



Wings

Of

Freedom

A.D. Trent

Wings of Freedom

The Freedom Series

By: A.D. Trent

Copyright ©2023 A.D. Trent

10/01/2023

All Rights Reserved.

No part of this publication may be replicated, stored, or transmitted, in any format or any means without written authorization. This is a fictitious production from the author's imagination. Names, characters, places, and accidents are not part of the real world.

Published by A.D. Trent

United States of America

Hardcover ISBN: 9798863081014

Paperback ISBN: 9798861250429

Dedication

To my husband and family, thanks for supporting me.

~A.

Contents

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Epilogue](#)

Prologue

Alex Springfield

I was born and raised in a small town in Northern Kentucky with my younger, by five minutes, twin sister Jasmine. You know the kind of town where everyone knows everyone. And if your parents run a business they expect you to follow in their footsteps. Well, I have no intention of sticking around to do that.

At twenty-four, I know exactly what I want to do and that is not working in the local veterinary office with my mom (Mia). It definitely is not working at the lumber yard with my dad (Tucker). Jasmine, on the other hand, has been working her way toward becoming a veterinarian since her freshman year in high school.

While she has been doing that; I have been dreaming of opening my own coffee/bakery/bookstore since I was thirteen and discovered my love of coffee and romance novels. I even have the name picked out for it: *Wings of Freedom*. I think I want to open it somewhere near the mountains, or maybe a beach town, I'm not sure yet. I know one thing for certain, I am ready for a fresh start.

Ever since I broke up with Justin six months ago, I have been the talk of the town. Justin had been my boyfriend since my freshman year in college. He had started working for my dad right after graduating high school. We met when I came home for spring break my freshman year. I had taken Dad lunch, like I usually did, and when I walked into the office, there he was in his muscular, square jaw glory. Little did I know I'd get swept off my feet, madly in love, only to find out that he had a girlfriend three towns over, and a bad stalking habit.

To say I was ready for a fresh start was an understatement. As I answered the phone at the local bakery, I'm reminded why. Georgia Pierce, the town gossip, calls every Wednesday afternoon to get croissants for her Bible study group.

"Hey sweetie, how are you holding up?" Georgia drawled.

Rolling my eyes inwardly, I sigh, “Just fine, Miss Georgia, what can I get for ya?”

“Well, I know you loved that boy. It’s a shame someone so good looking and sweet as you couldn’t find a nicer man. My nephew Charlie a few towns over is a nice boy. I can give him your number if you’d like?”

Groaning to myself, I squeeze me eyes shut. “That’s okay, Miss Georgia. I appreciate the offer, though. Can I get your usual ready for you?”

Trying to steer the conversation back to business.

Clucking her tongue, Georgia sighs, “Yes, the usual would be fine. Have a nice day, dear.”

Hanging up the phone a bit aggressively, I straighten my shoulders, pull out my phone and start looking at buildings for sale in North Carolina, near the Black Ridge Mountains. A fresh start was exactly what I needed, and I have plenty of money saved up for just that.

Chapter 1

Alex

“Jasmine, I promise I have thought this through. I haven’t been thinking about anything *but* getting out of this town my whole life. I’ve already put a deposit down on the building. It’s right on the highway near Black Ridge Mountain, North Carolina. You’ll love it! You’re off next weekend, right?”

“Yeah, I am and I am going with you. I’m not letting my twin travel all that way by herself. And yes, I know you can take care of yourself, but you also aren’t the only one wanting to get out of here. I’m done with exams this weekend and will have the whole summer to help you set the place up, free of charge. You honestly didn’t think I’d let you go do this without me, did you?” Jasmine states excitedly.

I can’t help but chuckle, “Yeah, I figured as much. I’m ready for an adventure.”

Hanging up the phone, I pull up the tall two-story brick building with a covered porch. My heart is racing just thinking about opening my own business. Pulling up my email, I scroll back down to the deposit I put on my new building, *Black Ridge LLC* lease agreement. Excitement bubbles up with all the possibilities of what’s to come next.

After that phone call with Georgia, I have been itching to get out of this town. I found this building that would pretty much fit my needs. It looks like an open-concept floor plan. It already has a checkout counter since, according to the internet, it was an old hardware store at one point. Best of all it has an apartment above it. I might have to do a little remodeling to the kitchen, but no matter how much work there is, I can’t wait to get started; my parents and sister however are not pleased. They don’t know anyone down there, and my moving so far away has them nervous, to say the least.

Black Ridge Mountain seems to be a pretty decent town from all my research. Aside from the occasional reference from the local newspaper articles of drug busts in the mountains, nothing major though. The building I put a deposit down on is

on the way out of town near a few state parks, on the main highway, across from a bar. There aren't a ton of pictures of the building or the bar. The bar's website doesn't have a whole lot of information on it either, and it doesn't have a social media page. Scrunching my nose, I think to myself, *maybe it's out of business?* All the pictures seem to look okay. It doesn't look too shady, I hope.

Thumbing through the pictures on my phone while I wait for my white chocolate raspberry filled cake to cool, I think about how I will set up each area. I want to have a couple of tables inside for people to sit at; I also want a huge floor-to-ceiling bookshelf where people can borrow and exchange books while they drink their coffee. Maybe I'll get a nice leather sofa, oh, and some rocking chairs for the porch. It was moments like this that I'm thankful for the trust fund I got from my grandparents after they passed.

I had worked my way through college on my own dime. Sure, my parents had chipped in when needed, but I have saved every drop of my trust fund for this exact moment. After getting my business degree, along with a minor in culinary arts, I'm finally ready to spread my wings and take the next step toward my freedom. I thrive on adventure and this town is slowly killing me. I want a new chapter, and not just because of the pitying looks people shoot my way. I want to experience something new. Something only mine.

The timer on the shelf behind my head rings, causing me to snap out of my daydream. I have to finish this cake for a local graduation party. I absolutely love decorating cakes and finding new flavors that work well together. The bell above the door rings just as I'm starting to pipe icing in intricate circles on the cake.

"Just a second," I call.

Placing the icing bag down, I wipe my hands on my apron. With Beth on maternity leave, I'm not sure how she reacted to my notice but hopefully she will make do. She didn't answer when I called her so I emailed her my resignation letter last night. Beth knew I was itching to leave and her maternity leave is almost up. Stepping around the stainless-steel table, I

walk to the pastry counter, and round the corner to see who stopped by.

Chapter 2

Rhett Walker (28 years old)

I've been riding forever it feels like, but this trip has been worth it. Getting to see my newborn niece was the highlight of my year. Seeing my brother Danny's face, when he got to hold his daughter, is a memory I will cherish for a long time.

We have had a bit of a rough life growing up in foster care, but I'm glad to see him so happy. He and his wife are the epitome of happily ever after high school sweethearts. Watching them grow up and become a family has been wonderful, but I can't help but be a little bit jealous of them.

After I graduated high school I enlisted in the Marines. When I got back the only thing that settled my mind was riding my motorcycle and fighting. Having PTSD, I wasn't really able to hold a nine-to-five job. So when Matt from Black Ridge MC (motorcycle club) found me and asked me to prospect; I agreed. It took a while but eventually they made me an enforcer.

Some of our business isn't exactly legal, but most of it is like the Black Ridge Construction Company, D's bar, and the old hardware store across from the bar. Although it went out of business a few years ago so I'm not sure what that building will be in the future. The Black Ridge crew are loyal, family-oriented, and have my back no matter what. Plus they help keep the town of Black Ridge safe so that's always a plus. Especially with the Appalachian Motorcycle Club trying to expand their territory further south.

Just thinking about that group has my fingers turning stark white on the handlebars of my charcoal gray Harley. They are a ruthless bunch thrown out of the American MC Club for not following the rules and then they started their own gang. They have dealings in all sorts of things like cocaine, arms deals, and, worst of all, sex trafficking. We found a semi-truck full of half-starved and terrified women and girls heading south toward Mexico through Black Ridge over three months ago.

Nothing makes my stomach turn more than finding something like that.

The President of our MC, Matt Turner, called me just yesterday, asking me to come back to the clubhouse. Rumor has it the Appalachians have moved into our territory and he wants to have all the enforcers close to home to protect the families. So here I am hightailing it from Chicago.

Stopping off in Northern Kentucky, I need to stretch my legs and maybe get some coffee. Seeing a sign for Beth's Bakery & Coffee shop I pull in. Swinging my long legs over my bike, I stretch, and pull at the edges of my Black Ridge MC leather cut, straightening it. My jeans are a bit dirty from the ride here, but these back roads and highways are way better to travel on than any interstate, even if they are a bit dusty.

Pushing open the bakery door, I'm met with the most delicious smells. I haven't eaten since dinner last night and now my mouth is watering. I walk the short distance across the hard oak floor to the glass pastry display cabinet and eye a lemon blueberry bar. It's not exactly a five-course meal but I'm a sucker for desserts.

"Just a second," a female voice calls.

I was not ready for the smoke show that came around the corner. Dark brown hair, emerald, green eyes, a wide smile with one dimple on her cheek. I'm pretty tall at 6'3" and she must only come up to my shoulder but it was hard to tell with her behind the glass display but, man, was she beautiful.

"Oh, ah, hello," she blushes as she says, "How can I help you?"

I blink trying to peel my eyes away from her but they keep darting back to those twin emerald pools. I've never seen a shade of green so pretty. She's got flour on her cheek and the thought about clearing that flour away, of my fingers lingering on her soft skin has me clearing my throat, "Um hello, can I get a coffee and two lemon blueberry bars? They look delicious."

“Thanks, they are actually a new flavor I’ve been working on. So let me know what you think,” she says. She turns toward the espresso machine and starts making my coffee giving me her back. I take the opportunity to take her in. She is petite but has curves that just beg to be appreciated. It’s been a long time since someone attracted my attention. The steam comes out of the espresso machine and she fumbles slightly noticing my stare.

“Did you bake all this yourself?” I look up and down the display, averting my eyes from her captivating ones, seeing an array of almost every type of cookie, muffin, and pastry I could think of.

Chapter 3

Alex

“Usually I have help but Beth is out on maternity leave. I haven’t seen you around before, just passing through?” I ask, glancing at his motorcycle outside and his leather cut. He is devastatingly handsome in that rugged sort of way. With light blond hair and eyes so icy blue, I feel like he is looking into my soul. Gosh, he is handsome.

“Yep just heading back south,” he eyes the display counter.

“How do you like your coffee?” I ask eyeing his leather cut a bit closer. He has a Black Ridge MC patch on the front left. I stare harder and under, yup, you guessed it Black Mountain, NC is sewn in tiny print under the picture of the mountain. Oh, this is perfect.

“More sugar than coffee, if you know what I mean,” he smiles. And man does it transform his face from ruggedly handsome, to devastatingly so.

“Mind if I pick your brain while I get your lemon bars?” I ask. He looks at me with uncertain curiosity but shrugs and says, “Sure.”

I hand him the coffee in a to-go cup and watch his biceps bulge when he lifts his arm to collect his coffee. *Focus Alex*, I chastise myself. Reaching for a plate I grab his two lemon bars.

“I noticed your Black Ridge logo, does that happen to be out in Black Mountain?” Not beating around the bush I add, “I just put a deposit down on a building near there and was wondering about the area.”

He tilts his head appraising me for a second before he reaches for the plate of lemon bars. Uncomfortable under his scrutiny I wonder what he is looking for. He must have found an answer because when he looks away he says warily, “It’s a small town, but overall it’s nice. You moving down there?”

Usually, I avoid answering any personal questions like that. Especially after Justin turned into a creepy stalker; but this guy, there's something about him that puts me at ease. I glance around for something to do to keep my excitement off my face.

"That's the plan, I'm going to start a little shop just outside of town. If all goes well that is." I walk step for step with him, reaching the cash register, and he pays after finishing the lemon bars. I ask, "Did you like those?"

"They were one of the best desserts I've ever eaten." He grabs his coffee and starts to walk for the door. Just then Georgia Pierce opens the door and he holds it for her. She looks him over in that way she does and he clears his throat as they pass each other through the tight space. He looks over his shoulder, "Well I hope it all works out for you."

Then he's gone, Georgia arches an eyebrow at me. It's been two weeks since that phone call with her but that doesn't stop the look of pity and curiosity crossing her face. Before she can question my previous customers presence I say, "Miss Georgia, so nice to see you. How's your granddaughter?"

Keeping the subject going is the only way to deal with the gossips of this town. Once I've finished up with Georgia, I return to decorating the graduation cake. I need to finish it for pick up tomorrow morning.

A few hours later, Jasmine comes in just as I'm working on the second layer. She calls as she comes around the corner, "Knock, knock! I brought your favorite. Mexican and Diet Coke."

Setting the piping bag down and wiping my hands off, I snag my Mexican food with such excitement I almost rip the brown paper bag. I may bake all day but I hate eating sweets. Mexican food has my whole heart.

"What's the occasion?" I ask.

"It's a peace offering for giving you such a hard time about your move," she says.

I look at the sheepish grin on my sister's face, but I don't miss the concern in her eyes. Things have been a bit tense the last few weeks but she's coming around. My mom on the other hand has been hounding me for information, sending me news articles, and trying to *prepare* me for life without them close by.

My excitement starts to bubble over as I say, "You wanna see the building before we head out in a couple of days? I have a few pictures."

She grabs my phone and thumbs through the pictures and a smile grows on her face. My excitement just keeps growing as she looks at me with amusement and excitement of her own showing in her emerald, green eyes. Eyes that are identical to mine.

"I can't wait to spend your money helping you decorate. This is going to be so awesome. Look at that cherry countertop," she squeezes my hand, "How did Beth take the news?"

I sigh deflating some. Beth had emailed me back just a little while ago, "She didn't take the news well. She's worried with only Molly baking she won't make ends meet. It may sound selfish but I'm not putting this off anymore. I told her six months ago I was looking to leave. So maybe she will hire someone else. Time will tell."

Jasmine nods, "Yeah you've been talking about this a long time. I just thought we'd have more time together this summer here at home. *But,*" she drawls, and pauses dramatically, "I'm excited to see this Black Mountain."

"Well if the *gorgeous* man I had in here earlier is anything to go off of, I'd say we are both in for a real treat!" I wiggle my eyebrows up and down and my sister and I laugh.

"Tell me everything," she says.

So I do. Our relationship has always been easy, I'm not sure if it's a twin thing or if it's just a sister thing. But she's my best friend and there isn't anything we wouldn't do for each other.



At dinner later that night at my parent's house. I'm sitting at their dining room table, thumbing through the meager photos, sharing with Mom and Dad my ideas and plans.

"Shew, Alex this is going to be a big undertaking. Are you sure you don't want me to find a relief vet to cover me for a few days?" Mom asks.

"I'll be okay, Jasmine is coming with me for a few months so we will handle it. But..." I glance at Dad giving my best pleading look, "We are leaving Friday night and I think we should have it pretty well cleaned up by Sunday. Do you think you could bring a load of lumber down and maybe... possibly... build me that bookshelf I was talking about and maybe a few other shelves? I can pay for whatever you need. Just please don't send you-know-who," I plead.

Dad scoffs, "If I had my way he wouldn't be working for me right now anyway, but I can't find another tree climber as good as him to replace him. Plus he has been taking on some more deliveries for us the past few months, which has helped a lot. But I promise not to send him. I'll try to come myself, so you don't have to worry about it."

He squeezes my shoulder and tears prick my eyes. Finally, they are giving me the encouragement and approval I need. Mom catches my expression and pulls me into a hug. "Alex honey, we want you to succeed in anything you do. We are just struggling with you not being close to home. We will do whatever we can to help you."

Releasing the hug I stare at my family truly grateful for them and all they do for me.



Friday comes all too quickly. The town is abuzz with news that I'm leaving so the bakery has been busier than usual. Telling everyone goodbye and trying to order and organize delivery for all the equipment I'll need for my bakery. Plus getting in touch with Matt Turner, my contact with Black Ridge LLC, to see if I need any special permission to remodel the kitchen downstairs and get any other permits I may need before coming down. He has been a huge help, emailing back and forth, and always responding quickly to any questions I may have.

So far I have gotten all my certificates I need for the state, the board of health, and a building permit for the remodeling. I'm having Black Ridge Construction do the remodel in the kitchen but I asked them if I could have the lumber shipped down from my dad's lumberyard. They were extremely accommodating and totally understood the family discount. They worked with Matt and he emailed me a list of lumber I'd need to get started on. So I'm currently on my way to the lumber yard to catch Dad to set it all up.

Pulling into the lumber yard I smile, I love the ebb and flow of this place. The smell of wood and sawdust hanging in the air. It's peaceful chaos. Pulling around to Dad's office, I hold my breath hoping it's him in there and not one of his guys.

Stepping out of the truck, I pass a couple of men and smile politely, they wave back. Reaching Dad's office door, I knock once and before I get the door knob turned, it rips open, out of my hand.

Startled, I jump back trying to get out of the way as Justin comes barreling out of the office. I lose my balance and stumble to the ground, off the two steps going up to the office. He brushes past me not even stopping to help me up, keeping his head down. I don't miss the telltale sign of a black eye

starting and wonder for a second who gave it to him. Dusting off my butt and walking into the office, I don't have to wonder for long as Patrick, Dad's right-hand man is shaking his hand out, walking back to the desk.

"Stupid idiot," he huffs.

"Everything okay, Patrick?" I ask hesitantly.

"Nothing you need to concern yourself with hun. That boy shouldn't bother you again." He switches the subject before I can question him further; I don't mind though because no one but Jasmine knows about Justin and his stalker tendencies, "Shouldn't you be on the road by now? Your pops told me you were heading out today."

"Uh, yeah I was just coming by to see if I could get a shipment of lumber sent down for the remodel. The construction crew would like to get started as soon as possible," I hand him the list. He eyes it as I ask, "When do you think you could get it down there?"

Glancing at the list one more time, he turns to the computer. Wrinkling his brow he scrolls through the schedule, "Ol' Tommy needs to make a delivery down that way in a few days, I think he can squeeze them in together. Should be there by the end of the week if you've got a spot cleaned out for it."

Smiling, I give Patrick a hug, "That would be awesome Pat. Thank you!"

I release him and he huffs out a laugh, "No problem darlin, we will miss you around here," he sighs, "Don't be a stranger, okay?"

I smile one more time and text Jasmine as I head out the door.

Me: Heading to the house to grab my stuff. You ready for an adventure?

Jasmine: EEK!!!! I'm packed and ready. Even

got your favorite snacks for the road. See you in a bit.

Walking down the steps, I go towards my truck, tucking my phone back in my pocket. I glance around and notice Justin standing by his bright yellow jeep. He is on the phone, cussing up a storm, and kicks his tire.

“I don’t care what you have to do just fucking fix it!” he yells. He hangs up his phone just as I’m getting into my truck. He glares at me. I quickly look away and head out. I haven’t seen him since I broke up with him months ago. Well, aside from the stalking phase.

He’s still as handsome as ever, but I’m sure the devil was a handsome man at one point too. I had to block his number right after the breakup because he just wouldn’t leave well enough alone. You’d think being caught cheating would make it obvious that there was no future for us. But blocking his number and having Dad step in was the only way to make him leave me alone. Not that I told Dad about Justin’s stalking phase, lord that would have ended badly if I had.

I pull out of the lot and head to get Jasmine.

Chapter 4

Rhett

Driving seven hours on my Harley after stopping to get that coffee, I'm finally pulling onto the winding road heading towards the clubhouse. Looks like I'm one of the last enforcers to arrive based on the bikes lined up outside. The clubhouse is more like a mansion on the mountain. With plenty of bedrooms, five bathrooms, a huge kitchen, living room, dining room, and outdoor patio overlooking the mountain.

It's truly a sight to look at. It's a huge cabin with big floor-to-ceiling bulletproof windows on the front. This is a sanctuary for a lot of us. After I got out of the Marines, I was a mess, drinking and fighting my way through underground fight clubs. I was in a rage after my platoon got hit by that I.E.D.

There were fifteen of us. Most of us went through boot camp together, then special forces training. We had a target in Iraq that we needed to rescue. Some high-level Iraqi general that had intel that we needed. I don't pretend to know the details of why we needed him. Just that the order came and we were supposed to go bring him back to base and extract information out of him. We had a plan.

