding her. In saving her.

But I’d do it alone too. There’s no doubt in my mind about that.

I’m not losing another person I love.

That won’t happen. It can’t.

TWENTY-FIVE

Summer

My phone's buzzing because the creeps who took me didn't find it on me. They took my purse, but not my phone which I stuck in the pocket of my sweatpants after texting Edge back.

I try to reach for it, thinking it must be him, thinking I'm as good as saved. But it's not the chloroform or whatever they drugged me with that's making me unable to move my arms. They tied my hands with fucking zip ties. But like the idiots they clearly are, they did it in the front and not the back.

I manage to reach into my pocket and take out my phone, even though the zip ties are cutting off my circulation so bad my fingers feel like sausages. I can just about see the screen through the black bag over my head.

The van is going over rough terrain. Maybe the forest floor? The roots and rocks we're hitting are making the whole van wobble. Going over a particularly big one nearly knocks the phone right out of my hand.

I type fast, replying to Edge's last text. I'd call my dad, but I know Edge is probably staring at his phone, right now, waiting to hear from me, wondering why I'm not at my apartment like I said I'd be. Ice is most likely asleep since it's the middle of the night.

The van stopped and I only realize it as the back door opens. I got maybe two words in, I hope. I can't see the tiny letters as well as I'd need to through the bag.

"Give me the phone, bitch," the guy who took me snarls.

I scramble away from him as he jumps into the van and press send. At least I hope that's what I did. Because in the next moment the phone is yanked from my hands and a fist connects with the side of my head.

The sound of the door slamming again is the first thing that makes sense again as I try desperately not to lose consciousness. The fact that we're moving again is the next. We're going faster this time, so now when we hit the tree

roots, the whole van lurches into the air. I smell redwoods all around, thick and lush. It's the smell of my childhood, of playing with my sister, and cousin, and friends in the forest that surrounds Sanctuary, the MC's HQ. We were always perfectly safe there, we could go anywhere we liked, there was no danger lurking anywhere.

That's not the case now.

After what feels like hours the van stops again.

This time the guy drags me out of the back and tosses me to the ground. It doesn't hurt, because the soft pine needles cover the ground feet deep. Just like in the forest around Sanctuary. Just like in the forest where Edge and I made love. There will be none of that anymore.

This isn't really a kidnapping. This isn't something anyone can save me from. I feel the knowledge of that deep in my chest. I don't feel drunk anymore, or drugged, or in pain, the adrenaline pumping through my veins seems to have taken care of all that.

"What do you want with me?" I ask, trying to sit up, but I can't get my feet under me.

"Revenge," the guy says. "A life for a life."

"I'm more valuable to you alive," I say, my voice shaking as I realize I actually have nothing to offer him and I'm a really bad talker besides. "I'm young, I can do stuff..."

He and the other guy laugh harshly.

"Hear that? She can do stuff," one of them says.

"Wanna see if it's true?" the other one asks, dark sarcasm thick in his voice.

"Nah, no time. We got dozens of girls prettier than her back at the compound. She just needs to die."

My breath lodges in my throat, expanding painfully. I was right. This is no kidnapping. There will be no rescue mission. Only revenge. And that's the one thing I can promise him.

“You kill me, and my father and his brothers will hunt you down. They’ll kill you and everyone you love—”

“They already killed everyone I love,” the guy snaps. “My brother was my only family.”

“And he shouldn’t have messed with me,” I snarl back.

That earns me a kick in the stomach, which makes me unable to breathe for a couple of seconds.

“How you wanna do this? Just shoot her in the head and be done with it?”

“No,” the grieving brother says. “We do it right. Cut her up, make them hurt when they find her.”

The darkness in his voice makes me shiver and I can’t stop.

“Please, just let me go,” I say. “It’s not too late. I’ll tell them not to go after you. Everything can still work out. We can all still just walk away. Please.”

The guy laughs harshly and kicks me again.

“That’s not an option, you dumb bitch. Never was.”