But once we got ambushed and that I.E.D. exploded all hell broke loose. Our unit was scattered between abandoned buildings. We all kept getting pinned down, getting pushed further and further apart. Finally, our platoon commander called in an air strike and it hit. But it hit where over half our team was holed up. James and I were the only ones to make it out of that shitstorm and that's only because he carried my broken ass out of there. I was shot multiple times and had lost too much blood to walk. After we got back home, he went back and reenlisted while I spiraled; my body and mind *unfit* for duty; medically discharged. That is until Matt found me.

Matt had been at one of the underground fights I was in, meeting a client. I'd been working my way through the underground circuit for over six months. Beating the life out of anyone who wanted to take a swing at me. That particular

fight I was in a rage, almost blacked out; I didn't notice or care that I pounded this guy over and over again.

Not caring that he was unconscious, when the fight ended with someone pulling me off the bloody, unrecognizable man. I hopped on my bike outside the abandoned warehouse as Matt pulled his bike in front of me. He looked at me with no pity in his eyes, just understanding and said, *'Follow me man, I have something I want to show you.'*

He brought me here, my sanctuary ever since, well aside from the travel I do for the club, and the occasional trip to see my family in Chicago.

Stepping into the clubhouse, it's organized chaos. The office door opens and Matt steps out, "Ah, just the man I was waiting for, follow me."

I follow him into his office where he has a map laid out on his desk of the Black Mountain area. There are a few markers on the map: ten are red, four are yellow, and it looks like we are blue. I take the map in, memorizing the layout of the markers. Matt just waits for me to say something.

I sigh, "They seem to be getting braver by the day, it seems."

Matt nods his head, "The red is their housing it seems. Small shacks surrounding the yellow markers. Which are either weapons caches or storage containers full of what we are assuming is cocaine, or women. They keep them pretty heavily guarded. The conservation officers stopped by today to fill us in. They are outnumbered and subtly asked if we could help out a bit. They aren't exactly sure how they are clearing enough land without notice for the storage containers but they're ready to move in when we are."

I nod, "You got a plan, or do I need to go in and scope it out a bit better with Rex?"

Rex is an ex-military sniper that doesn't talk much. Based on the scars and old burn marks on his face, I probably wouldn't talk much either, but we get along just fine.

Matt looks at me warily like I won't agree with whatever he is thinking, he says, "I have a plan, but I'm not sure you are

going to like it.”

He has a slight smirk on his face and a dangerous look in his eye. If there is one thing I know about Matt Turner, when he gets that look it's either going to be a hell of a lot of fun, or extremely dangerous. His bright green eyes shine with mischief and danger.

I smile and shake my head. My fingers itching at the possibility of action. “What do you have in mind?”

I may have PTSD but it has been almost a year since my last bad episode. I can mostly keep my demons at bay, but I haven't been in a war zone since I've been back, so I'm hoping this doesn't turn into what I think it will, a war.

Our mountain is big. But not big enough to share with sex traffickers. Matt runs his fingers through his dark brown hair, eyeing a box in the corner. I turn and see some automatic rifles, a box of C4, and a few sniper rifles.

“Well it seems they have a base just north of us, six miles east of highway 80. They must have built a decent sized cabin up there because the conservation officers stumbled across it when they were looking for some lost hikers. We have been staking it out the past couple of days with the drone we got from Sam at the Forestry Fire Department. It looks like they have a meeting every morning with about ten men and then they all disperse to the red markers.” He points his finger to the map, “So, the plan is to disrupt their meeting tomorrow morning at 0600 sharp. I'd like to use the C4 as a distraction but I don't want to hurt any women if they have some stashed with them. So we hijack their weapons caches, then turn any women and drugs over to our contact with the police station. They will keep our name out of the news as always, and we get to help keep our town safe.”

I look at the terrain between the hideout and the highway. It's rough terrain, no trails that we know of lead to the cabin. So getting up there at night is going to be difficult.

“Rex and I can stage up here and here,” I point to two high points on the map, “Just in case anyone gets past you guys. How many men are we taking?”

Matt glances at the same spot on the map eyeing the terrain, “It will be a rough hike. They have ten men, I don’t know if they are trained or not. I was thinking we would take ten of us up there. Four of us enter the front of the cabin, two enter the back, two enter the side; you and Rex staged up with night vision until we are ready.”

I nod in agreement. That part of the forest is pretty dense, the sun probably won’t shine in until 0730.

“Let’s do it.”



Staging up on a boulder near the cabin, I monitor my surroundings. The hike up here wasn’t as bad as we were expecting. They have a rough-cut road off a fire break, not far from the highway. Breathing deep, I focus on the job at hand. The guys should all be in position. My ear comm whispers with confirmation that two of our men are at the back door. Matt and his crew are just coming around the building as someone opens the front door.

“Hold,” I hear Matt whisper.

A tall dirty man in his mid-forties with a beer belly comes out. He turns toward the bushes to the right of the porch, unzips his pants and starts to relieve himself, right next to Matt’s shoulder. I train my crosshair on him, waiting for Matt’s signal. Matt seems to become one with the house as I watch him through my scope. I see the strain as he tries to control himself. I’m sure the instinct to reach up and just kill the man is hard to ignore. Finally the man saunters back inside. I see Matt hold his Beretta at the ready and he slowly makes his way to the front door with four of our men behind him.

“Breach,” he says calmly over the ear piece.

I take a deep breath, sweep the area through my scope and focus. No movement outside. There’s a small shed in the back

of the property I'm keeping one eye on, but from the sounds coming from the house, things seem to be going well. There have only been a handful of gunshots, then silence. I'm sweeping the area but there isn't any action outside. That's okay by me.

Finally, Bricker, the MC Vice President, comes out of the house with the man from earlier handcuffed. He tosses him to his knees. Bricker looks in my direction and waves me down with an all clear. Taking that as my queue, I leave my post.

"This scum, can you believe him? They had two women chained up in there. Beat to a pulp," Bricker spits on the ground.

"Did you find out what they are storing up here? Weapons or something else?" I ask ready to be done with these bastards. After our last raid on the semi-truck, I'm not overly anxious to look in the shed.

"A little bit of everything from the sounds of it. Matt called the police and they are on their way up. I'm a little disappointed they gave up without much of a fight, but their boss or whatever they call him isn't here."

The police force in Black Mountain is extremely small. So dealing with something like this is impossible for them, and going through the proper channels takes too long to make a difference. That's where we come in.

About twenty minutes goes by, we lead their men outside handcuffed and on their knees. There are eight of them, ranging from around thirty-five years old to sixty. All look mean, dirty, and unkempt. I walk over to the shed at the back of the property. Dread sinking in my stomach, hopefully it's just weapons. Judging by the smell though I doubt it. I take an axe I found lying next to a pile of chopped wood and smash the lock off the door. The shed can't be more than five feet wide and five feet long.

When I open the door I'm shocked, women are stuffed inside. Literally stuffed, no room to sit or turn, and the smell coming out of the shed is nauseating. I take a step back, lower my gun and raise my hands in surrender trying not to gag. "I'm not

going to hurt you. Please come out and the police will be here shortly to take you home.”

A tall skin and bones brunette drops her head, “Come.”

She ushers another woman out and they huddle close together as the other women follow. I stand in awe as woman after woman rushes out of the shed clinging to one another. Some aren't strong enough to hold themselves up, others help them. They start sitting on the forest floor and I wish I had some blankets for them. The last woman walks out, seven women in total. All range in age and ethnicity.

Just as I'm starting to turn towards the house to find some blankets something catches my eye in the shed. A glint of metal. There on the dirty shed floor lay three women, lifeless. The glint of metal is a slim wedding band. Skin and bones, matted hair, gray skin. I know they have been dead a while, but when I look back at the seven women watching me, I know I have to check for a pulse for their sakes.

Entering the cabin I hold my breath. I check for a pulse on each one. I know it's pointless but I have to check for the pleading eyes at my back. As I rise from checking the last one, I'm bombarded with a memory of another time, another lifeless girl's body under sand and rubble. I push it back, thinking, *I'm not in Iraq*. I step out of the shed, close my eyes, and breathe in the mountain air. Knowing we saved most of these women sets my memories back in focus. The police and fire department finally arrive and are tending to the women. Matt walks over.

“Let's get out of here. The less we are around the better,” he glances down at his watch, “Shit I need to hurry, I've got a renter to set up at the hardware store in a few hours.”

I'm not sure what story the police and Matt came up with and I don't really care. My job is to keep our town, our mountain, and our brothers' families safe. That sole job is one of the only things that has kept me sane this past year. Having a purpose, being needed, wanted, and useful.

Chapter 5

Alex

Jasmine rode with me down to Black Ridge Mountain. Dad said he would have one of the guys drive her car down when he comes to build my shelves. We are having a great road trip. Music blaring, snacks flowing, and the laughter between us makes my heart even lighter than getting my own business up and going.

“What do you want to accomplish first?” Jasmine asks around a bite of a Twizzler.

“Well, I’d like to clean everything, then decide where to start. Aside from the shelves Dad is coming down to build; we really can’t set anything up until the kitchen is done. So I guess once we clean and organize downstairs we should start on the apartment.” I glance in the rearview mirror again at my mattress and bedframe making sure it’s riding okay. The apartment is a two bedroom so we will have to buy some stuff for the guest room. I was honestly surprised that everything I own fits into my truck for one trip.

The drive down has been stunning, but I’m ready to get there. The GPS says we have about fifteen minutes left.

“How about we make a list of everything we need to get at the store once we get unloaded,” I suggested.

Jasmine wiggles her eyebrows, excitement gleaming in her eyes, “Oh, I get to start spending your money already! I’m so excited.”

The list takes up the rest of the drive. By the time I’m pulling in next to the two-story brick building with the white front porch, I’m guessing that we will have another truck full of stuff after we are done. I pull my phone out and glance at Jasmine, “I’m so nervous. Matt and I have only ever emailed, but he said to call him when we got here.”

Jasmine sighs, reaches over, and squeezes my hand, “Don’t worry we have each other, a gun in the glove box, and my cunning sense of humor to stave off any awkwardness.”

She wiggles her eyebrows, shimmies her shoulders, and hops out of the truck. My sister may seem a confident ball of energy, but it's just a front. She hides her self-doubt well, and I know this trip is just a distraction to keep her mind off of school and everything going on in her life. So if she is looking for a distraction, I'll happily accept her company.

I pull out my phone and put it to my ear. It rings once, "Alex you're early. I'll be right over."

The line goes dead. I'm standing there blinking in surprise. Matt's voice is surprisingly young. I had this vision in my head of a man in his fifties, bald, big belly with wrinkles. Now...Now I don't know what to think.

Jasmine looks at me thoughtfully as I tell her what I was thinking. "Hmm, well, maybe he just sounds really young. How long did he say it would be before he gets here."

"He didn't," I say as I walk up onto the porch. A smile stretching across my face as I take in the massive porch. I can just picture it four white rocking chairs with two round whiskey barrel tables between, "Come on let's window peep!"

Jasmine claps her hands and jumps up and down, "Eek, I can't wait to get inside!"

Just as her foot is stepping onto the first step a jet-black Harley pulls into the parking lot. Stepping closer to me, Jasmine glances sidelong at me, worry lining her face, and says, "Should we be worried?"

Squaring my shoulders, I take a deep breath and step off the porch with Jasmine at my heels. Walking past my truck, a tall man with jet black hair, broad shoulders, and bright green eyes, that seem to take in everything all at once, comes to a stop in front of us. His demeanor demands respect and attention. There's a hint of excitement in his eyes and they bounce back and forth between me and Jasmine.

"Well I wasn't expecting twins but it's a nice surprise. I'm Matt Turner. It's nice to finally put a name with a face," his deep voice drawls. Jasmine tenses up beside me, her hand brushing mine. I think I feel her tremble.

I stretch out my hand, “It’s nice to put a name with your face as well, I’m Alex, and this is my sister, Jasmine.”

Jasmine reaches out a hand, her cheeks turning the tiniest shade of pink, saying quietly, “Nice to meet you.”

I glance at my sister. Never have I seen her...this shy before.

He shakes her hand and holds it for a beat too long while studying her face, then he turns, saying, “Well let me show you around. Here’s your keys. I just changed the locks so you two will have a key and I have one back at the office.”

As he turns, I notice his leather cut. Black Ridge MC is printed on the back with a mountain, just like the man that came into my bakery. *Interesting*. He turns to make sure we are following and I notice on the front it says **President** in big silver letters. *Very interesting*.

We step through the front door and I shriek with excitement. The room could use a fresh coat of paint, it has dark wooden floors with ornately carved cherry trim. The counter top matches the trim perfectly with an enamel coating shining on top. The bottom of the register counter could use some work, but overall it’s perfect!

“Oh my gosh this is perfect! The pictures didn’t do it justice. Jasmine, can you picture it?” I walk quickly around the room, “The cash register here, the bookshelves here, a leather sofa, two tables, the dessert display! God, it’s finally happening.”

I turn around and I notice Jasmine is as far away from Matt as humanly possible. He is looking at her with, is that interest? Curiosity? Or annoyance? *Hmm, fascinating*.

“It’s going to be great, Alex,” Jasmine says, her excitement is starting to come back as she looks around at the space.

“We can paint in here, right?” she asks, eyeing Matt warily.

“You can do whatever you want. The old kitchen is this way. I started to have the construction team demo it since you said you wanted to totally redo it. So watch your step.” Matt ushers us in.

He is right, it's a wreck. Drywall has been ripped out and walls have been knocked down so the storage room and the kitchen are all one space. I needed it to be so I have plenty of room to work, and I needed room for a small walk-in fridge and deep freezer. I spin in a circle taking it all in, aware that Matt is watching our every move with an unreadable expression on his face. Jasmine is smiling ear to ear watching me as well. I go through the layout I want with both of them listening attentively. Jasmine taking notes on her phone of things I haven't ordered yet.

"I'll get the construction crew to get rid of this wall too then. It's load bearing so you'll have a couple pillars in the way but it will open it up some more for you. Come on, I'll show you the apartment."

We come around a corner and take the stairs up, I'm leading the way followed by Jasmine then Matt. "The key to the front door also unlocks this one too."

I open the door and walk into the open living room-kitchen area. The walls are a slate gray with white trim. The hardwood floors are dark just like downstairs. There isn't any furniture so we will have to take a few trips to town, but maybe there's a place that can deliver. As we walk through the apartment, taking it all in, we hear the rumble of what sounds like several bikes. Matt glances out the window, "Let me call one of the guys, they will help you unload your heavy stuff."

"Oh that's not..." Jasmine starts but he leaves no room for argument as he pulls out his phone and gives Jasmine a no-nonsense look.

"Hey Bricker, can you send a few guys over to unload Alex's truck?" he hangs up his phone not even waiting on a reply.

"Rude," I hear Jasmine huff quietly. Matt glances sidelong at her but doesn't say anything. His green eyes a little brighter with something flashing in them, I smile and clap my hands trying to ease the weird tension between them.

"Well, let's get started!"

We make our way back downstairs and out to the porch. I notice the bar across the street, D's bar, is packed full with motorcycles in the parking lot. I pause, worry leaking past my excitement and glance at Matt, "Is it safe here?"

He huffs a laugh.

"Alex, we may look rough and rugged, and some of us are, but I promise you those guys," he points across the street, "Are some of the safest men to be around. I do not allow scum in my club, and that bar belongs to me and my sister. Same as this building. You two are under my protection, I'm not sure if back home you had a motorcycle club around, but here it means something."

He looks across the street as two burly looking men come out. He motions as he continues to speak, "Come on let me introduce you and then I need to get back to the clubhouse."

"Clubhouse?" I ask.

Matt smiles as he steps off the porch, "Every MC needs a clubhouse."

Walking over to the two men he grabs each of their hands and gives them a pat on the back with a smile. I start to step down off the porch as Jasmine grabs my hand, "Okay I know you're excited, but are you sure about this? They are a motorcycle *gang* Alex, a *gang*," she whisper hisses.

I glance at Matt who is looking at us curiously. I don't get a bad vibe from him, in fact he seems almost brotherly to me. I shrug, "Like you said. We have each other, a gun, and your charming sense of humor. What could go wrong?" I pause, "Except what happened to that charming sense of humor?"

She avoids my stare and pushes me lightly towards the three men.

"Ladies, this is Bricker, he is the Vice President of the *gang*," he enunciates the last word glancing at Jasmine sheepishly almost, "And this is Rex. Don't mind his looks, he's ex-military."

Rex grunts, or maybe growls, in affirmation, and Bricker nods. I look cautiously at both men, neither give me any bad vibes in

fact the only thing I feel is, safe, oddly enough. Rex has a few burns on his face, like maybe he was in an explosion. But I try not to judge people on their looks. I shake hands with both men, Matt heads over to his bike and we start to unload the truck.

Bricker and Rex don't say much. Jasmine and I gather the small stuff and make multiple trips up the steps to the apartment while Bricker and Rex work in silence carrying the big stuff and they barely break a sweat.

Once the heavy stuff is all unloaded, we say goodbye to Bricker and Rex. As they are leaving, Bricker turns over his shoulder, "Don't work too hard, and if you're hungry the bar serves a pretty decent meal. The guys know to steer clear of you until Matt introduces you."

He gives us a two-finger salute and goes across the street. As the day had gone on, Jasmine seemed to be more comfortable around Bricker and Rex, so that's a plus.

"Well are you hungry? Do you want to unpack some more, or go to town for the bare necessities?"

Jasmine looks at me exhaustion in her gaze, "Well it's past dinner time, so why don't we make the bed, head over to the bar for dinner, and then we go to town first thing in the morning with fresh eyes."

"Sounds good to me, I'm starving. Let's change clothes first, I feel filthy."

After we freshen up I put skinny jeans, a white t-shirt and throw my brown hair up in a messy bun. Jasmine is wearing bell bottom jeans and a pink baby doll tank top with a white cover up over her arm.

"Just in case it's cold in there," she says.

We lock up and walk across to the bar. Which seems to be even more packed than earlier based on the bikes lined up in the lot.

We cross the street, open the bar door, step over the threshold, and stand side-by-side while our eyes adjust to the lighting. The bar was pretty loud with multiple conversations when we

walk in. Almost all the tables are full with men and women sporting some kind of leathery outfit. Leather cuts, leather pants.... So much leather. I look for an open table but stop once the door closes behind us...silence. Every conversation has stopped it seems and you could hear a pen drop as everyone's eyes turn towards us. *Well this is awkward.*

Chapter 6

Rhett

I'm shooting pool, talking with Bricker, when the door opens and the bar is sent into stunned silence. No outsiders ever come in here. I look toward the door assessing for a threat but instead I stare shell-shocked at the woman in front of me. It's her, the baker from Kentucky. She's even more beautiful today than she was then, although I'm not sure which one she is, twins I'll be damned.

They are both stunningly beautiful with an innocence about them that brings out my protective side. Before I can even move, Bricker's voice breaks the silence.

"Guys please welcome the Springfields, Alex and Jasmine. Alex is renting the old hardware store to turn it into a bakery," his booming voice bounces off the walls, "Please let them eat in peace until Matt or I introduce you personally."

He winks at the women and points toward a long table toward the back of the bar. Alex and Jasmine head for the table and join Bricker. I can't help but watch the exchange.

Twin one whispers, "Are you sure it's okay to be here?"

Twin two whispers, "Yeah, that was a little intimidating."

Bricker smiles, "I'm sure. Here's a menu, order whatever you want, on the house."

I can't stand still any longer. I go sit next to Bricker. Twin two's eyes light up with recognition.

"Well, well, well had I known those lemon blueberry bars were going to follow me home, I wouldn't have been daydreaming about them this morning," I drawl. She laughs, emerald, green eyes dancing.

"And had I known I was seeing you so soon I would've strapped a trailer to your bike," she grins at me, "I guess I never did introduce myself. I'm Alex and this is Jasmine."

Her sister nods at me. Daphne, the manager, and waitress of the bar, comes over to take their order, she winks at Bricker and then walks away.

Bricker smiles great big. He nods towards Daphne's retreating back, "That's my Old Lady Daphne. She is Matt's sister. If you need anything and we aren't here, just ask her."

Alex follows his gaze, nods her understanding, and returns a curious look back towards me.

"Well, I'm Rhett. I didn't realize the building you were looking into was the old hardware store. You should've hounded me harder for information." I tease. Seeing her smile lights up something inside me that's been dormant for so long.