“We did forget to take her phone,” the other one says. “They could know where we are by now.”

“Shut the hell up,” the first one snaps. “What are you? Chicken shit? We do this and then we disappear. Though I’d love to see the looks on their faces when they find her.”

He pulls a knife from a leather sheath. I don’t see it. I just heard it. And it sounds like a thousand snakes hissing at once. It sounds like death itself slithering for me.

I try to run. I do scramble away. But I have no chance of getting away from them and I know it.

I’m already dead.

At least I got to know love. At least I didn’t bring this on myself and let my father down again. At least it’ll all be over quick.

TWENTY-SIX

Edge

As I ride as fast as I can for the yellow dot that is Summer deep in the forest, a part of my mind is fixed in the memory of the wild ride Ruin and me took out of our hometown. The fear is almost the same, the nausea too, the shock and the shakes as well. But I'm riding towards something here. I'm riding to save a life, not running from death and destruction.

Though there will be that too when I reach my destination. And plenty of it.

Tuning into the killer in me helps drive all those useless, sad memories from my mind.

I've left everyone else behind already. No one dares drive as recklessly as I'm driving. But I feel them right behind me anyway. They won't be late. We won't be late.

We can't be.

The turn off from the main road that will lead me straight to the yellow dot is so narrow and so overgrown, I almost miss it. But I don't.

The road is not a road. It's at best a forest lane, but more a footpath. Twice my father's bike almost buries me under its weight.

I have to slow down. It's the only way.

The tracker on my phone leading me to Summer starts vibrating and beeping fast as I near the spot where the dot last pinged.

It emits a single steady beep when I reach it.

But there's no Summer here. There's nothing but a small clearing surrounded by trees so tall I feel like they're trying to swallow me whole. And it's dark. So fucking dark. Darker than it was on the night my family got killed. Darker than any night I've ever lived through. So dark I don't believe I'll ever see light again.

I find Summer's phone in the undergrowth, the screen cracked from hitting a rock. There's a picture of me on the screen in the Joker mask she painted on my face. I remember her taking that picture right before I made her mine. That seems like a million years ago now. And at the same time, no more than five minutes ago. The heart shaped pendant she gave me to remember her by is heavier than a mountain around my neck.

"What's happening?" Ice asks. "Why'd you stop?"

They're all here and I didn't hear them arrive. I didn't hear anything but Summer's voice telling me she loves me.

I hand him her phone. "She's not here."

There's nothing to say after that so no one does, but the silence is so thick with hurt it's screaming.

"She can't be far," I hear myself say. "I'm going on."

The forest here is vast. I don't even have to check on the map to know it's true. I feel its ancient heart pulsing all around me. And it has Summer. She's a part of it now. I am too. We all are.

It will show me the way to her.

"There's no way we'll find her like this," Ice says.

I feel how much it pains him to say those words. To give up. I'm not giving up.

"I'll find her," I rev up my bike and drive on.

Onwards along the path. She's still alive. She has to be. I'll find her. I have to. And that's all I know.

The going's slow because the path is not a path anymore here. Just forest. But my heart's beating in tune with it now. And it's guiding me. To Summer. To joining her. Wherever she is.

Maybe it's all that time we spent naked in the forest, alone in the moonlight when all this began, but I feel her with me. Her heartbeat is joining the pulsing of the forest, the thudding of my own heart.

Strong at first, but growing fainter.

And there's nothing in front of me but forest. Nothing around me but trees. Tall, suffocatingly oppressive. Trees like the ones that grow over unmarked shallow graves.

I hear the bikes of my brothers behind me and all around me.

I almost miss the van parked amid the trees to the left. It's just a black mound slightly darker than the night.

I rode up to it so fast one of the guys standing next to it has no time to react before I run him down. My bike buries him, and he doesn't move.

Now it's just me, Summer and the guy holding a knife to her throat. A great, big old hunting knife against the delicate skin of her neck that I love kissing so much.

"You think you're on time," the guy snarls at me. "You're too late."

He flicks the knife and a drop of blood forms on Summer's neck. He's wrong. I'm right on time. And I'm not here to talk.

I don't think, I just lunge at him, the element of surprise on my side, making him stumble backwards and remove the knife half an inch from Summer's neck. It's all the opening I need to bump him away from her, knock him to the ground, and start punching his ugly, psycho face with all I got.

Each time my fist connects, something crunches. But it's not enough. I need him to hurt worse. I need him to feel all the fear and all the desperation I felt riding here tonight. I need him to know death is coming and fear it.

"It's OK, Edge," Summer says quietly. "I'm OK. He's dead."

But he's still twitching. He's not dead yet. So I don't stop.

"I need you to hold me, Lucas," she says, laying her hand on my shoulder.

I freeze and stand up. Wrap my arms around her and hold her so tight I don't think I'll ever let go. She leans against me,

soft as a breeze, yet more solid than anything I've ever held in my arms.

The others are here too. I can hear them talking all around us. But I don't hear their words, all I hear is Summer's heart, beating strong and fast.

"I love you," I whisper into her hair.

I haven't said those words to anyone for a very, very long time. I never planned on saying them again. Yet they roll off my tongue as effortlessly as breathing.

"I know," she whispers back. "I love you too."

"Summer, are you all right?" Ice asks and I let her go so she can go to him.

He hugs her tight too, then holds her at arm's length and looks at her.

"You're covered in blood," he says. "Are you cut?"

She looks down at her t-shirt which is red with blood. Then she gasps and looks at me.

"It's your blood, you're bleeding, he cut you."

It would appear that he did, all over. Blood is oozing from my arms and my stomach. But I don't feel any pain.

"It's fine, just a few scratches. I heal fast."

Which is especially true now that she's in my arms again.

I can't read the look on Ice's face. I never can. But he's looking at me like he's trying to read something off mine.

"This is serious then?" he asks.

"Yes, it's very serious," I say and Summer just nods.

He continues looking at me for a few more moments and this time I know exactly what he's thinking. He doesn't even have to say it.

"Hurt her and I'll end you," he says it anyway.

"Never."

Then he cracks a grin and claps me on the shoulder. “Welcome to the family. Now let’s get you sewn up.”

My cuts aren’t as bad as all that. I have no trouble lifting my bike off the guy I ran over. He’s not quite dead yet, but my brothers will take care of that.

And I have no trouble riding out of the woods with Summer on the back of my bike, leaning against me and holding onto me tight like she’ll never let go. And I don’t ever want her to.

TWENTY-SEVEN

Summer

If it were up to Edge, we'd just go back to my apartment and get lost in each other. His words. Not mine. And I wanted that too. But I made him take us to Sanctuary so Doc could take a look at his many cuts anyway. Except for the large gash in his forearm which will need stitches—a gash that had probably saved his life as he blocked a slash from above. All the cuts on his body saved my life.

Doc is suturing him up now. I kept leaping up each time fresh blood started oozing from somewhere. So he asked me to go wait outside. I'm sitting in the gazebo near the entrance to the big mansion that is Sanctuary, an ornate white thing that's been standing here since they built this place back in the nineteenth century. Sanctuary used to be a convalescent hospital back then, a place where the rich could go and get well or die peacefully. But after World War Two, the sole heir turned it into the HQ for the biker club he'd founded. In one way or another, he had lost his entire family to the war. Some fell in battle, others died of grief. No wonder Devil's Nightmare MC became what it is. A band of killers. However much Cross tries to turn the business around, make it just about selling guns, they always return to what they're best at—killing. And right now, I'm so grateful to them for that.

I'm trying hard not to think of any of that though.

Hunter got married right here in this gazebo just a few short months ago.

Harper played the new songs she'd written for the family here after she'd been abducted and saved. Some of those made me cry, others smile with joy. My mom taught me and Eden how to make garlands out of spring flowers here once, a million years ago.