Jasmine's eyes are bouncing between Alex and myself with caution, she whispers, "He's the one you were talking about?"

My eyebrows shoot up in question. Alex nods, "Mhmm."

Her cheeks flushing a little at being caught talking about me, she continues, "I didn't hound you for information, because I didn't know your club owned the building. And...I was concerned you might be a bit on the dangerous side. What if you turned out to be a serial killer or something?"

She shrugs; Bricker bursts out laughing.

"Old Rhett here?" he chuckles pointing his thumb at me, "Ex-Marine, loyal to a fault, honest even when you don't want him to be, and can be a bit dangerous when needed. But he isn't a serial killer, far from it actually."

Alex and Jasmine seem to relax at the fact that I was in the Marines. They exchange a look I can't decipher, ending with Jasmine shrugging. She seems to settle in, obviously deciding we aren't bad people.

Just then the bar door opens and Matt walks in, stalking towards our table. He looks around the bar, grabs the white jacket from the back of Jasmine's chair and drapes it over her bare shoulders. She tenses and glares at him while shrugging his hands off her shoulders. He glares back. *Well, that's new.*

“I see you’ve decided to introduce yourself,” he glares at me next, almost like he is being territorial.

“No introduction necessary, I met Alex on my ride down from seeing my brother,” Matt visibly relaxes, so I add, “Although I didn’t know Alex was a twin, and two of you pretty little things running around here may require a correction a few times. You guys are identical, I’m bound to get you confused.”

Matt glares at me again, but if I’m being honest with myself there is no way I’d mistake Alex for Jasmine. Sure they look identical but Alex is stunning in the way she carries herself. The confidence she has and the way she lights up a room. Jasmine is beautiful too, but she doesn’t capture my attention like Alex does. She seems shy. It’s almost like Alex is a magnet and I’m drawn to her.

Bricker is chuckling under his breath, clearly picking up the stay away vibes Matt is oozing out of his skin. Alex looks up at him cautiously, tightens her lips and looks at her sister with concern. I see her reach under the table and take Jasmine’s hand offering some sort of comfort. Why, I’m not sure, but clearly things between Matt and Jasmine got off to an interesting start. Trying to ease the tension I ask Alex, “So what’s your big plan for the building.”

Her eyes light up as she goes into detail about the plans she has. I know some of the club members are listening with open curiosity, some of them are openly staring, while others are more subtle. She tells about her goals for the bakery, the bookstore, and of course the coffee side of things. Jasmine has started to relax now that Matt has pulled up a chair next to me, across from her. She is actively avoiding his gaze and totally focused on her sister’s animated run down of her plans. Daphne brings the twins their food and joins us sitting on Bricker’s lap.

“God, I can’t wait for you to be open. I’m going to be a permanent fixture in front of your espresso machine! We haven’t had a good coffee house in town in ages. Are you taking orders for cakes and cookies yet? Bricker’s birthday is coming up soon and I’d love to pick your brain about what I have in mind.”

Alex lights up even more, “Gosh yes! I’m so excited to get started. I’ll happily take orders.” She’s looking at Matt, “When do you think the kitchen will be done? The lumber should be here by the end of the week.”

Matt looks at Bricker, “Well I was going to put your crew on this one, Bricker. We need to tear out another wall, add some support beams and a few outlets. What do you think?”

Bricker rubs his hands over Daphne’s back, “Well I’d say we could have it done in two weeks, and once all your equipment gets here we can have the guys install it for you. When was your delivery coming with your appliances?”

“Next week, do I need to push it back? Or can we store it in the front?” Alex folds her hands together on the table and I’m fighting the urge to cover them with my own. *What has gotten into me? I’m not usually one to fall for someone in two meetings. Heck, I haven’t had a serious relationship since I left for the Marines.* But all I can think about is how soft her skin must be and wanting to rub my thumb across her knuckles.

I tune back into the conversation as Bricker and Daphne get up to leave and Bricker saying, “I’ll be over tomorrow to take a look at that wall to see what all I need to bring with me.”

Alex smiles, pushing her plate of almost finished cheese fries away from her, “Sounds good to me!”

“You ready to head back?” Jasmine asks Alex and eyes Matt warily, “I’m ready for some much needed rest.”

Alex smiles at me, “Well I guess I’ll be seeing you around.”

With that they head out. Matt’s hands are clenched around his beer so tight his knuckles are white.

“Prez, what’s up with you? You okay?” I ask so no one else can hear me. He just grunts and heads towards his office. *Okay then, I’ll leave that alone.*

Chapter 7

Alex

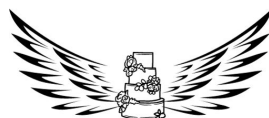
As we walk back to the apartment, I wrap my arm around Jasmine, “So, are you going to tell me what made you hate Matt? Or am I going to be left being your buffer? We literally just met him. How can you hate him already?”

Jasmine shrugs, “It’s just his whole vibe that gets under my skin. Did you see the way he put my jacket on me? Like he covered me up so no one would see me,” she sighs, “I don’t know how to explain it. He got off his bike all six foot-five tall, dark, and handsome with his southern drawl and I panicked. My heart and brain threw up my defenses. He didn’t really even say anything to me, he just kept looking at me with those damn penetrating green eyes like he could see into my soul, like he wanted to own me.”

She looks at me with confusion and uncertainty. Jasmine has been too busy to have a serious relationship, but that’s never stopped her from appreciating handsome men.

I squeeze her shoulders, “I don’t get a bad vibe from him, maybe just steer clear of him while you’re here, if he makes you uncomfortable. They all seem nice enough to me, and Rhett, isn’t he gorgeous? I almost spit out my drink when he walked over and sat down.”

“Yeah he is handsome, and Matt doesn’t make me uncomfortable. It’s just,” she sighs as we enter the apartment, “Never mind, let’s get some rest before we go shopping.”



Jasmine and I spent the morning unpacking the essentials in the apartment. I would rather be getting the downstairs ready for paint but this is necessary, “You wanna take a break from this and head downstairs to work for a bit?”

We still haven't gone to the store yet so breakfast consisted of granola bars and water. "Yeah, sounds good. I got all my clothes and stuff hung up in the guest room, but honestly I'm tired of looking at them. Let's go get started."

Walking downstairs and heading into the main shop area, I say, "There is so much dust from the kitchen demo. I'm sure there will be more but hopefully if I hang some plastic over the door it won't be bad. I'd like to get this room cleaned and painted before the lumber delivery comes at the end of next week."

Jasmine nods, taking everything in. She turns and heads out of the room, saying over her shoulder, "I think I saw some buckets and rags in the mud room. I'll go fill them up and find a broom."

I look around and smile like a cat that ate a canary. *My dream is finally within my grasp! I can't wait for people to come through the door and the bell to ring, the espresso machine humming in the background, and the smell of fresh baked croissants wafting through the air.*

Jasmine comes back carrying our cleaning supplies and I pull myself out of my daydream. Tossing my hair in a messy bun, I pull out my phone and find my Cleaning Playlist. Jasmine smiles broadly as *Pony* by Ginuwine comes on.

"Nothing motivates me more than the image of Channing Tatum and this song passing through my mind," Jasmine laughs.

"I couldn't agree more." Cranking the music I grab the broom from her and head to the far corner starting to knock down all the cob webs. Jasmine finds a ladder and starts washing the walls down going behind me. I walk over and open the door on the porch to let some of the fresh morning air in and hopefully some of the dust out.

The music is thrumming so loud through the room, drowning out all outside noise, I get in a zone when I clean, much like baking, my mind goes blank and I just relax and listen to the music, maybe dance a little. You know, just let my guard down and cut loose. *Pour some Sugar on me* by Def Leppard comes on and Jasmine starts flicking water on me and I can't help but

do a little pole dance with the broom. We are cackling like loons when we hear a female voice shout, “Well had I known this was a party I would have brought tequila.”

I yelp, jumping at the unexpected voice. Looking up, I see Daphne and another woman standing in the doorway coming from the porch. Daphne is shaking her head, grinning at me. She and the other woman are wearing skinny jeans, black biker boots and a white V-neck t-shirt. I’m a little jealous about how sexy they look in such a simple outfit. I’m sure I look like a total mess. I’m covered head to toe in dust with cobwebs in my hair. My athletic shorts are covered in old paint from when I painted my last apartment and I’m pretty sure that they say *bootylicious* on the back. I turn down the music still grinning, “Sorry, I didn’t realize I had the music so loud.”

“Oh honey, no big deal. I just wanted to come by and bring you this, since I doubt you’ve had time to get your coffee maker unpacked.” Daphne hands me two plain coffee to-go cups and I hand one up to Jasmine who is still on the ladder.

“You are a life saver!” Jasmine says happily, she lives off coffee. I glance at the woman next to her and Daphne must realize we haven’t met yet.

“Oh right, this is Piper. She works with me at the bar and hangs out at the clubhouse sometimes. I wanted to introduce you guys and invite you out for our weekly girls’ night tonight. We didn’t really get a chance to talk last night, and I want to get to know my neighbors a bit better,” she says with a genuine smile on her face. Daphne has this way about her that makes you feel like she’s the girl next door. I have a feeling we will get along just fine.

“What are you guys doing for girls’ night? And who all is going?” I ask.

“Well I know you haven’t met any of the ladies but me, but I think you will like them fine enough. We were going to hit the Mexican restaurant for some margaritas. They have *the* best mango marg you have ever tasted,” Daphne shrugs, “And who doesn’t love a good margarita.”

Piper nods in agreement, “Their food is pretty killer too. It’s my favorite place in town to eat.”

Jasmine glances at me and shrugs, “Alex loves Mexican food. I’m in if you are.”

“What the heck, I can’t pass up Mexican... ever,” I smile sheepishly. We hear a bike pulling in and Daphne smiles a gooey lovesick smile.

“There’s my man,” she calls out the door.

“Hey darlin’. I missed you already and had to track you down for this,” Bricker says as he climbs the steps of the porch two at a time; getting to her, he slides his hand up her neck, bends her backwards, and gives her a deep lust-filled kiss. I look away not wanting to intrude on their moment.

Bricker pulls back and laughs, “That will have to be continued later.” He looks around the open shop space, “You girls are already making a big dent in the clean up! I’ll bring some plastic with me in the next day or two to hang up so it will keep the dust out.”

“That’s fine. I was planning on going to the store later to get some groceries and some paint. Maybe look for a good furniture store.”

Daphne steps further into the room looking around. “If you go to K & E Designs in town, Kayden can hook you up with some furniture and stuff. She is Everett’s Old Lady and will be at girls’ night tonight. It’s right on Main Street. She has some really amazing pieces and they are reasonably priced. Plus the prospects can bring anything heavy back for you when you’re ready.”

“Thanks, I will stop there first! I can’t wait to get everything in here,” I agree. Bricker goes into the kitchen with all of us following.

“I know you told Matt how you wanted this laid out but why don’t you go through it one more time with me so I know how many outlets and stuff you need put in.” Bricker pulls out a pocket notebook to take notes.

Daphne places a hand on his bicep to get his attention, “I gotta get the bar ready for lunch later but call me when you head out okay?”

She kisses him bye and heads for the door. Bricker watches Daphne leave smiling ear to ear and I can’t help but want what they have one day. He only has eyes for her and it’s so sweet. This big burley man is a cinnamon roll for his Old Lady.

“It was nice to meet you guys, I’ll see you tonight,” Piper says over her shoulder.

I look at Bricker and smile. The big softie! I jump right in, “Okay, tell me if this is too much work and I can adjust my plan if needed.”

The cabinets and walls have all been ripped out of the kitchen so we are starting from total scratch. I go into details about where I need my cabinets, how I would love for my counter tops to be stainless steel so they are easy to clean, and where I need all my equipment.

“I don’t think it will be too much at all. This building is older so I may just wire you a new breaker box specifically for the kitchen in the mud room so you will have easy access and plenty of room for everything you want to put on it. We can build shelving for your mixers and stuff too, just let me know where you’d like them and we will mount them to the wall.”

Jasmine adds in the idea of adding a water spigot in the laundry room for my mop bucket, and maybe putting in a window so I can see out into the front shop. Bricker writes everything down and seems satisfied with the plan we have set in motion. He starts sketching out a few things for his own needs and Jasmine and I head back into the front to continue cleaning.

We hear another bike rumble in, not long after and a knock drags my attention to the open front door.

“I figured you two would be elbows deep in dust already this morning,” Rhett says as he enters.

“Hey! I wondered whose bike was rumbling past. Sorry to disappoint you but I haven’t made any lunchtime desserts yet,”

I chuckle.

“Well actually that’s why I was stopping in. I was going to see if you guys wanted to grab lunch with me at the bar again. Daphne makes a really good, breaded tenderloin. On me of course,” Rhett walks over to the counter and leans against it casually. His eyes roaming over the space but stopping on me. I am immediately aware of my outfit again and my face heats with glorified embarrassment and I do everything in my power to let the floor swallow me. I quickly turn my body so my ass is to the wall. *My Bootylicious shorts...What the hell was I thinking? I should have thrown them away after college!*

“Uh we...uh,” I can’t find my voice past the embarrassment and Jasmine saves the day.

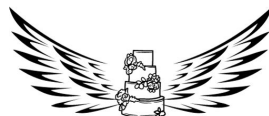
“We would love to but can you give us a minute to head upstairs and clean up. I’m covered in dust.”

I smile gratefully at my sister. We may not have twin telepathy but she knows me to my very core.

Rhett’s eyes roam over my body from my pale pink converse shoes all the way up to my hair. His eyes are lit with amusement and something deeper I’m not ready to read into yet. *Please let the floor swallow me now!*

“Sure thing. I’ll just go talk to Bricker while I wait if that’s okay.”

I nod and make a beeline for the stairs. My ass sticking to the wall out of his sight. The last thing I want is for him to see *that!* Jasmine follows, laughing her ass off as I slide around the wall to the staircase never letting my backside see the light of day.



“It’s fine. No way he saw the back of your shorts,” Jasmine giggles trying to hide the shit eating grin on her face. She is

enjoying my embarrassment a bit too much for my liking, but that's okay.

"Ugh, why, why does the world hate me?" I throw my head back dramatically as I look in the mirror. Yep those would be spiderwebs in my hair. Jasmine laughs while turning on the shower.

"Here get in, I'll just go get my clothes together while I'm waiting," she says as she walks out the bathroom door.

We rush getting ready and I may or may not have put on makeup specifically for Rhett. We head downstairs and find Matt, Rhett, Bricker, and another man leaning over a laptop. It's got a map of some kind pulled up with red, yellow, and blue markers on it.

"See isn't this handy?" the new man says. He has the same shade of brown hair as Bricker and their facial features are pretty similar. Rhett notices me in the doorway and a smile lights up his face.

"Hey, this is Cole. He's Bricker's younger brother," Rhett points. Cole turns and nods. Smiling a boyish smile, I'd say he's at most twenty-five. His eyes drift between me and Jasmine and his smile grows.

"Twins, huh? This could get interesting." Cole eyes Matt and laughs.

Bricker smacks him, grunting, "Behave."

"Are you guys ready for lunch?" Rhett asks ignoring the two. Matt on the other hand is shooting daggers at Cole. I nod and grab my purse out of the mud room. Heading out to the porch, the guys follow us out. Jasmine comes up next to me.

"Guess we are having lunch with everyone," she whispers so only I can hear. I shrug and head across the street. These guys don't bother me. They are actually pretty decent men from what I can tell.

We sit down around a round table in the corner of the bar and Piper comes over to take our order. She places a hand on the new guy's shoulder, "Hey hun, what can I get you guys to drink?"

We all place our order and Piper walks away. I lean over to Rhett and ask, “Is Cole, Piper’s old man or boyfriend or whatever?”

Bricker barks a laugh. “Now that’s funny! Nah Piper and Cole just have a casual thing.”

Cole smiles and nods in our direction. Matt whispers something in Jasmine’s ear and she looks down and blushes.

Our lunches come out and the small talk is flowing easily between all of us. Rhett starts telling me about a few places in town along with the K & E place Daphne had mentioned earlier.

“I can take you tomorrow, if you want, and show you both around town,” he says nonchalantly.

Jasmine nudges my leg under the table and I take that as a yes. She seems way more comfortable around everyone today.

“That would be fantastic, actually. I wasn’t sure about where to really start. I love to support other local businesses but it’s hard to find all the right ones.”

“Great, I’ll pick you guys up in the morning, if that’s okay?”

Jasmine pipes up, “Only if you bring coffee. We haven’t gotten a coffee machine yet. And I may die if I don’t get my fix.”

We all chuckle and finish our lunches, which were actually really delicious. Walking out of the bar, Rhett grabs my hand and holds me back from the group. Bricker is chatting with Jasmine about their dog and the behavioral issues they have been having. Apparently the poor thing is having separation anxiety so bad he is shredding all the rugs in the house.

Rhett stands there just staring at my face for a minute and I take the time to really appreciate his features. The hard lines of his clean-shaven jaw, his devastating blue eyes, and the way his hair curls a little at his ears. Clearing his throat, “Thank you for letting me show you around town tomorrow. I didn’t much care for the idea of you wandering around by yourselves.”

His voice is low, vibrating through me. Normally I would bristle at a comment like that. I am an independent woman who can definitely take care of herself. But the soft look on his face makes me hold my tongue, and if I am being honest, spending the day with him sounds exciting.

“Well, I look forward to it,” I say; Rhett is still holding my hand gently and the heat from it is sending goosebumps up my arm, “I should get back before Jasmine busts a blood vessel from glaring at Matt.”



We both chuckle and head across the street.

I’m just curling my hair when the doorbell rings.

“I got it,” Jasmine calls from down the hall.

I put the finishing touches on my hair and head into the living room. I hear laughter coming from the stairwell and Jasmine and Daphne emerge.

“Hey, I was going to just text you but I realized I didn’t have your number. I’m heading home really quick to change but I wanted to let you know Ophelia is going to be our DD tonight. She has a minivan so we can all easily ride together. So if you want we can swing by in about thirty minutes and pick you guys up?” Daphne says leaning against the kitchen counter.

“That would be great!” Jasmine says, grabbing a bottle of water out of the fridge.

“Perfect! Text me so I have your number and I’ll let you know when we are on our way,” Daphne grabs the pen and paper I have laying on the counter and scribbles her number on it, “I’m so excited! Okay see you in a few!”

She shimmies her shoulders and heads out the door. Jasmine and I finish getting ready when the text comes in.

Daphne: *The party has arrived. You ready?*

Me: *Coming down now.*

We met them in the back lot and Daphne opens the side door. As we slide into the van, she makes the introductions. We already know Piper who is sitting in the very back of the van by Jasmine. Ophelia who is driving, they call her Lia, and she is a very pretty petite blonde.

Kayden is sitting in the passenger seat, her long brown hair curled perfectly around her face and shoulders. Daphne and I are in the captain seats in the middle.

“So Lia is Axel’s Old Lady. I’m sure you will meet him at some point. You will love their daughter, Layana. She has all of us wrapped around her tiny little fingers. And Kayden is Everett’s Old Lady. She’s the one I told you about with K & E Designs,” she waves a hand toward the backseat, “You already know Piper.”

I smile politely to them. They continue chatting amongst themselves, apparently Lia works at the dentist office and had a client she was trying to take impressions on today for a mouth guard but couldn’t get it done. She giggles, “The poor man just kept gagging over and over. I felt bad for him, but he was a mountain of a man like Everett and I couldn’t help but laugh at the whole scene. I tried everything, even numbing agents and he still couldn’t take it.”

The ladies laugh and joke like they’ve known each other all their lives. It is so easy to feel comfortable with them, like I could belong here.

We make it to the Mexican restaurant as the ladies keep talking about each of their days. Telling one story or another. They ask Jasmine why she chose vet med, and how long she has left.

“It’s honestly the only field that really fits me to a T. I love animals and with my mom being a vet it just makes sense,” she glances at me cautiously, “Um as far as how long I have left... Well, I actually finished early.”

My eyes bulge, I croak, “You what?”

“Sorry, you had so much going on I just didn’t tell you, or anyone for that matter.”

“Why wouldn’t you tell us? This is huge news! We should have been celebrating! Mom is going to have a fit that she didn’t hear this before you left.”