But try as I do to focus on all the good memories, my mind keeps going back to that clearing where I almost lost my life tonight.

My head covered by a black cloth bag, so I couldn't see much, the zip ties cutting into my wrists, so I couldn't move my arms, and my heart racing, sending my blood through my body so fast it was all I heard.

The guy with the knife was almost on top of me, I could feel his heat. I could smell his nasty breath. I thought I was dead.

Then a bike came roaring into the clearing. And I knew it was Edge even before I saw the outline of his body that I'd recognize anywhere as he slammed into the idiot that was about to end my life.

I heard them fighting, but saw almost nothing. Then someone finally freed me from the mask and restraints. The guy who took me was unconscious on the ground by then, his face gone, but Edge was still hitting him.

I stopped him because I needed his arms around me. Only then did I know it was all over.

"There you are," my dad says as he walks up out of the darkness. "Aren't you cold?"

He takes off his jacket and puts it around my shoulders without waiting for me to answer. I didn't think I was cold, but now that I'm wearing his warm jacket, I know I was.

He brought a tumbler of whiskey with him and offers it to me. "Here, for the shock."

"I'm fine, Dad," I tell him, but take the drink anyway. Father of the year over here, but at least he's trying. And at least he's not treating me like I'm ten years old and need to be coddled. He did want me to go to the hospital at first, to get checked out officially, but then he was fine with Doc sticking a band aid over the tiny cut on my neck and declaring I don't have a concussion or any other injuries that some rest won't cure.

"I'm sorry, I know you didn't want me dating Edge," I say. "Or anyone from the MC..."

I stop talking because he's just grinning at me. He wraps his arm around my shoulders and squeezes me tight. "As long

as you're with someone who'll take care of you right, I'm good. That's all me and your mom wanted for you."

"I thought so," I say and lean against him. "But I'm glad you approve too."

Aunt Roxie, Cross' wife and Ice's sister once told me that between her brother and her dad she had to sneak around to date, especially anyone from the MC that her father ran. And that Ice was just as against her dating bikers as their dad had been.

"Edge is a good guy," he says. "You could do worse."

"Wow, that's like a glowing endorsement coming from you," I say, making him chuckle.

Edge is coming towards us, wearing a new clean sweatshirt under his cut. Ice vacates the spot next to me.

"You all fixed up?" he asks him.

"As good as new."

Ice laughs again. "I doubt that, but you'll get there."

Then he offers him his hand. "Thanks for doing what you did back there. I'm in your debt."

Edge claps his arm. "No debt owed. I'd do it all over again anytime."

He looks at me as he says it and my heart just melts into the softest, sweetest, dreamiest pool of light and goodness.

"Let's hope there's never a need to again," Ice says. "Now get some rest, the both of you. And that's an order."

I feel my cheeks heat up and I'm glad it's so dark that they probably can't see me blushing. Because rest is the furthest thing from my mind.

Ice leaves us and as soon as he's out of the gazebo, Edge wraps his arms around me and kisses me lightly.

"All well and good, but I don't think I'll be following that order," he whispers, his lips barely a breath from mine. "You have my back, right?"

“Always,” I say and hold him tight.

“Yeah, me too,” he says. Though he didn’t need to. He’s already proven it. “Now let’s go back to your place.”

“You read my mind.”

He takes my hand and leads me to his bike. And a few moments later, I’m holding onto him much tighter than I need to as we speed down the long driveway and then along the curves of the road into the night. I’m holding on as tight as I am because I want to. Now and forever.

My apartment is a mess from all the coming and going tonight, but that’s a problem for another day. All that matters is that the bed is soft and that we’re together.

His torso and arms are covered with bandages, but that doesn’t stop him from covering me with kisses as I lay naked on the cool sheets. Some are soft and gentle, others full of urgency, need and fire.

Then he lies atop me and slides his throbbing cock into me slowly, kissing me deeply as he pulls back out and repeats. Soon, the soft pool of love and bliss that’s been my heart, expands outward, filling my entire body, made greater by the slow, sensuous way in which he’s taking me. In which he’s joining us.

Soon his breathing and his groans, my breathing and my moans, grow louder, more urgent. His thrusts do too, adding fire to the softness, stoking it higher and higher. The orgasm comes in a flash of flame, consuming me whole, burning away all pain, all sadness, all sorrow. Leaving nothing but hope and love and belonging. And joy. So much joy. Going from nearly dying to this much life and happiness is intoxicating. And it’s only the beginning.

This is the perfect end to this imperfect night. The perfect beginning to what I hope will be a long, long life of loving him. Of loving each other. Of cherishing each other. Of always meeting bad with good.

It’s the last thought I have before I drift off into real dreams. Which I know won’t be nearly as good as the one I’m

living.

TWENTY-EIGHT

Edge

My phone is ringing, and I feel like I've only just closed my eyes. All my various cuts are protesting as I disentangle myself from Summer's arms and go fishing in my jeans for it.

"Sorry, man, but you gotta come to Sanctuary now," Ice says as I pick up. "You'll rest some other time."

"I'll be right there," I mutter, my voice thick with sleep.

When I turn, Summer is sitting in bed, the sheet draped around her legs, her naked breasts making me wish I never got the call. Or at least that I was still dreaming, and this was just a bad one before the good one comes. But I don't get nightmares when I'm with Summer.

"You gotta go?" she asks.

"I gotta, I'm sorry."

I start dressing before I change my mind and just stay with her. In her soft arms, in her warm bed, with her tasty lips on mine.

"It's so hard waiting for you," she says as she glides out of bed and comes to me. "But I understand... it's who you are... It's what you do..."

She sounds like she wants me to tell her it's not true. And I want to. But I can't.

"I'll be careful," I tell her. It's the best I can do.

She picks up my cut from the back of a chair I hung it on last night and hands it to me.

"I mean it," she says. "I understand. But come back to me safe."

She punctuates her words—the words that damn near broke my heart even as they made me the happiest man on earth—with a soft kiss that makes my mind instantly float back to happier times, easier times, times when nothing ever

went wrong for long. Times when I still had my family, when they were all still alive and well.

“I’ll be right back,” I tell her then leave before I change my mind.

The ride to Sanctuary goes by in a flash. It’s not as early as I thought it was and the noon day sun is blinding me the whole way there. Yet another reminder that I should’ve just stayed with Summer.

I find Ice, Cross, and Tank in Cross’ office. Ruin is there too, standing off to the side and looking like he’s not sure he’s actually supposed to be there.

“Trench was nearly killed watching over Summer last night,” Ice tells me. “He’s in the hospital, but it’s touch and go. The bastards shot him and dumped him down a ravine. We didn’t find him until this morning.”

The news wakes me up real quick and snaps me out of my pining over Summer’s bed. I love her, but this is important too. And the thought of a brother almost killed is enough to make me see red and do all that needs doing to get revenge.

“So, we riding against them or what?” I ask.

Last night, there was talk that Trench might be the rat, since he had been guarding Summer, but was nowhere to be found after she was taken.

“That was never a question,” Ice says. “What they did to Summer is reason enough to take them out.”

“We’re just gonna do it sooner rather than later,” Cross says.

“I’m ready, let’s go,” I say.

Cross pierces me with his hard gaze. “No, we need you here.”

“What, no,” I say. “I’m going.”

“And who’s gonna watch over Summer?” Ice asks. “You’re the only one I trust to do that.”

I can’t argue with that, so I don’t even try.

“But there’s more to it than that,” Cross says. “As it stands now, we got the possibles for the snitch narrowed down to three of the brothers,” Cross adds. “Bane, Fossil and Archer. All close friends of yours and Ruin’s.”

I gulp, thinking he’s accusing me of something too. But he grins darkly. “A rat would never take a bullet for me the way you did, Edge. You got nothing to worry about.”