“Well because if I would have told mom I finished early, she would have had me do my externship at her office and, as much as I love our mom, I honestly don’t want to work for her. So I was waiting until I decided my next steps. Then you decided you were moving, so I took the summer off. I’ve got feelers in a few places between here and home. I’m still waiting to hear back from a couple,” she shrugs in explanation.

“Wow Jaz, that’s amazing! I’m sure mom will understand. You two are so alike I always wondered if you’d be a good fit working together anyways. So where are you wanting to actually do your externship?” I ask selfishly hoping it’s close by.

We park the car and head inside the Mexican restaurant. It has a welcoming vibe and it’s not overly busy just yet. So the hostess says we won’t have to wait for a table.

“Well actually Asheville has a cardiology department that is top of the line. They can even do pacemakers! I’d give my left leg to be able to do it there. So I’m hoping they will call me. Plus I’d be able to stay near you. But they said I wouldn’t hear back until the end of the summer. So I’m just going to wait. Worst case scenario I go back home, no harm done,” she shrugs nonchalantly.

Daphne follows the hostess to our table, saying over her shoulder to Jasmine, “Well, I for one hope you get it. It would be so nice to have both of you sticking around.”

We get to our seats, place our drink orders. A small family of four stops to say hello to the Old Ladies. Making conversation and asking how everyone’s family is doing. Apparently the Old Ladies have a community outreach program that this

family helps with. They discuss the upcoming barbeque for the women's shelter in a few weeks. It's nice to see the small-town vibe, it was something I worried I may miss...as much as I sometimes hated it back home.

Our drinks arrive causing the family to move on. Lia asks, "So Alex how did you end up wanting your own bakery? What got you started?"

My cheeks heat a little, I hate being the center of conversation, so I'm going to blame the margarita instead of all their eyes turning toward me, "Well, I was never really good at anything else. I used to bake with my grandma and we would deliver baked goods to the nursing homes around the area. I always love how food can make people light up. I actually am not a huge fan of sweets, but I love the challenge of making different flavors pair together. When I got a job in high school at Beth's Bakery I would make small batches of odds and ends pastries or cakes for people to try. They would love them and eventually after I graduated, I finished culinary arts school and my business degree. Beth made me her head baker. Everything just kind of fell into place. I love coffee and making different seasonal drinks so that went hand in hand with baking," I sigh, reminiscing, "As far as owning my own shop... Well that came much later."

I pause, letting the waiter take our orders. When he leaves I continue, "I have this dream of having a place for people to come and drink their coffee, work on their laptops, or enjoy a great book. I want to have a reading corner. I'd like to set it up like this: say Lia comes by and is reading a fantastic book, after she is finished she can put it on the shelf and Daphne can come by and borrow it next in exchange for a good book of her own. If that makes sense."

"That sounds wonderful!" Kayden says, "I am always looking for a good read and I never know where to look in the library. Lord knows the workers don't always know the kind of books I need, and Book-Tok is great. But it would be nice to be able to talk with other likeminded people about the book. Even if it's Lia's smut she loves so much," Kayden winks at Lia who shrugs smiling unashamed.

“I can’t wait for this! I have a few books I can donate to your shelves if you need me too,” Piper adds excitedly.

“Well I’m glad you guys like the idea. I was worried it wouldn’t make sense. I know we have a library but this will feel more personable and maybe not as overwhelming for some. And it will be free.”

Our food comes and the conversation continues to flow. These women are fantastic. They are funny and welcoming. I don’t think I have felt genuinely connected to a group of women like this before. There is no competition between them, no need to gossip, or hassle each other. You can tell they treat each other like a family. It’s refreshing!

Chapter 8

Rhett

I'm sitting out on the patio at the clubhouse when Matt and Bricker come around the side of the house. With the girls out for the night most of the men have come to the clubhouse to hang out. They each take a wicker chair around the propane fireplace in the center of the patio.

Matt seems a bit tense, but that's not necessarily unusual with everything going on with the Appalachian MC. After we raided their cabin in the woods, they shrank back to their own turf, maybe they are regrouping. It's honestly hard to say. They seem to be like cockroaches: tough to kill and persistently coming back.

"I heard you're taking the twins around town tomorrow," Matt says, watching me from over the fire.

"I am," I say, wondering where this conversation is heading.

"Are you interested in one of them?" he asks, eyeing me suspiciously.

I huff a laugh, "Easy caveman, I have no interest in Jasmine aside from getting to know her as a friend. Alex is the one capturing my attention. So just keep those daggers you're shooting at me to yourself."

Bricker lets out a low chuckle, "Matty-Boy you need to tone that possessive shit down a notch, you'll scare Jaz off before you even get to know her. Have you even had a private conversation with her yet?"

"Don't call me that Bricker," he gives him a dry look, "And I am not acting like a caveman, I was just curious if you needed...help."

"Help?" I pause, "Do you want to hold my hand while I drive?" I ask deadpan just to tick him off. His jaw ticks.

"Look, okay fine I am acting like a caveman, but I just want to get to know her better," he pauses thoughtfully, "Do you want to meet me for lunch after you guys go shopping? I'd like to

take Alex to the electronics store so she can help pick out a security system. With the Appalachians in the wind, I'd like to ramp up security at the bar and the bakery. Just to be safe."

"Well I don't mind grabbing lunch with you, but that really isn't my decision, now is it?"

Bricker chuckles as Matt stares me down, "Dang Rhett, you just gotta push all his buttons, don't ya?"

I chuckle too and break eye contact.

"Here," Matt says, handing me his phone with Alex's number pulled up on it, "You text her and ask if it's okay. Since you want to get to know her better."

"You're helping me so I'll return the favor?" I ask incredulously it's like high school all over again.

He just smirks.

Me: Hey, I hope this is okay. Matt gave me your number. He wants to have us meet him for lunch tomorrow so we can all go to the electronics store to pick out your security system. Is that okay?-Rhett

Alex: It's fine by me! And I don't mind that he gave you my number at all.

I wait a bit contemplating if I should continue the conversation. I finally decide to say heck with it and just go for it.

Me: How's girls night going? Need me to come save you?

It takes her a few minutes to respond but I don't expect her to be glued to her phone all night. Matt and Bricker head out, but

my mind won't settle for a while. It's nearly impossible sometimes for me to fall asleep. Today has been a bit difficult for some reason. There doesn't seem to be a reason for my flashbacks. Sometimes it's words that trigger my memories, and other times it's just my head. Maybe it's exhaustion.

Alex: *If I said come save me, would you?*

Alex: *And then where would my knight in shining armor take me?*

Before I can respond to that...

Alex: *In all seriousness these ladies are amazing, and I'm having fun. But that doesn't mean I don't need a backup plan...just in case.*

Me: *I'm glad you like them, and as far as the backup plan goes, I have a few things in mind.*

Alex: *Hmm...like?*

My mind forms all sorts of scenarios. Almost none of them are first date appropriate with a girl like Alex. So I push the images aside and type.

Me: *I'd ride in on my charcoal stallion and whisk you up the mountain for a nice private tour in the moonlight.*

Me: Have you ever ridden a motorcycle before?

Part of me hopes that she hasn't, I'd love to give her that first ride.

Alex: Surprisingly enough my dad has a bike, but I haven't ridden with him since I was a teenager. I love it though.

Alex: Jasmine says hello by the way. We are heading back to the apartment. Thankful for a DD, these girls weren't teasing when they said they wanted to let loose.

Me: Hello back, and I'm glad Lia is driving. You don't sound drunk. But yes, they can drink me under the table any day of the week.

Alex: Well it's been awhile since I went drinking. Two large margs, and a few shots. I'm definitely ready for bed. What time were you coming in the morning?

Me: Yeah that'll do it. How does 10 sound? That way you can sleep it off. I'll bring you both coffee. How do you like it?

Alex: Mine black as pitch. Jaz takes hers like

you, light as milk and too sweet to drink. We are home. Goodnight, Rhett see you tomorrow.

Me: Good night little lady. Sweet dreams.

Pocketing my phone I head into the clubhouse to my room. I chuckle to myself, *She remembers the way I take my coffee.*



I woke up early and after my grueling workout in the gym downstairs at the clubhouse and my four-mile run. I ran into town and grabbed breakfast and coffee for Jasmine and Alex. I wasn't sure what they'd like so I got a bit of everything: bagels, breakfast burritos, and a few sandwiches with hashbrowns.

Okay, so I may have gotten enough to feed a small army but it's fine.

It's about 9:45 a.m. when I pull in and all the curtains are drawn in the apartment. *Hmm, wonder if they are even awake yet.* I head to the back door and ring the bell for the apartment. My phone pings.

Alex: Doors open. Come on up.

I open the door and head up the stairs. The apartment door is cracked open so I go ahead and enter. I carry all the food to the kitchen counter. Neither Alex nor Jasmine are in sight. I think I hear a hairdryer going, then it cuts off and I hear bare feet running across the floor.

“Just a second,” Alex calls and I can't help the smile forming on my face remembering that first day we met.

I lay out my breakfast buffet with the coffees and open a couple cabinets to find some plates. Jasmine comes in the kitchen, her eyes basically shut and her hair in a messy bun. She's wearing athletic shorts and a baggie t-shirt, looking like she just crawled out of bed. Alex is hot on her heels, but she is perfectly put together. She has her straight hair down, a tan tank top hugs her petite torso and jean shorts exposing long tan legs with gray ankle booties. *God she's beautiful.* I clench my hands into fists when she walks over to me. Her intoxicating perfume envelopes me and it takes all my willpower not to touch her.

"Morning," Jasmine mumbles as she sits on a stool by the kitchen island putting her head down on her arms.

"Morning," I hand her a coffee and she barely raises her head.

"Mm thank gawd," Jasmine mumbles clutching the coffee like it's a life line.

I chuckle, "Not a morning person I take it?"

Alex laughs while grabbing a plate, "She definitely is not. You didn't have to get all this but thank you. I still haven't went and got groceries yet."

"I figured as much. Plus I was starving after my run this morning so," I shrug.

Alex eyes me over top of her coffee cup, appreciatively, "Hmm...I love a good run and a good work out. Is there a good gym nearby?"

"No there isn't, but the clubhouse has one. We could ask Matt if you could use it. I'm not sure how comfortable you'd be with all the guys in and out." *I for one don't want anyone else eyeing those long lean legs.*

We dig into breakfast exchanging a bit of small talk while we wait for Jasmine to come to the land of the living.

"You about ready Jaz?" Alex pokes her shoulder.

Jasmine lifts her head off the counter, and mumbles, "Let-me-go-change."

Or at least that's what it sounded like. Alex just chuckles and shakes her head. She gets up to put the food away and I start to clear the dishes, working in a comfortable silence. Her arm brushes mine and her breath hitches. She must have felt the zap of electricity like I did.

We are standing shoulder to shoulder next to the sink and I look down at our arms touching, then up to those emerald pools. Her mouth opens slightly but the moment is broken when Jasmine walks back in.

"Okay I'm alive, let's go," Jasmine says. Alex jumps, startled. Jasmine looks between us and arches a brow.

I clear my throat and grab my coffee, "Perfect, let's hit the road. Where would you like to go first?"

Alex grabs a list off the fridge, "Well I'd like to furnish the apartment today, and get paint for the store front and supplies for that. Then maybe in a day or so we can furnish downstairs."

I nod, "Okay so I'd say furniture will probably take the longest so why don't we go get your paint stuff first and then we can go to K and E?"

Alex agrees and we head out. Picking out paint should have been simple. At least to me, painting is simple, but apparently I was wrong. Alex and Jasmine are currently holding up four different color swatches. All look fairly similar to me; they all look like a creamy honey color, not quite caramel, but not quite tan either. It's pretty comical watching the twins go back and forth. Their facial expressions are so similar.

Alex will hold up a color next to the cedar and walnut wood samples we picked up on the way back here. I guess she's seeing how well the colors look together, Jasmine will scrunch her nose. Then Jasmine will repeat the process. Occasionally one of them picks up a ridiculous color like Fuchsia, and they giggle. Watching them together reminds me of the days my brother and I were inseparable, and my heart pangs a little.

It feels like a lifetime ago. We were best friends and then when I got back after my deployment I landed at his place. It only

took one Fourth of July party to ruin it all. The fireworks had sent me into action, I had my brother's best friend pinned into the dirt, his arm wrenched back ready to snap it as I yelled at my brother to run. Thankfully his girlfriend knew what was happening and she'd crouched in front of me and tried to calm me down. Once I realized what happened, I ran, hid, fought, until Matt found me. Then I was able to work through some things and get my relationship with my brother back. It's not like it used to be. I don't think it ever will be. I had left my brother in the dark about my past.

I shake my head and focus on the task at hand. Paint. Personally I like a neutral cream color, but I keep my opinions to myself and sit back and watch Alex and Jasmine at work.

It's taken about 25 minutes, but finally they agree on a color. I can't help but say, "*Spruce Fix*, to me it looks nothing like a Spruce but I'm clearly out of my element. If I named it, I would go with buckskin brown."

Alex laughs, "Well that'd be better than Petunia yellow. That one was awful!"

Jasmine chuckles. We gather the rest of the supplies for painting and check out. Then we head over to K and E.

"Girls! I've been looking forward to this visit all day," Kayden shouts from the back. She is helping Everett hang a mirror behind a bedroom suite.

"Me too, look at all this! You have so many unique pieces. I don't know where to start," Alex twirls in a circle, her hair falling into her smiling face and I tuck my hands in my pockets so I don't reach out and tuck it behind her ear.

"Why don't you tell me what room your working on first and then we can go from there," Kayden suggests, getting down from the ladder.

Everett follows and shakes my hand, "Been awhile man, I'm glad you're back home."

"Yeah it's been a long few months. I'm glad to be back for a while. Hopefully Matt keeps me around for a bit. I'd like to do

some house hunting this time. The clubhouse is great but I think I'm ready to have my own space," I shrug.

"Well you haven't been there that long, and your room will always be there, whatever you decide. Doc was asking after you too," Everett says, turning to Alex and Jasmine.

Alex is looking at us curiously and I can see the questions flashing through her mind.

"This is Alex and Jasmine that I was telling you about, honey," Kayden says.

After the introductions are made, Kayden sweeps the girls off toward the bedroom suites. Everett and I sit on one of the gray loveseats. He's talking about everything that's happened in the club while I've been gone but I'm not really listening.

My eyes are tracking Alex as she weaves through the bedroom suites and the side tables. She and the other women are laughing about something, her head is thrown back and her musical laughter is ringing out. Jasmine talks quickly but I can't hear what she said and it's Kayden's turn to laugh hysterically.

"The Old Ladies really like those two," Everett nods toward them, "You just showing them around to be neighborly?"

I arch an eyebrow and he chuckles, raising his hands, "Kayden was asking."

Of course, she was a nosey Old Lady. You even glance at someone remotely attractive and they are ready to pounce on you. I'm not about to be their gossip piece so I mutter, "We will see."

The girls come back over and Alex eyes the couch we are sitting on. Suddenly, she flops down between Everett and I, dramatically sighing. Her entire side is pressing against mine causing goosebumps to rise on my arms.

"Why is shopping so exhausting?" Alex asks and Kayden chuckles flopping down on the couch opposite of us. Everett gets up, tosses his water bottle, and moves to sit next to her, tugging her into his side.

“This one is perfect,” Alex says not scooting over at all but almost snuggling closer. I move my arm around the back of the couch, making room for her, my heart racing, Jasmine rolls her eyes dramatically.

“Rhett, do you mind if we load this in your truck? Kayden said they will deliver the bedroom suite for the guest room and side tables later.”

“Not a problem,” I reluctantly stand. Everett and I get busy loading the truck.

“Let’s start noting down what you want for the store,” Kayden suggests. Alex starts walking around again, and I can’t help but let my eyes rove over her. Kayden is placing sticky notes on items for delivery next week. Jasmine is carrying some curtains behind me as we head toward the loading bay.

“Careful,” she sing-songs. I look back at her and she is grinning mischievously. I arch a brow in question and she chuckles, pointing to her own chin as she says, “You got a little drool on your chin.”

I duck my head smiling broadly, “I’m that obvious?”

Jasmine nods enthusiastically, “Oh yeah. But she seems to enjoy it so,” she shrugs, “As long as she’s happy I won’t have to scare you off. She’s been through a lot lately. She deserves to be happy.”

“What do you mean?” I ask curiously.

“That is not my story to tell, but when she’s ready she’ll tell you,” Jasmine passes me and starts to load the smaller items. Now my curiosity has really peaked. I gotta get her by herself so we can get to know each other.

After Everett and I load the truck the girls and I head out to lunch with Matt. Jasmine and Alex have been keeping the conversation going all afternoon. The relationship between these two is refreshing; their laughter is contagious, but once we started to head toward the Italian restaurant, Jasmine has tensed up. I eye her in the back seat.

“You alright?” I’m not one to be nosey but Jasmine and Matt haven’t gotten along since the beginning. So lunch today

should be entertaining.

Chapter 9

Jasmine

I nod and Alex looks at me skeptically, saying, “You don’t have to come if you don’t want to. I’m sure Rhett wouldn’t mind dropping you off at the apartment.”

I sigh heavily, “I’m fine guys, I promise.”

Honestly they act like I’m terrified to see Matt. The only reason I’ve gone quiet is because the man unnerves me.

We pull into the packed parking lot and head inside, my heart is pounding, my palms are sweating. *Gosh why does my body react this way around him.*

The restaurant is booming, but that’s to be expected. They serve the best Italian food around, Rhett had said earlier. Matt already has us a table and we make our way to it. He eyes me with cautious curiosity as I sit down next to him. My leg accidentally brushes his and he immediately glares at me. My breath hitches and I look away. *My gosh why does he glare at me? Does he hate me or something?*

Alex and Rhett take the seats across from us and the waiter takes our drink order. Alex grabs a breadstick out of the basket and dips it into the alfredo sauce on the table.

“So good,” she says in-between bites.

“I told you. They have the best alfredo around,” Rhett digs in as well.

“So I was thinking about what kind of security system you may want. I don’t know how familiar you are with them. So Miles and I picked out three really good ones, but we can look at others if you like,” Matt says while piling salad on his plate. Just the thought of food right now has my stomach flipping. His elbow brushes my arm and I can feel my heartbeat in my ears. I try to scoot my chair a few inches away from him, and he definitely notices because there’s that glare again, but this one seems different. There is a flicker of heat behind it. I can feel those penetrated green eyes down in my soul.

“I’m not a tech guru or anything; Jasmine is much better at that. I just want to have a camera in the front and maybe one at the back door. Jaz can you pick one?” Alex asks, giving me her biggest pleading smile, the one I always give in to. I’m not a huge tech person. But Alex is lucky if she can get her online bakery orders to go through without having issues.

I give in hesitantly, “Sure, just show me what you have in mind.”

I reluctantly look at Matt and he hands me the papers. We stare at each other for what feels like a minute and I can’t quite gather what his eyes are saying. His eyes soften a touch when his fingers brush mine. They linger on my palm and my heart speeds up. His eyes dart to my mouth and they flash with interest...maybe, but that can’t be right.

He was just glaring at me a second ago. I shake myself mentally and take the papers and thumb through them, “I’d say this one. It seems pretty user friendly and it links to your cell phone. Plus if something happens there can be a backup signal sent to a secondary device along with the police.”

“That’s the one I’m getting for the bar. It has the best reviews too,” Matt says. His attention going back to his food. *That wasn’t so bad. Maybe I can tolerate the man for a bit longer.*

As the meal goes on I start to relax a bit as the conversation continues around me. Alex fills Matt in on the delivery for the apartment and how she set another delivery up for the end of next week for the store. He gives her an update on the progress with the kitchen.

Once the food comes out the conversation turns to small talk and I tune out most of it. Every time I take a bite of my food my arm seems to brush Matt’s. It’s almost like he is trying to touch me. I can’t scoot my chair over any more or else I’ll be off the table. I can feel my face turning redder with every brush of my arm and Alex keeps eyeing me, silently asking what’s wrong.

When Matt’s leg presses against mine I can’t handle it anymore, I snap, practically yelling, “Are you trying to sit on top of me? Can you scoot over some?”

Alex's eyes go wide, reprimanding quietly, "Jaz."