He looks at Ruin, who turns as pale as the bright white walls in this office. “You’re in the clear too.”

The gasp of relief that Ruin lets out would be funny if this wasn’t such a serious conversation.

“I need you two to rekindle your close friendship with those guys,” Cross goes on. “Get them to trust you. Tell them you’re unhappy. Tell them whatever you must to get them to open up.”

I used to be a killer through and through. No soft tissue. No middle ground. The three guys he’s talking about are worse. There’s no trust to be had from those guys. No real friendship. I share a look with Ruin and I’m positive he’s thinking the same thing.

“We’ll get it done,” I say anyway and Ruin nods.

“Good,” Cross says. “Anything you need is at your disposal while we’re gone. Tank will be in charge.”

“We better get started,” I say and get an approving nod from Cross.

Ruin follows me out the door and I can read it in his face he’s about to lay out all the ways this mission will be impossible for us to complete. But Ice catches up to us before he can do that.

“You’ll probably have to sneak around with Summer for a while longer,” he says, and I almost tell him to shut the hell up. But I manage not to. “Tell them I’m not letting you see her. Use that to gain their trust. Something like how you expected more after taking a bullet for Cross.”

“Summer’s not gonna like that,” I say, can’t help it.

Ice grins. “And you’ll know it. But you two already have some practice at keeping secrets.”

Once again, there’s no arguing with his logic.

“I’ll make it work,” I tell him.

“I’m sure you will.”

He goes back to Cross’ office and Ruin and I exit the mansion. We decided to meet up again at the clubhouse after dark, since the three we’re going after aren’t much for being up and about during the day. We don’t talk about the mountain of the task in front of us. There’s no need. We’ll get it done. Whatever it takes.

But first I need to hold Summer some more.

“Told you I’d be right back,” I tell her as she opens the door for me.

She’s still naked, wrapped only in the enticingly see-through sheet.

“And I didn’t believe you,” she says, the sheet dropping as she wraps her arms around my neck. “Sorry about that.”

I lift her up and carry her back to the bedroom, back to the bed that’s still warm and soft like the stuff dreams are made of. Summer’s the stuff dreams are made of. My dreams, every day and every night from right now onward.

“What did they want?” she asks.

“They gave me a job to do,” I tell her. “I get to stay right here, by your side. But we gotta pretend we’re not allowed to be together.”

Her eyes widen, the glint in them as sharp as a knife. “Are you messing with me?”

I shake my head. “Sadly, no. But don’t worry, I’ll make it up to you.”

“You better.”

“You’re my family now,” I tell her. “And I would die for my family.”

All anger leaves her eyes, making them as soft as a peaceful lake somewhere far from anything bad or nasty.

“You mean that?” she whispers.

“With my entire soul,” I say. “Which you helped me find again.”

“You remembered I said that.”

“What you promised,” I correct her. “And you delivered.”

She kisses me so softly it’s like the tiniest breeze against my lips. But it feels like a hurricane in my chest. Only this one isn’t the destroying kind. It’s putting everything right again, making things that were wrong for so long fall back into their proper place.

I kiss her back, harder and deeper. Because it’s time to make one of those dreams that’ll be our lives going forward come true. The first of millions.

EPILOGUE

Three Months Later

Edge

My bedroom at the Devil's Nightmare MC clubhouse is barely big enough for a twin bed, a dresser and a small table and chair. It's now completely empty of the belongings that I've amassed in the last decade, and it still looks tiny.

I say one last silent goodbye to the room that's been my home since I lost my family at eighteen then slam the door shut. And almost run smack into Ruin grinning at me widely.

"I still can't believe you're leaving to move in with a woman," he says. "Never thought I'd see the day."

"Yeah, me neither," I say and grin too.

It's the absolute truth.

Back before Summer, if anyone had asked me whether I'd ever settle down and start a family of my own, I'd have laughed in their face and vowed it would never happen. I'd be completely sure of it too.