Rhett is just staring at me in intrigued anticipation and Matt, *ugh is that a freaking smile gracing his gorgeous stupid face. God he almost looks smug! What is wrong with him?*

Matt shrugs and continues to eat. Not removing his leg from mine but **nudging me!**

Did he really just nudge me like he is egging me on! I can't with this man. One minute he's glaring, the next minute it's almost like he's trying to flirt with me.

I eat the last of my food, not caring if I make a scene. I toss my napkin on my plate and stand up sharply. Matt's leg jerks like I startled him, "Thanks for lunch. I'll meet you two in the truck."

I turn and walk out. *Good lord what has gotten into me, that man is driving me insane. And I don't even know him!*

Chapter 10

Alex

I feel like I'm still buzzing from yesterday. Between the shopping trip and the accidental touches from Rhett all day, it has kept my mind buzzing. I don't know what it is about that man but every time I see him the butterflies in my belly go haywire. Sighing I flip the covers off me and pull out some painting clothes from a box in the corner.

I'll unpack eventually.

I grab my phone and start to turn on my Cleaning Playlist so I can get in the mood to paint. But I notice a text notification. Opening it my stomach flips.

Rhett: I had a good time with you yesterday. I hope painting goes well today.

I'm surprised he's up this early. It's only 5:00 a.m. My internal alarm always goes off this early.

Me: Well, you're up awfully early. Truthfully I'm a terrible painter. Thank you for showing us around yesterday. I had a lot of fun too. Sorry about how lunch ended. I'm not sure what's going on with Matt and Jaz. I'm hoping to talk to her about it today.

Rhett: I couldn't sleep, so I'm about to go for a run. And no biggie, Matt's been acting odd since meeting her so it's not her fault, but I'm not sure what's going on with him either. Maybe I'll talk to him.

Me: I still need to ask about using the gym, but running at this hour? NO THANK YOU!

Rhett: *You could join me. I'm sure I could change your mind.*

Me: *Trying to see me again so soon?*

The three dots showing he's typing appear and disappear over and over again. But no response comes through. A part of me would love to see him again. But not for running.

My mind instantly imagines other ways we could both get a good workout, but it definitely does not involve a gym. My cheeks heat thinking of Rhett shirtless and sweating. Shaking my head I go into the kitchen to grab a bottle of water. Jasmine probably won't be up until 10 so I skip breakfast and head downstairs to get started.

My Altec Speaker connects and *Dear Future Husband* by Meghan Trainor comes blaring through it. I start taping the plastic down singing along to the tunes. It takes a while but I won't risk damaging the beautiful walnut flooring in here. Eminem's "*Lose Yourself*" starts playing and I pick up my phone to switch it. I'm not really feeling that song this morning.

Glancing at the clock I've been working for a couple hours. Finding another song: "*Cry me a River*" by Justin Timberlake comes on and I just can't help but sing along and sway my hips to the beat. This song was on repeat in my car for a while after I broke up with Justin. I get the paint trays out and move the ladder by the door so I can paint the ceiling white. I open the front door so the fumes don't get too bad and start painting, singing, "The bridges were burned. Now it's your turn to cry. Cry me a riv...Eek!"

I shriek when someone clears their throat from the doorway, which is right behind me. I turn around so fast my heel catches on the ladder and I start to fall backwards, my arms windmill and the paint roller drops as I try to right myself. I feel fingers brush my arm trying to catch me but it's too late.

My ass lands right in the paint tray and paint goes *everywhere*. I wince, “Ow!”

“Are you okay?” Rhett rushes toward me and drops to a knee. I can’t help but bust out laughing. I’m literally covered in paint. It’s dripping off my hands, running down my legs, all over my clothes. I’m doubled over laughing, tears rolling down my face.

I start to pull myself together only to fall apart again. Rhett, who looks like he just walked out of a gym magazine aside from the stark white paint splashed across his gloriously tan arms, black shirt, and marine shorts. The look on his face went from fear that I was hurt to amusement pretty quickly. His smile is glorious and his laugh wraps around my heart like a blanket.

We both start to calm down as Rhett offers me a hand up. I grasp my hand in his, not thinking that it was drenched in paint. His eyes are still crinkled at the corners as he pulls me to him. He pulls a bit hard and I stumble into his chest. My right-hand flies to his hard pecks stopping my fall.

I look up into those ice blue eyes full of laughter and my heart skips a beat, my breath hitches, and as he starts to lower his head to mine, he breathlessly chuckles, “You are the worst painter I have ever met.”

His hand slips under my chin, tilting my head backward. Our mouths are a whisper apart, I can feel his warm breath fanning over my face. Just before his mouth can meet mine the plastic from the kitchen noisily announces Jasmine’s arrival.

“What the heck happened? I heard a loud...” her voice trails off when she sees me plastered to Rhett’s chest. As her eyes rake down me, I feel paint running down the back of my calves. Jasmine busts out laughing, “Oh my God this is rich!”

Before I know what’s happening she has her phone out and is snapping pictures. Rhett chuckles and shakes his head at her, he eases me away making sure I have my footing.

“What a mess,” I halfheartedly laugh looking down at myself.

“Think there’s a water hose outside?” Rhett asks, “There is no way you can go anywhere without leaving a paint trail.”

His eyes rake down my paint-soaked legs like a gentle caress and lingers a second before he clears his throat and his eyes dart back up to mine.

“Let me grab a towel,” Jasmine says hurrying out of the kitchen door.

“I think I saw a water hose out back,” I look Rhett over again and notice his hair is wet with sweat, “Did you run here?”

“Yeah, it’s not that far just under 10 miles or so. Matt was going to pick me up after he finishes installing the security system at the bar with Miles. But I’m not sure he will let me ride in his truck like this,” he laughs.

Thank goodness he isn’t mad. Some of the men I know would be irate if they got covered in paint, and damn he looks good. White splattered paint and my handprint is on his rock-hard chest. His muscled calves are speckled with white paint highlighting more of that deliciously tanned skin. I peel my eyes back to the mess at hand.

“Sorry about that,” I chuckle, “But serves you right for scaring the daylights out of me! Why were you sneaking in anyways?”

“Well I heard you singing and,” he pauses, Rhett’s cheeks flush. His eyes dart down to my legs and I remember I was probably swaying my hips and singing with my backside turned to him when he came in. Now it’s my turn to blush because, yep you guessed, I’m wearing my bootylicious shorts again, and yes I own more than one pair. Jasmine saves me from the awkward moment we are having and brings in the towel.

“Here you go. That should sop up most of it for you to be able to go outside. Here is a rag too for outside.”

I soak up the paint running down my arms and legs, then I mop up the floor and toss the towel in the trash. I head toward the door and toe off my paint-soaked shoes and socks. Then pad bare foot across the porch and glance back noticing Rhett

is following me. “Well I guess my favorite pair of shorts will finally meet their end.”

Rhett covers a laugh with a cough, his cheeks turn an alluring shade of crimson when I catch him staring at my backside, saying, “Such a shame.”

His grin is contagious. We make it to the water hose and I go to turn it on but Rhett beats me to it.

“Here let me. Your hands are covered,” he turns it on, grabs the hose and sprays off his own paint-soaked hands, “It’s a bit cold, sorry.”

“I can handle it,” I say. The day is already warm, and I had worked up a sweat from taping all that plastic down. But I still suck in a breath when Rhett sprays off my legs. He chuckles as I rinse my arms and hands off. I’m hyperaware that Rhett’s gaze is burning into me. I’m also extremely aware that I have a white shirt on and between the paint and the water splashing it’s become see-through. “I’m going to go change. I’ll meet you back in the shop. Do you want me to see if I have a clean shirt for you?”

“No that’s okay,” he heads back to the front. I quickly change and when I come back, Rhett has most of my mess cleaned up. A quick glance shows Jaz has disappeared.

“Oh, you didn’t have to do that,” I say breathless from running up and down the stairs.

“It was my fault you tripped anyways,” he laughs again. Standing he tosses the paper towels in the trash, “Since I’m already covered in paint, do you want help?”

“Well Jasmine says painting isn’t her thing either, so I’d actually love some help,” I go and get another paint tray and roller, asking, “Do you want the ceiling or the walls?”

“I’d better do the ceiling. Can’t have you looking up unable to see your feet again,” he winks and smiles when I blush. *This man smiling and winking at me is going to give me a heart attack! Good lord, I thought him in his biker cut was handsome. But him in athleticwear showing off those arms and calve muscles is downright sinful!* Rhett catches me staring

and his eyes heat, like he feels this crazy desire the same way I do. I clear my throat and grab my phone. “Okay then but I’m subjecting you to my terrible singing no matter what.”

We both smile and as I grab my phone I notice a text from Jasmine.

Jasmine: *Well don't they make a cute couple?*

Under the text is a picture attachment. I click the picture and Rhett and I fill the screen. There are two. One of us smashed together almost kissing and one of us caught when Jasmine was snapping pictures the second time.

Sneaky little thing. She must have made all that noise to announce herself after taking the intimate picture, but I can’t deny it, we do make a pretty cute couple. My head comes up to Rhett’s shoulders, like I was made to fit in his embrace. A second text comes through and I realize I’m in a group chat with the Old Ladies! *Oh my goodness this isn't going to be good.*

Daphne: *I KNEW RHETT HAD A THING FOR ALEX!!!!!!!!!!*

Lia: *AHHHH!!!!!!!!!! I NEED A PLAY BY PLAY OVER WINE!*

Kayden: *DANG GIRL!*

Kayden: *Wait there was no mention of Rhett helping you paint yesterday...and he only wears shorts when he's running...What's happening?*

Jasmine: *Dinner at our house tonight. I'll buy pizza!*

I can't help but laugh as the texts keep rolling questions and excitement. I start to sit my phone down but Rhett's voice stops me.

"What's that look about?" Rhett asks coming up behind me, his chest touching my shoulder. The heat from him searing my skin. I show him the text chain and the pictures.

"Can you send me those?" he smiles.

"Wanting evidence of how terrible a painter I really am?" I tease.

"I just want the picture to remember one of the best moments I've had in a very long time," Rhett takes my chin in his hand and whispers close to my ear, "Plus I'd like a picture of your long lean legs, I find them sexy."

His icy stare turns mischievous as he turns and gets back to work. I'm stunned, mouth open, and no comeback in sight. The things this man does to me.

Chapter 11

Matt

I step outside of the bar after finishing setting up Daphne's security feed with Miles. There hasn't been any retaliation from our raid on the cabins in the mountains and it's making me paranoid. But all my sources say everything is quiet. So maybe my paranoia is for nothing.

I step off the covered porch and head toward my truck. I can hear music coming from Alex's and see that the front door is open. I turn around and open the bar door, "Hey Miles, I'm going to go over and see if Alex is okay with us setting her security up today."

Piper is just sitting down a water and a breaded tenderloin in front of him. I don't bother asking, "Finish your lunch and meet me over there."

As a prospect he has to do everything I say, but he won't be a prospect for much longer. He's earned my trust. Miles nods.

I cross the street and knock on the opened door, but the music is too loud for anyone to hear me. When I look inside I can't hold back my chuckle. Rhett is up on the ladder painting meticulously between the wall and the ceiling, covered in paint. Alex is also covered but she is singing along to a song I am not familiar with, using the roller as a dance partner. Rhett grins down at her laughing, "At least you dance better than you paint."

Alex scoffs, pretending to be offended and swipes her roller across Rhett's calves. It's so good to see him laughing. There was a time I never thought I'd see him smile, but with Doc's help, he has slowly improved.

I look around for Jasmine but don't see her. I'm not sure if I'm relieved by that or not. Rhett finally sees me leaning against the doorway. His smile firmly in place, "Hey Prez. You ready to head back?"

Alex turns quickly to look at me.

“Actually I thought I’d see if Alex would let Miles and I put up her security system today. We just finished with the one over at the bar.”

Alex shrugs her shoulders, “Whatever you need to do. But know...” she twirls her finger in a circle by her shoulder indicating the room, “This is a danger zone and you may wind up covered in paint.” She laughs looking at Rhett who smiles broadly back, “Exhibit A, well I guess I’m A and that would make you, B. But this is also your fault so maybe I’ll stick with A.”

“My fault?” Rhett says teasingly and I shake my head and go back to the truck to gather my supplies letting them have their time alone. They are clearly taken with each other, and I hope it turns out okay for Rhett. He could use some good in his life.

Heading behind the shop I start to install the camera above the back door. It takes me about twenty-five minutes to set the camera up and run the wires inside to hide them. I place my ladder next to the washing machine to tie the electrical wires into the breaker box when I hear someone coming down the stairs behind me.

“Oh sorry,” I turn to see Jasmine hesitating on the steps. She can’t get past me unless I get down and move the ladder.

“I’ll be done in a few minutes unless you need by right now.”

“Oh...umm...” she hesitates, “Well I was just going to get a few things from the store for girls night tonight, but I can wait.”

She hesitates on the steps and to my surprise instead of going back upstairs she sits down. *Okay let’s try for a civil conversation.*

“So...” I start, she looks up at me and arches an eyebrow waiting for me to continue, “Rhett said, you’re a pre-vet student?”

“Yep. I actually am pretty much finished. I just need to do my externship, so I’m just waiting to hear back from a few places.”

“Isn’t it an eight-year program? You must be incredibly intelligent to have graduated that fast,” I ask genuinely curious.

Jasmine smiles, “I’ve been known to be called that a time or two. But yes, I have taken a lot of courses over the summers and was in an accelerated course. It was hard but it was also a lot of fun,” she shrugs like it isn’t a big deal, “What about you?”

“Well I’m really a jack of all trades and master of none. I was in the army for a bit, then, when I got out, I did construction. About three years ago I inherited the club from my uncle and started to make it a more legitimate business,” I glance back and see her arching her brow again so I hurry to continue, “He wasn’t into anything terrible. They were just part of a delivery system for weapons.”

“That sounds sketchy,” Jasmine says warily.

“It was but I’ve got the club cleaned up. There isn’t any more of that now. We actually help the police on occasion. Most of us are ex-military so it works out okay. Aside from managing the construction company and the real estate I just make sure the brothers are looked after,” I shrug.

“Sounds like you’ve got a lot on your shoulders looking after two businesses and everyone’s wellbeing. No wonder you’re such an ass sometimes,” she says.

My shoulders tense. She wasn’t being rude about it; but her tone was hard, unyielding, like she had already made her mind up about me. I sigh not knowing what to say. I don’t turn around because I don’t really want to see her facial expression. I know I have been an ass to her, but I feel out of control just being around her. I just want to get to know her.

That first day we met, we shook hands and I didn’t want to let go. That zap of electricity between us had me buzzing, and what did she do, she glared at me.

Challenge accepted, my brain had thought and here we are. I’m a possessive asshole and I don’t want any of the brothers to look at her, touch her, or talk to her. So yes I’m a jerk.

I finish with the wiring and step off the ladder folding it up. As I'm turning around, Jasmine quickly passes me, avoiding all contact, and goes out the door. *Well it was almost civil. Maybe we are getting somewhere.*

Chapter 12

Alex

Dinner with the Old Ladies was right around the corner and I am a literal mess. Rhett left a few hours ago with Matt after he had showed me how to use the security system. It had seemed easy enough. A code for the door, an alarm you could shut off on your phone. Two cameras with motion detection. I had a monitor in the kitchen downstairs and I could also pull it up on my phone. I wasn't sure how I felt about Matt having all the codes, but it seemed like an okay option since he owns the building.

Rhett and I finished painting the front store area. I absolutely loathe painting but today was surprisingly a fantastic day. Rhett is smart, funny, and a great listener. The day flew by and I think we could be really good friends.

Sure friends. Keep telling yourself that, it's not like you were picturing him naked or anything. The image pops back in my head and I quickly shake it away. *Yeah friends don't picture friends naked, Alex. But you keep living in denial-ville.*

I throw the last of the plastic away outside in the dumpster, feeling a sense of pride at a job well done. I may be covered head to toe in paint, but the store front looks fantastic. I head upstairs to get cleaned up.

As I'm exiting the shower I hear laughter. *The Old Ladies must be here already.* I hurry and get dressed, quickly braid my hair to the right side, and go find some food.

Daphne is pouring wine, Jasmine is opening pizza boxes, Kayden is getting plates out of the cabinet, and Lia is plating some brownies. They all look at home in my small apartment and it makes my heart warm. I have a feeling Jaz and I will be fast friends with these three.

"Mommy, mommy, mommy can I have a brownie?" a young voice asks. I'm assuming it is Layana, Lia's daughter is behind the counter where I can't see her.

“We have to eat dinner first baby, then you can have your brownie,” Lia bends and hoists her daughter up on the counter. They are almost mirror images. You can definitely tell Lia is her mother.

Lia notices me first, “Before you critique my baking skills just know they are made with love, and I had help.”

She taps her daughter’s nose affectionately and Layana giggles.

“I don’t critique anyone’s cooking!” I place my hand on my chest in fake outrage and make a funny face. Layana finds that hysterical and her little girl cackles have all of us grinning.

“The shop looks wonderful!” Daphne says conspiratorially elbowing Kayden who smiles sheepishly.

“Yes, Alex the shop does look fantastic...by chance did someone help you with it today?” Lia asks mischievously.

Layana claps her hands together, “Uncle Rhett helped! I saw the picture. You were hugging him, well that’s what mommy said anyways.”

Jasmine is standing by the pizza leaning against the counter grinning a little too smugly for my taste, so I deflect, “What are you smiling about? How did your stairway conversation go with Mr. Alpha-hole?”

All eyes turn to Jasmine. Her smile drops and she gives me the famous sister stink eye that says ‘I will get even for this.’

“Oh? Mysterious conversations in the stairway with...?” Kayden asks.

“Well the only other people I saw come over here was my brother and Miles,” Daphne says watching Jasmine over her wine glass, “And I know Miles is not an Alpha-hole, although I’m not quite sure what that is.”

“It’s a possessive domineering male. You would know that if you read the books I keep recommending for you,” Kayden nudges Daphne’s shoulder.

“Ah so you are talking about Matt,” Lia says as she situates Layana on the bar stool with her piece of pizza.

“My brother is a lot of things, Alpha-hole is definitely a new term, but it definitely fits! You should have seen him when Bricker started finding interest in me. Protective and domineering are just a few choice words I’d use to describe his behavior,” Daphne laughs, eyes crinkling at the corners, “Bricker was so terrified of what Matt would think he would take me all the way to Asheville for dinner. That lasted about a month and then finally I told Bricker to man up. It took Matt awhile to come around but it all worked out.”

Lia scoffs, “Awhile? Matt didn’t talk to Bricker for days!”

Kayden eyes Layana, “Lord help this child, between all the brothers she doesn’t stand a chance at dating when she gets older.”

We all chuckle and start to fill our plates. The conversation is smooth and easy. The wine flows and the laughter rings out. We play a few rounds of Euchre with Layana sitting on Lia’s lap saying “go fish” anytime someone made trump and Lia didn’t have any. That was pretty funny. I can see why everyone is wrapped around her little fingers.

As the evening winds down, Daphne and I are sitting on our new sofa in the living room. Jasmine has already gone to bed and the other ladies just went home.

“So all teasing aside, Rhett came and helped you today?” Daphne asks almost hesitantly. Like she’s worried about broaching the subject.

“Yeah, he was waiting for Matt to take him back to the clubhouse after his run. One thing led to another and he stayed to help,” I can’t keep the grin off my face and Daphne smiles back, relaxing a bit.

“I think it’s great he is getting to know you. He isn’t one to venture too far out of our friend group, and in the years I have known him I haven’t ever seen him with anyone. No girlfriend or fling or anything.”

My cheeks heat. So this is where the conversation is going, “Well I’m not sure that’s...”

Daphne holds up her hand, “Just be patient with him and take your time. He has been through a lot. I don’t want to see either of you hurt.”

“I think friends for now is all I’m really looking for, I was in a relationship almost eight months ago, it didn’t end well. And it’s left a sour taste in my mouth. But I’ll keep an open mind, I don’t plan on hurting anyone,” I know this conversation is coming from a place of love and I can’t help but respect Daphne even more for it.

She pats my leg, “Well I’m off. Tomorrow is always a big dinner rush at the bar and I need my beauty rest. Oh, and I need to ask if you can make cookies for Bricker’s birthday next week. There will probably be thirty people at the clubhouse. Obviously you guys are invited. Do you think you could make some?”

“Absolutely just let me know what day you need them,” I agree. She heads for the door and I set the alarm behind her.