But then last night, Summer asked me if I wanted to make the move to her apartment permanent. I'd been spending all my free time there for the past month anyway, ever since Ruin and I successfully carried out the mission Cross set us. All the sneaking around and pretending I can't be with her only made me need her more. Love her more. Which even last night I didn't even think was possible.

Now here I am, less than twelve hours later, all my belongings packed, ready to take her up on the offer. For better or worse. It'll be *for better*.

"When you know, you know, huh?" Ruin asks as he walks with me down the stairs.

He sounds serious like it's not just a throwaway sort of line for him.

"So what's going on with you and Ariel?" I ask, sensing we're no longer talking about me and Summer.

He shrugs and holds the back door open for me.

“I guess you could say we both know, but it’s somehow not enough.”

I’m no good at giving advice of this sort. Used to be I had a different girl in my bed every month. And if any of them happened to *know* something about where our relationship was going, I’d make sure she wasn’t back by the next night.

But it’s different now.

“Man, you just gotta take out all the stops,” I say. “If you want her, take her. Give her what she needs and wants.”

He looks at me like he’s seeing me for the first time.

“I’m serious,” I say. “Life’s too short for wishing and waiting.”

I attach my saddle bags to my bike, fully ready to go put an end to my own wishing and waiting to be with Summer again. Even though it’s only been a few short hours since I saw her last, it’s still somehow too much to bear.

“Dude, love’s really changed you,” he says, sounding at once awed and like he’s trying to change the subject.

“Summer’s changed me,” I say. “Like she promised she would.”

Back at the cabin, when I was still stupidly insisting I couldn’t be with her because of Ice. But I was a different man then. She deserved better than *that* man. Now I’m gonna do everything to be the man she deserves. From now until forever.

He shakes his head. “Go, before I barf from all this sweet talk.”

He laughs as he says it and I grin too. “You should try it too. It’s not a bad place to be.”

He shakes his head, waves his hand and goes back inside.

And I get on my bike and ride to Summer.

She's in the kitchen when I enter the apartment, measuring the spaghetti she's gonna make us for lunch, while wearing an apron that says Kiss the Cook.

"Don't mind if I do," I say as I walk up and scoop her into my arms.

She looks confused. "The apron, I mean."

She smiles wide. "What are you waiting for?"

I kiss her deeply and slowly, savoring every last bit of the softness that is her lips. She tastes like the strawberries that we had for breakfast, like the wind of the ride we took last night, like moonlight itself.

Even back at the cabin, I knew that one taste of her will never be enough. I know it even more clearly now.

"You're really excited to be moving in, aren't you?" she asks as she breaks away from the kiss.

"I'm not gonna lie," I say. "It's probably the best day of my life. Or at least in the top five."

She smiles, her whole face lighting up mischievously. "And to think we almost didn't get to this day."

The memory of the huge hunting knife to her throat flashes through my mind, vivid as the night I saw it for real.

She shakes her head and smiles even wider. "I'm not talking about almost dying. I'm talking about that night at the cabin when you told me there was no way anything would ever happen between us."

"Oh, that," I say and laugh, the terrible memory sinking back down to the bottom of my mind. "Yeah, I'm not gonna promise not to say and do stupid things in the future, but I'm sure gonna try not to."

"And I promise I'm gonna try to keep you from making as many mistakes as I can."

Sassy and catty. Just like I love it.

"Oh, is that so?" I say sternly and pick her up. "Try stopping me now. Lunch can wait."

I carry her to the bedroom. She wraps her arms tight around my neck and kisses me on the way.

“What, no arguments?” I ask as I lay her down.

“Nope,” she says and grins. “This is exactly what I wanted.”

Me too.

Especially after I get her out of her clothes and kiss as much of her perfect body as I can reach. Who needs lunch when I have this? Who needs breathing when I have her? Who needs anything in the world when he has the love and devotion of a woman like Summer?

I sure as hell don't.

And I plan on spending the rest of my life making sure she knows how I feel.

THE END

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