Chapter 13

Unknown

“Fix the issue,” he said, “Make sure my delivery is on time, I don’t care how you do it.”

God, I did not sign up for this. My hands twitch around the steering wheel. Stupid withdraws. I can’t wait to be done with this and get back to the apartment. I need a fix, bad.

I park out behind the woods. I wait for Tommy to go inside the office. He is dropping off a load of logs.

Sneaking around the back of the semi, my heart is pounding, my hands are shaking, sweat is running down my back. Though that’s probably from my withdraws not my nerves.

Patrick is in the office, so I have to be quiet. I pull out my pocket knife and cut the strap tying the logs together. Hopping into the log loader, that’s still running, I gently sit a log right on the edge of the stack, over top of the strap.

When they come to move the straps to unload, the log should fall precisely where I need it to. That should fix my problem. Patrick opens the door to the office and looks out just as I’m closing the door on the loader. I slink back into the shadows behind it. An owl hoots behind me causing me to jump. My heel catches on a log and I stumble.

It was just an owl. He didn’t see me. I take off running for the woods where I hid my car. They will never know it was me.

Chapter 14

Alex

Jasmine and I finally decided to go to the grocery store after we made one more visit to K and E. I needed a few extra odds and ends for the apartment, and with the storefront painted we were ready to decorate.

As we stuff the last shopping bag in the back seat of the truck and try to get the door shut without it all falling back out on the pavement, my phone rings.

“Hello,” I say breathless, not even bothering to look at the caller ID.

“Hey Ally-girl, I got some bad news,” Dad says cautiously.

“Uh oh. What’s wrong?” I ask, panic squeezes my stomach as Jasmine leans closer to hear. I put the phone on speaker.

“Your lumber order will be arriving today, unfortunately I won’t be there with it. Ol’ Tommy had a freak accident the other night and can’t drive for a few weeks. He’s doing okay, a log rolled on him while he was unstrapping one of his loads. No one really knows how but I had to send another driver. Now I know you aren’t going to like this but I didn’t have much of a choice,” he sighs and I can just picture him running his fingers over his gray and white beard, “I had to send Justin.”

I take in a sharp breath of surprise.

“Now before you yell at me, I know I promised to send anyone but him, I didn’t have a choice. I told him just to unload the wood where you say and hit the road. If he gives you any problems call me, okay?”

Jasmine is staring at me with concern. I never told Dad the whole story about after we broke up. Sure I told him I had to block his number and got Dad to tell him to leave me alone. But I didn’t tell him about Justin following me around town, popping up at the store, the nail salon, or at the movies when Jasmine and I had went one weekend. I also didn’t tell Dad about Justin just sitting outside my apartment at night either,

but Jasmine knew. I had called her on more than one occasion and she'd driven over to stay with me. Once Dad had talked to him all that had stopped.

"Dad this isn't a good idea. Can't you call him back and just send the order another time. I don't think Justin should know where Alex is going to live," Jasmine tries to reason.

Dad's voice is tense, "Well he hasn't been bugging you for quite some time now, and I already sent him on his way. Actually he should be there around 9:30 this morning."

My shoulders sag, of course he will be.

"Did Patrick ever say why he hit Justin in the face the other day when I was there?" I ask, curiosity and unease getting the better of me as I remember the look on Justin's face when I pulled out of the parking lot.

"What do you mean? Patrick isn't going around punching people," I hear Dad's disbelief ringing clear in his voice.

"I saw it with my own eyes, Dad. Maybe ask Patrick about it before Justin gets down here," I glance at Jasmine, the worry lining her face is like looking in a mirror.

"Hmm, well alright if you saw it, I'll ask Patrick out right about it. If it's important I'll call ya back. Anyways how's the move going?" Dad asks.

We continue small talk for a few more minutes, but it doesn't do anything to ease the worry growing in my chest. Justin is the last person I want to see down here. As Jasmine and I say goodbye to Dad, we get in the truck and drive the twenty minutes back to the apartment. It is almost nine by the time we get back and as we are pulling in two Black Ridge Construction trucks pull in behind us.

"Shew-y, you girls don't waste any time. Looks like you've already had a busy morning," Bricker calls as he unfolds out of his truck, Rex not far behind him. Miles and one more man get out of the other truck but we haven't met him yet.

I smile, "I'm not one for procrastinating when there's something I need to get done."

I unlock the back door that leads into a mud room, unarming the security system as I go. I head up the stairs and unlock the apartment door and prop it open. Coming back down the stairs, I'm met with all four men, arms loaded down and Jasmine directing them up to our apartment. We get the couch uncovered and Rex and Bricker heft it up the stairs. While the other two men, Miles, and Drake—who are prospects for the club—carry up the end tables.

Just as Jasmine and I finish with the last of the bags and the men go about putting on their carpenter belts, one of Dad's semis pulls in. I don't know why I do it, but I grab the gun out of the glove box and put it in the back of my pants, using my shirt to cover it. I turn around to see Bricker and Rex eyeing me cautiously as I head towards to semi. Jasmine is hot on my heels.

"Let me handle this," she says, getting in front of me.

"It's fine Jaz, I'm a big girl, I can take care of my own problems. Why don't you rest a minute on the porch," I say, looking at Bricker who is heading my way with an unreadable expression on his face, I start to ask, "Where do you want me to have him put the—"

"Alex baby, I knew you wouldn't be able to leave me behind for long."

I tense up as he puts his arm around my shoulder aggressively. I smack it off. I sneer, "Listen, you arrogant prick, I specifically asked Dad not to send you. So you can unload this lumber and be on your merry way back to Kentucky before the hour is out."

"Now, now, that's no way to treat your boyfriend," he smiles smugly eyeing Bricker.

"Ex-boyfriend," Jasmine corrects as she stands next to me pushing him towards the truck, "And I suggest you remember that you piece of shit."

Justin just laughs in a manic sort of way. Bricker and Rex are by our side in a second. Hard gazes, fists clenched.

“Get the truck unloaded, boy,” Bricker’s deep voice cuts off Justin’s laughter.

“Yeah sure man I’ll unload it. Just giving Alex a hard time. You know how it is,” he says, reaching for my face and I take a step back. He drops his hand. His eyes almost looking sad, but then his emotion seems to switch to anger. Something malicious crosses his face. He covers it quickly with a smile and turns to unload the truck.

Bricker and Rex don’t leave our side as Miles and Drake help Justin unload the truck. It takes them about an hour to get everything off.

“Guess I’ll see you around princess. Now that I know where to find you again,” Justin eyes me. All I see is hatred and anger in that look. I don’t even know what I saw in him, but it’s like he is a totally different person.

His face is a bit gaunt from all the weight he has lost. Gone is the loving, caring, country boy I fell in love with, and in his place is this shell of a person.

Rex steps in front of Jasmine and I, “I suggest you get in the truck and head back.”

His gravelly tone leaves no room for questions. Justin leers at me one more time, his gaze sending chills down my body, and a sense of dread, until finally he gets in the truck.

As Justin pulls away I pull out my phone and call Dad.

“Hey kiddo, how did it go?”

Jasmine is leaning in again so I just put it on speaker, not caring if the four men are able to hear.

“Not well,” I sigh, “Dad you need to get rid of him. Something is broken in that brain of his, and I swear to all that’s holy, if he comes back down here, I will not be responsible for what happens.”

Dad sounds tired when he says, “I know kiddo, I just talked to Patrick. As soon as Justin gets back I’m letting him go. Turns out the only reason he volunteered to start doing deliveries is to help his friend smuggle stuff across state lines.”

I feel Bricker perk up at this information, “What do you mean smuggle stuff across state lines?”

“Nothing for you to be concerned about, hun. I’ve got it handled up here. You just stay away from him, and if he come back around, call the police. Okay? Don’t confront him. He is headed down the wrong road and I don’t want you involved.”

“Okay Dad, but please be careful. He isn’t who he used to be. I love you and thank you for the delivery. I’ll see you next weekend, okay?”

“Okay, Darlin’, I love you too.”

As the phone call ends, Jasmine doesn’t hesitate, her rapid fire I told you so coming out a bit harsh, “I told you, you should have come clean months ago. Had you told Dad the whole truth this wouldn’t have happened and Justin wouldn’t know where to find you!”

Bricker is leaning against the porch railing openly listening. Rex, Miles, and Drake aren’t being as obvious about it, but as I huff a frustrated sigh, I feel their heads turn towards me.

“Yeah, let’s think about this,” I make my voice nasally and sarcastic, “Hi Dad, yeah I just thought I’d tell you, I’m pretty sure my ex-boyfriend is stalking me. He hasn’t done anything yet just keeps sitting outside my house like a creep every night. Oh and he keeps showing up around town, everywhere I go. I don’t feel safe. I’m also pretty sure he broke into my apartment and took my cat. It actually didn’t run away but what he did with the cat, I don’t know because I never saw it again.” I sigh, exasperated, “Honestly Jasmine, Dad would have shot him and then would be in jail. That’s not something I want to be responsible for. I can handle myself.”

“Yeah you’re right, you can, but what do you think he is smuggling? I mean he hauls logs for goodness sakes.”

Bricker is watching all of this unfold like he is memorizing every detail. Head shooting back and forth following the conversation. Rex and the other guys are leaning against the lumber pile now, listening.

I run my fingers through my hair, pacing back and forth on the porch. God I need my kitchen done. I need to stress bake. I grumble, "I don't know. The only friend I knew he had across state lines was some guy named Damien. I think he said he was from Northern Tennessee."

I see Bricker stiffen, pull out his phone and walk off the porch. Looking at Rex, I arch an eyebrow in question but he just shrugs and gets busy stacking lumber. Feeling exhausted, I head inside and climb the stairs ready to get some organizing done in my apartment.

Chapter 15

Rhett

I'm sitting in Matt's office discussing business we have in Northern Tennessee when his phone rings.

"Yeah?" he puts it on speaker.

"We have a serious problem," Bricker says quietly, almost like he is trying not to be overheard. Unease trickles down my spine.

"You run into some problems ripping out that wall at the hardware store?" Matt asks.

"Something like that. The lumber shipment was delivered early and some new information came to light."

Matt eyes his phone, clenching and unclenching his hands on the desk, "How so?"

"Well, at first I thought it was odd when the semi pulled in Alex tucked a Glock in the back of her pants," I straighten in my chair, my nerves ratcheting up. Matt's eyes dart to mine then back down to the phone, Bricker continued, "Not that I'm against her carrying, but why would she need a gun when it's one of her dad's drivers? Jasmine was even more skittish than yesterday, but she kept trying to send Alex inside. Of course Alex didn't listen. So when they went to meet the driver I followed behind. A normal enough guy stepped out and started giving Alex a hard time. Turns out he was her ex-boyfriend; he seemed a bit off, sort of manic at times like maybe he was on something. I stepped in, directed the conversation after some awkwardness and kept the girls away from him. Jasmine and Alex got into a bit of an argument about telling their dad everything that's happened. Apparently he was stalking Alex before she moved."

I bristle this isn't good. Matt's eye flick to me, anger unmistakably in them.

"That's not even the worst part," Bricker sighs.

What could be worse than stalking? Keeping my thoughts to myself, I impatiently wait for Bricker to continue. My need to protect Alex growing by the second.

“Alex called her dad pretty shaken up. Turns out her dad didn’t know about the stalking, and still doesn’t, but her dad said he was going to have to let the guy go because he was busted for smuggling across state lines. He didn’t go into detail about what he was smuggling because he didn’t want them involved. He just warned the girls to steer clear of the guy. And then once they hung up Alex said the only friend she remembered Justin, her ex, having was some guy from Northern Tennessee named Damien.”

I see Matt’s shoulder tense, he muttered, “You’re shitting me.”

The only Damien from Northern Tennessee we know is the Appalachian Drug Dealer/sex trafficker. He supplies the gang trying to take over our mountain. The one we raided just the other day.

Bricker sighs, “No man that’s everything I heard, and I got a plate number for you for the semi.”

Bricker rattles off the plate number and Matt inputs it into his computer. On the computer display, cameras start flashing with live traffic footage. The police don’t know it, but we have a live feed same as they do. After about fifteen minutes the semi shows up on the screen pulling into a warehouse near the cabin we raided a few days ago. I have a really bad feeling about this.

“Call the enforcers, meet for church within the hour. We are gonna see what’s on that truck,” Matt hangs up the phone.

The look in his eye should terrify a lesser man, anger, hatred, destruction. But I’m feeling an unexplainable urge to protect Alex at any cost, and if this ex of hers has the slightest chance of hurting her, I won’t hesitate to end the bastard. Matt must see it written on my face and nods his head, “Let’s go.”



We ride out from the clubhouse ten men deep, staggered two wide all the way back. Matt and I are in the lead. We left Bricker with the girls at the bakery just in case something went sideways. We weren't expecting it to, but you can never be too careful. Matt had Miles hack into the warehouse security. He may be a prospect but not for much longer. The guy has some serious tech skills.

The warehouse is about a fifteen-minute drive out of town. There isn't much surrounding it except one other warehouse. The property backs up to the park near the Old Fort on highway 70. It may be on the highway, but it's fairly remote. On the security feed all we could really see was the semi, some wooden crates, and a few men roaming around. No sign of Damien or Justin based on what Miles saw. My hands are itching to find the scumbag, and make it clear he isn't welcome here.

We have been having issues with Damien for years, but he never comes out of hiding long enough for us to catch him. It would be nice to rid the world of him, but I have a feeling it won't be today. Our goal now, is to see what is in the warehouse and the truck. If I get to rough up Alex's ex in the process, that will be a bonus.

We pull into the Old Fort, an abandoned old theatre, so we don't tip off anyone in the warehouse down the road. Rex takes his sniper rifle up to the high point overlooking the warehouse for backup. The rest of us split off into groups of three and surround the building. It is pretty flat here with some decent tree coverage. Once we are all in place, Matt signals for all of us to move in.

Matt, Miles, and I come to the large front door, it looks like it's a regular steel door, but Damien has been known to rig things to blow for security measures. So we have Miles check

the door for traps with a camera slid under the door. He hacks into the keypad next to the door and finally the light turns green and the door opens.

We move in fluidly, all of us having some sort of training. Me with the Marines, Matt with the Army, and Miles, well, he doesn't really say but I have a feeling he was Navy Special Forces. I'd know a frogman when I see one.

Once we breach the door we slide along the wall, guns drawn ready for anything. A calm feeling I am extremely used to washes over me like a blanket. I was a little worried I would have an episode, but so far so good. All my senses hone in on the task at hand. We come up to a few wooden crates next to the semi.

"Let's get these boxes loaded before the boss has a fit that you are late," a gruff voice says.

"Come on man, I said I was sorry I was late. It took a hell of a lot of effort for me to even get this delivery anyway. You're lucky I am even here. If I hadn't smashed Ol' Tommy with that log, Tucker never would have let me get in the damn semi and you know it," another says, I'm assuming that is Justin's voice.

"Still you are drawing too much attention to yourself. This area isn't like the others. We have eyes everywhere watching our every move. You need to be smart about this and leave that girl alone. Unless you're offering her to the rest of us. Then maybe we can work something out," the gruff voice says. My hands clench around my gun ready to get rid of these assholes.

Matt must sense the shift in my stance because he shakes his head. We are waiting for the other guys to get into position.

"Ready Prez," comes through our comms.

We move, I round the crate silent as a wraith. I slide up behind Justin as Miles appears behind mister gruff voice. I put my gun to Justin's temple as I wrap him in a headlock. My voice is hard and ruthless from holding back my need to hurt this bastard as I say, "Give me a reason to pull this trigger."

Miles gets mister gruff voice subdued, while Matt checks for anyone else. We put the two men on their knees and zip tie their hands and feet together. The other two groups of our team round the semi with three men between them. They zip tie the captured men and throw them down next to Justin.

“Well now let’s see what we have here,” Matt says as Drake pops the top off of one of the crates. It is full of AR-15s, Miles pops the next crate open, it’s full of C-4. Matt asks the one with the gruff voice, “You guys planning a war or something?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know,” he sneers.

Matt punches him in the face and grabs his Ka-Bar knife out of his side holster. He puts the knife to Mr. Gruff’s neck, “I would actually.”

Matt’s green eyes are bright with determination and anger, “Start talking and I may let you walk out of here.”

Matt pushes down on the knife, drawing a bit of blood. Mr. Gruff just stares at Matt. Matt nods at me and I take Justin and cut his Achilles tendon with my Ka-Bar. He screams, *A man with a bag over his head with his arms tied above him. My fists pounding his abdomen. The smell of blood and piss.*

I remind myself this is for our safety as I step back and shake my head. This information is important.

As I position my knife along Justin’s ear to remove it, Mr. Gruff shouts, “Okay, okay, stop!”

The ear goes flying, blood gushing across my hand, warm and hot. Justin deserves this much and we need answers.

Mr. Gruff’s pants have become damp between his legs. The Appalachian MC may be a gruff and ruthless bunch, but they have been pretty easy to extract information from lately.

“Would you look-y there? You pissed yourself like the coward you are. Start talking or I’ll let my men continue to cut yours apart,” Matt said while pressing on his knife a bit harder.

“Okay!” Mr. Gruff yells, eyes darting around desperate for a way out, “My boss just wanted me to bring this stuff across state lines and start it on its way to Nashville. I don’t know the

plan from there. All I know is a text comes in, and I do what it says. If I don't, the boss will kill my wife and two kids."

"Who is your boss?" Matt asks, his patience is running thin.

"Damien, it's Damien," he cries.

Matt kicks the guy away from him and heads toward Justin. Justin starts flailing in my hold. Matt asks, "And you. What have you been doing for Damien?"

"None of your business," Justin's voice is strained from pain.

I push my steel toe boot into the cut on his ankle. He screams, sweat forming on his forehead. I push hard.

"Okay, okay! I just make deliveries. I met Damien last year and have been helping him ever since. It pays well, and I had the perfect set up for it." He's breathing hard. "I made a delivery to one of his warehouses last year, and he didn't give me a choice but to work for him."

Justin's eyes are dilated and his nose is red from cocaine use, it seems.

"And you've been sampling his products as well," I state while squeezing his neck a bit harder.

"Yeah man, he made me test it a few times and then I was hooked," Justin says.

"Where were you making the delivery?" Matt asks.

"Damien has a few warehouses in Nashville. He doesn't send me the location until I message him that I am on my way. If I don't message him, he said he will kill my girlfriend," Justin starts to slump. His words are slurred with pain, and I know he is about to pass out. But the impact of what he says makes me squeeze a bit harder. I force myself to relax a bit.

"Alex?" I question, but before he can answer, he passes out. I look at Matt who is already dialing Bricker.

"Hey, you may have to stay with Alex and Jasmine for a bit. They may be targeted," Matt hangs up, "I need to call our contact at the police so they can clean up this mess up. But first Miles, I need you to scrub the footage and see if there's

any links to Nashville. Drake take the semi over to the Old Fort. We don't need it impounded."

My skin feels tight. Everything in me is screaming to go back to Alex. Clenching and unclenching my hands I wait for Matt's next order.

Matt walks around to the side of the semi, phone in hand and he dials the number on the side of the truck. I walk over to him so I can try to listen. Matt seems to know I need to hear this so he puts it on speaker.

"This is Tucker," a male voice answers. I assume that's Alex's dad since the semi reads T.S. Lumber on the side.

"Tucker, this is Matt Turner. Your daughter is renting my building for her bakery," before Tucker can say anything else Matt adds, "She is fine but that driver you sent to deliver the shipment won't be returning. I'm having him arrested. I'm not sure if you know the whole story or not but let me get you up to speed."

I listen attentively as Matt fills Tucker in on everything. From the fact that we are actually a Motorcycle club, the story Bricker put together, Damien, the smuggling, all of it even the threat on Justin's girlfriend.

"Sweet Jesus," I hear Tucker whispering in the background. When Matt is finished Tucker sighs deeply, "Matt, this is a lot to take in. Hearing Ol' Tommy's accident wasn't an accident at all isn't surprising given what he told me, and I wonder if Justin is referring to Alex or his girlfriend she caught him cheating on her with." The thought of Alex being cheated on makes my blood boil. "Either way I'm going to head down there to stay with the girls. If I tell them to come back here there will be hell to pay and Alex is a stubborn one. I know without a doubt she won't budge, even if she knows all the details. I appreciate you taking the time to call me. But can I ask what your plan is? Does your club work with the police or against them? I know there are some clubs out there getting out of the illegal stuff, but I swear if you get my daughters hurt during this I won't stop hunting you."

Matt's stern voice interrupts Tucker, "The twins are under my protection. They won't be involved in club business unless they become someone's Old Lady."

He side-eyes me. My skin is still itching to get back to Alex. "I have my vice president with them now. And I'm planning on having them stay at the clubhouse for a couple days. Almost all of the guys have military training. We will keep them safe. I am going to have your semi taken back to our warehouse until you can take it back with you. I know if I tell you not to come, you won't listen. I know I wouldn't, but I want you to understand you are not to get in our way. You are not to tell your daughters anything that is going on. I will keep you informed the best I can, but my job is to protect this town and our families. That includes the twins."

Tucker sighs in relief, "I will be down there tomorrow. Let me get Patrick, my right hand looped in the best I can and I'll be there. Thank you Matt."

The line goes dead. Matt dials his contact at the police station next.

"I got the footage scrubbed, Prez. There was an office upstairs, but not a lot of information to be found. I tried to track the number on Justin's cell phone that he texts for the deliveries, but it is pinging all over the country," Miles says coming around a crate.

Matt clenches his hands, frustration clear on his face, "The police will be here in ten minutes. Let's clear out. Stuff those assholes in the office and bar the door."

Drake and Miles shove the men up the stairs and do just that. Justin is still lying unconscious on the floor. And I can't bring myself to touch him. He won't be going anywhere.

"Um, we may have a problem Prez," Miles shouts from upstairs.

Matt and I take the stairs two steps at a time. Miles is hunched over his laptop typing furiously.

"Speak," Matt barks.

Miles is typing like his life depends on it. His eyes dart across the screen as he reads some kind of code running across it.

“Come on, come on,” he mutters to himself, tap, tap, tap on the keys. I’m tempted to rip the damn thing out of his hands until he answers us. But the angry look on his face, the tense set of his jaw tells me this is *big*. Miles grins, “Gotcha!”

“Out with it, Miles,” Matt barks.

Miles straightens his shoulders and smugly says, “Well, I missed it the first time I was up here. There was a live feed camera in this hallway overlooking the entire warehouse, it wasn’t part of the circuit here though. Someone is monitoring this place off site and saw everything that just happened.”

Shit! This is not going to be good.

“But I hacked into the camera feed before they knew what I was doing and tracked it back to them, sort of. The camera feed is tracked to this IP address, which is located at this address,” he shows Matt and I the pin on the map. It is right outside of Nashville.

Matt grunts annoyed, “I gotta make a call and see if the local MC there can check it out. I don’t want to step on anyone’s turf. Let’s just head to the clubhouse.”

Pulling his phone back out, Matt dials Bricker, “Hey I don’t care how you do it but the twins and Daphne need to stay at the clubhouse for the next few days. I’ll fill you in. Call a meeting we need to have church with everyone.”

I haven’t been to a church meeting with every member in months, the last one was just enforcers. It only happens in serious situations. Every member gets called in and we meet in the pole barn behind the clubhouse.

The next few days should be interesting to say the least. I doubt Jasmine and Alex are ready for clubhouse life. Having every room full, all the guys there with their flings, the Old Ladies making dinner, and kids running everywhere. They are in for a big change that’s for sure, but laying my worry about the current situation aside, I’m excited to have Alex close by so I can get some time alone with her.

Chapter 16

Alex

Jasmine follows me up the stairs. She hugs me as she asks, “Are you sure you are okay?”

“Yeah, I’m okay. Just ready to let the past be the past and move on. That’s part of why I wanted to move so far away. I could have a fresh start and start new adventures,” I sigh, “Come on, let’s tackle this mess.”

I look around the apartment. We had gotten so much stuff and it was all shoved in my living room. I dig out my smaller Altec speaker out of a box buried beneath my huge mound of clothes. I turn on my *Happy Playlist* to lighten the mood and *In My Veins* by Lauren Alaina comes on.

Music is such a stress reliever. I have a playlist for everything: road trips, workouts, baking for weddings, baking for parties, a sad list, and my happy playlist. It’s all my go-to songs to put me in a better mind set, and after the morning we have had, I need to be in a better mind set. I walk over to the window facing the lot out back and see Bricker still on his phone by his truck. Not wanting to think about this morning any longer, I close the curtain. I grab the nearest box and take it to the kitchen.

The living room and kitchen are open so it isn’t hard to hear the music drifting through the apartment. Jasmine is currently taking all my clothes to my room.

Lunch isn’t too far off so I start to organize the kitchen. Box after box I unpack all my utensils, pots and pans, cookbooks, and then stack everything that needs to go back downstairs in the corner. I don’t really want to unpack my pastry items until I’m ready to use them. As much as I want to stress bake, I know I need to get this apartment organized first.

“Hey, where do you want this?” Jasmine holds up my baking apron I had made up years ago with my business logo on the front. *Wings of Freedom* is printed on the top of a cake with angel wings.

I smile, just the reminder I needed. Everything will work out. I have my building. My dream is coming true; slow and steady.

“You can put it over here with the pile of stuff I need to take downstairs eventually.”

A few hours go by and I start to make lunch. Chicken Bacon Ranch Strombolis. I make a few extras and take them downstairs. Jasmine follows with drinks. We couldn't fit a kitchen table on the truck earlier so I arranged for it to be delivered another day. In the meantime the counter top in the main shop area will do. As we come downstairs into the kitchen I only see Bricker.

That's odd.

“Hey, where did the other guys run off to?” I ask curiously.

“Oh we just had some club business that needs addressing. They should be back in a few hours,” he grunts as he pulls some drywall off the demolished section of the kitchen. They almost have the wall down. I'll be able to start cleaning after lunch, hopefully. I notice Bricker has the security monitor turned toward him. I had it facing the opposite way earlier.

Wonder why he wants to watch the doors.

“We made lunch,” Jasmine chuckles more to herself but adds, “Well I brought the drinks anyway, I can't cook to save my life.”

After the incident this morning with Bricker stepping in to direct Justin, she has been more at ease around him. Maybe she will start letting her guard down some.

“Thank goodness I was about to go over to the bar for a late lunch, but I will happily sample whatever you brought down. It smells delicious,” he says.

Bricker saunters over to the counter. He is a tall man, broad shoulders, and a bit rugged, but ultimately a teddy bear. I glance out the large glass windows towards the bar, but the parking lot looks pretty empty. I nod towards the bar, “It doesn't seem too busy today. Isn't it always as busy as it was yesterday?”

“Usually, unless we are having a cookout at the clubhouse. The brothers tend to hang out there. Plus Daphne prefers it. She would much rather cook for everyone in a commercial kitchen than have to lug everything to the clubhouse. I’m sure the other Old Ladies feel the same way,” he says between bites.

Jasmine arches an eyebrow at me, I shrug. I have read my fair share of romance novels. I know the term Old Ladies means they are pretty much wives to the men that have *claimed* them. I don’t know how I feel about that term. But being *claimed* doesn’t sound all that bad.

“So,” Jasmine hesitates and Bricker waits for her patiently, “How does this whole motorcycle clubhouse thing work? Is it like your gang’s lair or is it homier?”

I almost spit out my soda holding in my laugh, but Bricker doesn’t mind her wary tone or the fact that she called it a lair.

“It’s more of a sanctuary actually. It’s somewhere for the guys to lay their heads down, blow off some steam and on occasion we throw some pretty killer parties for our members and their families. Well their families and the single men bring their flings. It’s a really nice cabin up in the mountains. I actually think you both would like it,” Bricker shrugs, “I get the impression that you aren’t fond of the MC world.”

He looks at Jasmine, no judgment, just open curiosity on his face. Jasmine looks at him thoughtfully.

“It’s not that I’m not fond of it. It’s just...” she sighs, “Aren’t clubs like yours involved in drug runs and weapons deals? I mean like the Hells Angels or something?”

Bricker just chuckles, “I’m not saying we are innocent, I won’t lie to you, but for the most part we do things the police can’t. The police force here in Black Mountain is extremely small. If they ask us for help, we help them. There are things we can do that they just can’t. This area is a lot for them to cover. I can’t tell you any of our club business, but know you’re safe with us, with Matt. I promise to never lie to you, even if I can’t tell you all the details.”

He reaches across the counter and squeezes Jasmine's hand, like a big brother showing support.

"If this morning was any indication you may like having us around if that creep of an ex starts trouble," he says, gives me a heavy look that I can't fully read.

I grimace, "About that, you got most of the story. It all happened almost seven months ago. He was cheating on me and I dumped him. You know the rest. But I do want to say thank you for stepping in. Justin isn't the same as he used to be."

"That's my job, keeping everyone safe, but when I saw you grab your gun I knew something was off. Next time just tell one of us. We will handle it, and if he comes back around we will handle that too."

I laugh, "Ah, I should probably ask if there is a shooting range nearby. I like to go once a week or so since everything happened. When Justin broke in and stole the cat he got me as our 1-year anniversary gift, I started going more often, along with my self-defense workouts. Jaz, you should come with me. I know it has never been your thing, but it would be a lot more fun if you came."

Jasmine shrugs, "Okay, if you want me to, I will."

"Actually Matt has one at his house. His property butts up to the clubhouse so it would be easy to set you up over there. We would just need to clear it with him," he glances at Jasmine, "But something tells me he won't mind in the slightest. Well ladies, thank you for lunch, but I need to get back to work. It was delicious."

Jasmine and I clean up and head back upstairs.



A few hours later I hear someone knock on our door.

“Yeah, okay, I’ll handle it,” I hear the deep voice say.

I open the door to find Bricker standing there with a serious look on his face. His hair looks like he has been running his fingers through it.

“What’s up?” I ask cheerily, my mood is so much better after the productive afternoon we have had.

“Matt just called, I told him what happened earlier with Justin. I promised I wouldn’t lie to you guys. So here it goes.”

There goes my good mood. I sigh heavily and nod for him to continue.

“He wants you and Jasmine to stay at the clubhouse until we know fully what’s happening. It will be easier to protect everyone if we are all in one place. I can’t tell you all the details, and before you start arguing; Justin is dealing with some pretty shady people and hasn’t left town yet. It doesn’t look good, Alex. I know Jasmine doesn’t want anything to do with us, but this is important for your safety.”

Everything in me wants to throw a fit. I have never ran or needed protection from anyone. The encounter with Justin earlier definitely has me shaken. He was not his usual stalker self. There was something else lying underneath his usual demeanor, something malicious, and for some reason the look on Bricker’s face takes all the fight out of me.

Jasmine comes from one of the bedrooms, her face visibly pale. She also has been unsettled by the turn of events and has been begging me all afternoon to tell Dad the full story. Which I am definitely considering. She clearly heard what Bricker said. I go to her and grab her hand, reassuring her, “You can go back home Jasmine if you want. But I’m not letting that asshole ruin what I already have started here.”

“No, you’re right; he won’t stop no matter where you are. I think I should stay,” Jasmine’s face is unusually unreadable. I turn towards Bricker who is now leaning against the door frame.

“Honestly I’d fight you tooth and nail on this if I thought you’d let me,” I look at Bricker, “But something tells me

you'd just toss me over your shoulder and carry me down the stairs like a caveman."

"If it makes you feel any better, I am making Daph shut down the bar until this is over. So she will be at the clubhouse too, and I don't think I would be the one carrying you down these stairs, but I wouldn't put it past Rhett. He is a bit overprotective for some reason when it comes to you," he gives me a teasing look, "Come on, we better head that way before that exact scenario happens."

Not that I mind the image of Rhett hoisting me over his shoulder passing through my mind. Now is definitely not the time.

"Come on chop, chop, I still need to stop and get Daph," Bricker says impatiently. Hiding my flushed cheeks, Jasmine and I start throwing stuff in bags.

"So much for unpacking," I huff to no one in particular. Jasmine hears me and gives me a reassuring smile.

Having her with me has been a blessing, but I can't help but worry. What if something happens to her while we are here? I push the worry away. She may be a bit shy around the MC but if there is one thing we both do well it's thrive in stressful situations.

Our Dad taught us a lot over the years. He never really talks about his past and how he met mom, but he always made sure we could take care of ourselves. Teaching us how to stay calm when our world was in chaos, some self-defense, he taught me how to shoot when I was ten. Jasmine was never big on guns but he taught her the same self-defense moves anyway. Not to mention the camping trips, knot tying lessons, and general survival skills any good adventurer may need.

He always said it was just to spend time with us. Looking back I'd say it was so he knew we could take care of ourselves in any situation. I'm grateful for it, that's for sure. Throughout my life, I haven't had to use any of those skills much, but I kept up with my self-defense by incorporating it in with my workouts at the gym. Especially once Justin started stalking

me. I may have felt a bit paranoid at the time, but obviously my gut instinct was right to hone those skills again.

I stuff my lavender shampoo in my gray duffle bag and mentally inventory everything I threw in there. *Crap I forgot to grab an extra pair of pants.*

Passing by Jasmine in the hall who has her own duffle slung over her shoulder, I tell her, “Almost ready. ”

She nods and heads toward the living room. I step into my honey-colored bedroom. It looks so homey in here with my olive-green bedspread and gray and white throw pillows on the bed. *I really wish I was staying here tonight.*

Snatching a pair of black skinny jeans out of the box by my closet I hurry toward the living room. I stop briefly by the side table next to the couch and pull the Glock out, tucking it into the waistband of my jeans. I also snag a few boxes of ammo just in case we can go to the gun range.

“All set?” Bricker asks not looking up as he types a message out on his phone.

“Yup, all set,” Jasmine and I say at the same time. That gets Bricker’s attention. He smirks, shakes his head, and starts down the stairs.

“Twins,” I hear him chuckle under his breath. Bricker sets off toward the bar calling over his shoulder, “ You guys go ahead and load up in your truck. I’ll grab Daph and you can follow me out.”

Jasmine and I load up in my red Ford and I start the truck just as Bricker and Daphne exit the bar. She doesn’t look any happier than I did when Bricker told me to pack a bag. She’s talking fast, rolling her eyes as she hops in Bricker’s construction truck slamming the door.

I pull toward them and follow them out of the lot, huffing out a breath, I grip the steering wheel, stating, “Not knowing what we are really involved in is a bit unnerving, but at least we have a group of people to help us out. I should probably call Dad tomorrow and update him on the situation. Maybe I can tell him we had a gas leak, so he doesn’t worry too much.”

Jasmine just shakes her head, “I would just tell him the whole truth. He is bound to find out anyways.”

“Yeah you’re right, I should have told him months ago. Then maybe we wouldn’t be in this situation in the first place. What do you think he was smuggling to cause this much of a fuss?” I ask curiously as we pass by an old run-down gas station.

“I think the better question is who,” Jasmine says thoughtfully, “Did you see Bricker’s face when you mentioned that Damien guy. It was almost like he knew exactly who you were talking about. I definitely think there is more going on here than we know. I have a feeling it is much bigger than Justin. Maybe we can talk to Matt and he can tell us since Bricker wasn’t allowed to.”

I hum in agreement as I think about her piecing all that together. She has always been so observant and thoughtful, whereas I react and think about the evidence later. Maybe that’s part of why we are in this mess in the first place. *Placing blame on yourself isn’t helping anyone. Put your big girl pants on and deal with the hand you’re dealt.*

We turn off the highway, there is a large iron gate in front of a long-paved driveway. I see Bricker reach his arm out of his window and enter a code on a keypad near his door. Following him up the long winding driveway, it y’s off and we take the left side. I briefly wonder if the drive on the right is Matt’s since Bricker said his property connects. We come around a ninety degree turn and my mouth hangs open.

In front of us is a pristine green lawn with a massive three-story cabin with huge floor to ceiling windows on every floor. It overlooks the mountains and valleys beyond it and the view is stunning.

“My gosh, I did say I needed a vacation, but this wasn’t exactly what I had in mind,” I hear Jasmine whisper.

I scoff, “No kidding.”

We come around the back side of the cabin and where a large gray pole barn sits, there have to be thirty bikes parked back here. Parking next to Bricker’s truck, I see Rhett in the side

mirror coming along my side of the truck. He opens my door with concern on his face, and something a little wild and untamed in his eyes.

“Hey,” I say in greeting, but he just stares into my eyes like he’s searching for something. Those piercing blue eyes are bright against his sandy blonde hair.

I could stare into them for days.

He takes hold of my hand and whatever that wild glint was vanishes out of his eyes, his shoulders relax and he rubs a finger across my knuckles. Instantly my cheeks flush.

“Hey,” he finally says back.

He takes a step back and helps me down out of the truck. I grab the duffle out of the bed and start to walk toward the tailgate.

He places a hand on my lower back guiding me but stops abruptly, raises my shirt a little, his eyes roam my face, when I turn to look at him. His eyes crinkling at the sides as he chuckles, “Bricker warned me you were a badass but I had to see it to believe it. Damn woman, you’re making this difficult.”

Scrunching my brow in confusion I ask, “Making what difficult?”

Chapter 17

Rhett

I raise my hand to the side of her face. Alex's emerald eyes seem to brighten. Rubbing the pad of my thumb along the side of her neck, "Not kissing you."

I lower my head slightly just to see what she will do. *God it's so hard not to pin her up against this truck and kiss the daylights out of her.*

Her mouth opens slightly and she starts to lean in. I'm centimeters away from her mouth, her pulse is thrumming under my hand and bang the passenger door slams shut knocking us out of the moment. Alex jumps and cheeks are the prettiest shade of pink I have ever seen. She shakes her head and looks toward the other side of the truck.

I follow her gaze. Matt and Jasmine are almost nose to nose. Jasmine's face is the color of a tomato and she has a finger dug into Matt's chest pushing hard.

Yelling, Jasmine's voice is echoing off the barn, "You are not my boss, Matt Turner, and you sure as hell don't get to tell me what to do! You already forced us up here. Now leave me alone."

Jasmine yanks the duffle bag off his shoulder, pushes his arm off the side of the truck that was caging her in and stalks past him toward us.

"Great, I was hoping she'd start to like the guy after this," Alex sighs and I look down at her. She has concern on her face as she watches her sister approach, "What happened, Jaz?"

"Ugh that man is a barbarian. It's five hundred degrees out here and he wants me to put a gosh dang jacket on, and then he told me not to talk to anyone unless he specifically introduces me! Can you believe that? Do I have a property of Matt Turner tattoo across my forehead?" She's all but yelling at the end. Face red, bright green eyes glaring toward Matt, who is glaring right back at her.

I briefly hear Matt mutter what I think is, “That can be arranged.”

Jasmine isn't dressed poorly. What she's wearing accents her body well. If I was into her instead of Alex I'd definitely be eyeing the little bit of cleavage she has showing out of her baby doll tank top.

When Daphne breaks the tension with her extremely loud cackle. Jasmine adjusts her glare to her next. Daphne raises her hands in surrender wiping tears from her eyes. “Oh sweetie, once my brother decides he wants something there isn't anything that's going to stop him,” Daphne drawls sweetly, “Although he rarely has to work hard to get a woman, I think I'm going to enjoy this.”

She winks at her brother as she takes Jasmine's hand. “Come on, I will show you two to your room. I hope you don't mind but you will be sharing.”

Alex glances at me and follows behind Daphne. Bricker is grinning ear to ear, “Well this will be an interesting few days.”

He slaps my back as he passes following after his Old Lady. Shaking my head I head over to Matt.

He's glaring after Jasmine while watching anyone that looks her way. Lord, sometimes he is so intense and possessive I don't think he even realizes it, but I have never seen him act like this before. I lay a hand on his shoulder and give it a squeeze.

“Just give her time to get to know you, she isn't from this life,” I remind him. He shakes his head and goes off in the opposite direction.

Bikers do life a bit differently. We live fast, we love hard, and we don't hold back. It's an intense way of life, but I wouldn't have it any other way. I make my way after Alex hoping for a few more minutes with her. On the way I greet a few brothers that I hadn't seen in a while. Shaking hands and giving back slaps. It feels good to be back home.

I walk up the stairs to change into a clean pair of jeans. No one has noticed but there is a tiny bit of blood around the cuff of

my boot from earlier with Justin. Stepping into my room, I flip on the lamp illuminating the charcoal gray walls. I quickly change and wash up before going back out into the hallway. As I open my door and step out I run chest first right into... Alex. Don't ask me how I know it's her. I just do; she's a flame and I'm a bug drawn to her.

Chapter 18

Alex

As I follow Jasmine into our room, I can't help but be a bit worried. Jasmine hasn't ever acted out like that before. I don't even think I have ever heard her raise her voice at anyone, well, except maybe me, but that's beside the point. I need to figure this out before we have a repeat screaming match and get left to deal with things on our own.

"Jaz talk to me," I plead, "Tell me what's really going on."

She throws her duffle on the furthest twin bed in the olive-green room. She sighs, "I don't know if I can explain it. I haven't ever felt like this before. I have this all-consuming urge that I can't pin down. I can't tell you if I want to wrap Matt in a chokehold and squeeze the life out of him or push him up against a wall and have my way with him."

She rolls her eyes and flops down on the bed hard. Throwing her arm over her face she continues, "Then he opens that damn bossy ass mouth of his and tries to tell me what to do and I just snap. I mean who the heck does he think he is telling me to 'cover up what's mine'?" She air quotes around the last few words, all but shouting, "What's his! Like he owns me. Like I'm his damn wife. Even if I was his damn wife I would dress however I damn well please. God, he is an overbearing Alpha-hole! We have literally had a handful of conversations, none ending well."

By the time she is done, I have already kicked off my shoes and flopped down on my own bed. I chuckle at that last part and she throws her pillow at my face.

"Jaz listen to me. The guy obviously finds you attractive. Maybe give him a chance," I hold up my hand to stop her next rant, "I'm not saying make it easy for him by any means. All I am saying is these men around here respect him. He is protecting us, and he clearly has a thing for you," I wiggle my eyebrows at her suggestively, chuckling, "Alpha-hole statements aside."

Jasmine sighs, “Maybe I overreacted, but gosh I *hate* it when people tell me what I can and can’t do,” she sits up, “I’ll give him a chance to be better, but I am not under any circumstances apologizing for the scene I just threw down there.”

“Fair enough,” I say standing up and walking to the ensuite bath room to freshen up, “I think I am going to head down and find something to drink, you wanna come?”

“No, I think I am going to hide up here and save myself some embarrassment.”

I go to the door and start to head down the hall. I turn my head to make sure I shut the door behind me and smack into something hard. Strong tattooed arms wrap around my waist to keep me from falling and I automatically put my hands on the rock-hard chest in front of me. I’m overwhelmed by Rhett’s cologne. It’s the manliest delicious scent I have ever smelled. Dragging my eyes up the contours of his chiseled chest, oh so slowly, I’m met with smiling icy blue eyes.

“Easy little lady, where are you off to in such a rush?” He chuckles. Running his hands up my sides just a couple inches.

“Oh,” I say a little breathlessly, “I’m...uh...”

Blushing, I look down at his hands. He’s pulled me a little closer to him, making it harder to think. My pulse is racing. *Good lord, Alex get it together,* mentally shaking myself. “I was heading to find something to drink. I really should call my dad and let him know what’s going on so he isn’t worried. Is there somewhere private outside I could go?”

Rhett lets go of my waist and takes my hand, “Sure, I’ll take you somewhere.”

He intertwines our fingers and I feel his calloused fingers move against mine. Trying to keep my thoughts PG-13 I follow him down the stairs. Downstairs is chaos. There must be fifteen men lining the kitchen, Daphne is barking orders telling them where to put things. Apparently this ordeal is turning into a cookout. There’s hamburger buns, chips, hot

dogs, and potato salad lining the black stone counter tops. You'd think they were feeding a hundred people.

Rhett doesn't acknowledge anyone as he grabs a soda and a bottle of water off the counter. We head out the side door, going mainly unnoticed.

The patio out here is wonderful. There's a fireplace surrounded by brown wicker furniture overlooking the mountain. It's a pretty large area and the yard beyond has several picnic tables with a larger bonfire area further out, a few cornhole boards sitting off to one side, and a kids' jungle gym. This is definitely a place for a lot of people to gather.

"This way," Rhett nods toward the bonfire area, still holding my hand he leads us to a wicker loveseat, "Do you want a water or the soda?"

I take the water he's holding out for me and sit next to him. I say, "Thank you."

He nods stretching his long lean legs out in front of him. He rests his arm on the back of the loveseat and I can't help but inhale his cologne again.

"This conversation with my dad won't be the easiest, but you're welcome to stay if you want to," I say not really caring if he hears Dad yelling at me. For whatever reason Rhett just has this calm personality that sets my mind at ease.

Rhett's leg brushes mine as he grabs my chin to make me look at him, "No matter how mad your dad may be, he loves you. Just try to remember that."

He drops his hand and leans back into the couch and watches the mountain out ahead of us. Sighing I pull out my phone. My knee starts bouncing. *Gosh why didn't I come clean months ago?*

"Hey kiddo, how are ya?" Dad answers cheerily.

"Just fine Dad, how are you?" I say, getting the pleasantries out of the way.

"Oh I'm just getting the lumber you wanted for that shelf loaded in my truck. I think I'm going to head down tomorrow

and stay with you girls for a few days if you don't mind? I'd like to help you open your shop up sooner rather than later," Dad's voice sounds a bit tense but I don't think much of it.

"Yeah, about that...there's something I gotta tell ya," I take a deep breath and Rhett puts a hand on my bouncing knee offering some comfort, "I'm not sure how you're going to react so try to keep in mind that you raised me to take care of myself. You taught me to be independent and handle problems on my own. So that's why I didn't tell you any of this."

"Well, let me have it," Dad says in a no-nonsense tone. So I tell him. About the stalking, the defense classes I started taking at the gym, how the delivery went, and the newest bit about staying at the clubhouse. I'm greeted with silence.

"You still with me, Dad?" I ask quietly.

"Yeah, I'm just processing," Dad sighs, but then shocks me when he says, "Listen I know Matt told me not to tell you girls, but I've never been one to beat around the bush. Justin isn't who they are worried about. He has been handled. I know most of the details, and I'm glad you're at the clubhouse. I want you to stay there. I'm heading down tomorrow to stay with you two until this is all settled."

He doesn't even know Matt or any of these guys. I start, "But Dad you don't..."

He cuts me off, "Alex, I'm no use to you up here and there are things I can help Matt with down there, but that's a conversation I need to have with him..." he sighs and I can just picture him rubbing his forehead, "And you girls face to face. I know I don't talk about my past much but I think it's time I finally fill you in."

I glance at Rhett who can hear the whole conversation and he looks just as confused as I am.

"Okay Dad, well I'll see you tomorrow then. I love you and drive safe."

"Love you too, kiddo," and the phone cuts off. Rhett's hand is still on my leg, he starts to rub his thumb back and forth reassuringly.

“Well that didn’t go at all how I thought it would,” I huff looking up at Rhett, “Matt called my dad?”

Rhett nods before he shrugs, “It’s not my place to talk about. If Matt wants you to know club business he will have to fill you in.”

“Why all the secrecy?” I turn so I can see him better, drawing my feet up underneath me, my knees resting on his thigh.

Rhett just stares at his hand, that’s still on my leg. He says, “For your protection and it’s also about loyalty and trust. The only people that know club business are the brothers and their Old Ladies. It’s safer for everyone that way,” he runs a hand through his sandy blond hair, “I really wish I could tell you everything, but unless you wanna be my Old Lady...”

He trails off, grinning ear to ear and it’s the most stunning smile I have ever seen. I chuckle.

“Well we just met, maybe wait a while before you ask me to be your Old Lady,” I wink at him when he looks a bit shocked by my comment.

He brings his hand up to my cheek, eyes softening, “I plan to do just that.”

He moves in slowly giving me plenty of time to turn away. He slides his hand down my neck encouraging me to move in closer, and I do. My mouth parts, his eyes dart down to the movement, and then his mouth claims mine. I’ve been kissed quite a bit, but it has never felt like this.

Electricity shoots through me. This kiss is all consuming, breathtaking, and I just want more. I pull back breathless before I do something stupid like straddle his lap. The look in his eyes is pure desire and heat. He rubs his thumb across my bottom lip. “Damn Alex, you’re making this difficult.”

I don’t ask this time because I already know. This man right here is nuclear. He is epic, all consuming, and I think I may just let myself explode for him.

Chapter 19

Rhett

After I drop Alex back off at her room I head over to Matt's office. Which was the last thing I wanted to do after that explosive kiss, but I knock on the door anyway.

"Enter," he barks from inside.

He looks up as I'm opening the door. His hair is a mess, his leather cut is thrown haphazardly on the back of his chair, and his eyes are a wild bright green. "You okay, Prez?"

"Stop asking me that. I don't have an answer," he growls.

"You wanna talk about it?" I close the door behind me and plop down in the leather office chair across from him.

He glares at me incredulously, "I don't even know where to start. What is it about that woman? She's going to drive me mad!"

We've been friends for a while now and I haven't seen him this worked up over a woman...ever. I chuckle lightly, "I know what you mean. Alex is something else. Did you see she was packing this afternoon? Hottest thing I've ever seen."

He glares at me sharply before running his hand over the scruff on his jaw, "It's not just that. I have this overwhelming urge to just lock Jasmine in my house and never let her leave. Then there's the issue of me opening my mouth and some possessive asshole comment comes out, and her big green eyes light with anger and I could live for that look alone. It's intoxicating," he huffs a laugh shaking his head, "She's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen, but when she gets angry instead of shy...I just want to push all her buttons until I have seen every single side of her, but I'm going about it all wrong."

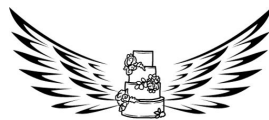
"Just be your charming self, Matt, if she's meant for you it'll happen," I shrug, not really sure what to tell him, "I might be able to help with you getting some time to know her."

He looks at me surprised, arching an eyebrow in question, so I continue, “Alex wants to teach Jasmine how to shoot and asked if they could use your gun range.”

Matt smiles smugly, “Perfect, I’ll go talk to them after we patch in Miles and Drake tonight at the cookout.”

“Bout time those two got patched in. They are ready. I also wanted to give you a heads up. I was with Alex when she called and fessed up to her dad about everything. He mentioned needing a meeting with you face to face, something about his past, and how he can help us,” I shrug, “I’m not really sure what he meant by that, and Alex didn’t really know either.”

“Well okay. He said he’d be down tomorrow so I guess I’ll worry about that then. Come on, let’s get this cookout started.”



The cookout is in full swing when Alex and Jasmine emerge from the back door. My eyes immediately find her. Alex is wearing snug high-rise jeans with a halter crop top, that make her eyes almost a glowing green color. But it’s the slight bit of skin at her midriff that keeps catching my eyes. I cannot wait to rub my thumb across it. Her hair is thrown up in a messy bun accentuating her lean neck. Jasmine is sporting black high-waisted shorts that are frayed at the bottom and her signature baby doll tank, but this one has a plunging v down the front. *Matt won’t be happy about that, maybe she’s proving a point.* Making my way toward them, I see Matt heading across the yard as well.

“You look stunning,” I say, reaching for Alex I place my hands on either side of her waist and my thumbs brush that bit of skin. My pulse jumps as she hitches a breath.

Blushing she looks at my mouth, her tongue darting out to wet her own, “Thanks.”

Jasmine clears her throat, “So uh what does a patching in ceremony mean exactly?”

She asks just as Matt makes it to us. He steps by her side, his arm brushing hers. She doesn’t pull away, I notice. Alex must notice the same thing because she wiggles her eyebrows at her sister. Blushing Jasmine turns toward Matt seeking an answer.

Matt clears his throat and nods towards Drake and Miles who are currently chugging beer. “Well they start as recruits or prospects. They basically do all our grunt work, or things we don’t feel like doing. Once they earn my trust, they get the club’s leather cut with just the name on the back. After a while and they’ve done more to earn our trust, and start to become part of the family, we give them the bottom half of the patch ‘family, loyalty, sanctuary’. If you haven’t noticed most of us are a bit scarred, some in more ways than others,” he glances at me briefly and I can feel Alex’s curious gaze on the side of my face, Matt continues, “I built this place for just that. A sanctuary for my family. My biological one, and my brothers. Tonight Miles and Drake are getting their final patch. The mountain for the center. After this weekend they have earned it.”

Jasmine nods at Matt, “Thank you for explaining. I’m gonna go get a drink.”

Matt takes her hand gently, “Before you go, can I talk to you in private for a second?”

Jasmine glances at Alex and then around the yard, “I guess so.”

Matt tugs her back toward the house and they disappear inside.

“Well, I’d love to be a fly on the wall for that discussion,” Alex smiles up at me as she takes my hand and we go across the yard as she says, “Come on, I’m starving!”

Chapter 20

Matt

God I feel like a caged lion. Holding Jasmine's hand I lead her to my office. Just the feel of her hand in mine is making my heart race. She hasn't spoken much since she exploded when she got here. *That was a mess.* Taking her into the office I move to sit down on my gray leather couch off to the side. She sits a good six inches away from me, releasing my hand. She clutches her hands together and places them in her lap nervously.

I just watch her for a few minutes, observing. She starts fidgeting uncomfortably.

"Look," I bark.

She glares at me and instantly I regret opening my mouth. I stand up and start pacing.

"Gosh dang it! Let me start over," I growl. Spinning I face her. She's picking at the frayed edge of her shorts not looking at me. *I can't have that.* I drop to my knees in front of her.

"Jaz," I say softly, tucking a finger under her chin directing her to look at me. She sucks in a breath and the emotions flying across her eyes are incredible: nervousness, curiosity, anger, confusion, and surprise. When I gently tug her face to mine, I place the gentlest kiss on her forehead. I sigh, "I'm sorry. I don't know what I'm doing but can we start over? I want to get to know you, I want to protect you, I want to know every part of you."

"Why?" She asks, "Every time we talk we fight. Why should I give this a chance when we aren't even friendly to each other?"

"Jasmine, I can't get you out of my mind, and every conversation we have ever had has been in a crowd full of my brothers. Where they are all eyeing you, waiting for you to notice them. It makes me want to lock you in a tower like a princess," I hold up a hand before she snarks a remark, "Yes, I know you can take care of yourself, but I want to be the one to

take care of you. I want to be the one you call when you're lonely. I want to be the one to take you to dinner. I want you on the back of my bike, no one else's. I haven't ever felt this way about anyone before, but all I'm asking Jaz is for a fresh start. A chance to start over, and I will try to keep my asshole comments to myself."

Her eyes soften at my admission. I can only imagine what I look like, a big biker down here on my knees begging her to give me a chance. She places a hand on my face and I lean into it. She seems to be studying my face searching for something. She must find what she's looking for because her eyes light up with mischief.

"Hi, I'm Jasmine Springfield. Don't tell me how to dress or what to do, I don't enjoy it, but you can make it up to me with some really delicious Chinese food, and a nice long ride on that sexy bike of yours."

I look at her grinning like a fool. She giggles and I pull her into me taking her face in my hands I kiss her softly, "That's all I ask."

Chapter 21

Alex

All the seats around the bonfire were taken except one. Rhett is carrying both our plates and I'm carrying our beers. I can't help but ogle him as he walks in front of me. He's wearing light colored jeans that hug low on his hips. His black shirt is stretched tight across his broad shoulders and his leather cut adds a ruggedness that's becoming irresistible. He sets our plates down on a side table and settles into the open chair. He pats his leg and smiles when I look at him incredulously.

I roll my eyes and sit on the arm of the chair handing him the beer. I reach across him for my plate and his large, calloused hand lands on the skin at the small of my back. I gasp in surprise, my pulse speeds up and I almost spill my plate on him as he lifts me like I weigh nothing onto his lap. Fumbling to catch my plate, I squeak and *everyone* is looking at us.

Daphne just starts laughing, "Girl if a man like him touched me, I'd be all thumbs too!"

Bricker eyes her but just continues eating. I feel Rhett chuckling beneath me. Glancing at him I start eating my hotdog. I can feel his gaze on me so I turn to look at him.

"What?" I say between bites of my hotdog. He grins sheepishly.

"Oh nothing, just making some mental notes," he chuckles as he eyes my mouth suggestively. A big burly man in his late fifties with a gray beard walks over and slaps Rhett on his shoulder.

"Rhett, it's been a while. How have you been, brother?" his voice comes out lighter than I expected. Like maybe he inhaled too much smoke and can't make his voice any louder. It's rough and raspy but light and wispy all at the same time. His eyes are soft and warm reminding me of a preacher. Like he genuinely cares about Rhett's answer.

"Hey Doc, I'm good. Have you met Alex?" his hand is rubbing small circles on my back, making goose bumps

pebble.

I extend my hand and clear my throat, “It’s nice to meet you.”

“And you’re the pretty baker, right? It’s difficult for me to tell you and your sister apart,” he shakes my hand firmly when I nod, “Well I’ll let you two get back to it. I just thought I’d check in and see if you needed to talk while I was in town. It’s been a while.”

Rhett shifts under me, almost uncomfortably, “I’m surprisingly good. The past few months haven’t been bad. Those breathing exercises really help, thank you.”

I glance at Rhett but don’t push for answers. I’ll get to know him soon enough. Doc walks away and we finish our meal making small talk with Daphne and Bricker. Miles and Drake are playing cornhole with Cole and Lia’s husband Axel and the other brothers are scattered around the yard laughing and cutting up. It feels nice to just be a part of this group. They genuinely seem to care for one another. I can’t keep track of everyone I’ve met but they have all been nice, a little rough around the edges, but that’s to be expected with a biker club, I suppose.

I lean into Rhett’s chest a little, “I wonder how Matt and Jasmine are getting along.”

He chuckles, “Well the house is still standing so I’d say it’s going okay. Come on I want to show you something.”

We ditch our plates and empty beer bottles and walk toward the lookout, away from everyone. There is a little trail off to the right that leads deeper into the dark woods. Rhett starts to lead me down it. The path is pretty wide and gravel. It’s well taken care of but the darkness makes it a bit eerie.

“Is this where you kill me and throw my body off the cliff?” I say teasing him.

He stops and stares at me with a slightly faraway look. His breathing picks up, almost like he’s running. He isn’t blinking just staring through me. Standing there I give him a minute. I know he was a Marine so maybe something I said caused this reaction. Between the comment from Matt earlier about this

being a sanctuary and the way Doc was talking, maybe he isn't always as calm as I think he is. His fingers start flexing and I can't stand it any longer, I need to pull him out of whatever this is. I step closer and put my hand on his cheek feather light.

"Rhett," I say softly, "Come back to me, big guy."

He flinches away and rips my wrist away from his face. Twisting me in a circle and locks my arm behind me. I'm pressed so tightly to his chest, it's hard to breathe. His eyes come back into focus sharply as I yelp in pain.

"Oh shit, I'm so sorry. Are you okay?" he asks, instantly letting go of my hand and taking a step back. His face is full of concern but he keeps retreating, "I'm so sorry, I'm so, so sorry."

He's three feet from me; I reach my hand out, "Rhett, it's okay. I'm not sure what just happened, and you don't have to tell me until you're ready, but I'm okay I promise."

He freezes under my touch. He sighs deeply, his shoulders sagging in defeat, "I'm sorry, I've been getting better, but when you said toss off a cliff I remembered something."

He takes my arm and inspects it for bruises. There might be some tomorrow, but it's too dark out here for me to see anything right now. He presses a gentle kiss to the inside of my wrist. The shadows playing across his face make him look so weary. His blue eyes aren't as bright as they were and I'd do anything to put a smile back on his handsome face.

"It's okay," I lift my hand to his face and stroke my thumb across his cheek. *This mountain of a man is going to steal my heart in a matter of a few days. Lord, I'm so screwed.* Taking his hand, "Come on big guy, what did you want to show me?"

"It's this way," he says gruffly. He gently takes my hand and ushers me forward, avoiding any eye contact. The trail is gravel and wide enough for us to walk side by side. We are both quiet. It's a comfortable silence though, well for me at least. It's too dark for me to really see Rhett's face to know what's going on with him so when he starts to talk, I listen intently.

Chapter 22

Rhett

I can't believe that's all it took. It wasn't even totally a memory. It was a vivid picture of someone throwing Alex's lifeless body over a cliff. I was running trying to get to her but I couldn't. Then the image morphed into me looking over the cliff at a lifeless body, and that memory I needed out of immediately. I did not want to relive that one, the one where I was too late. Thank God Alex touched me. She must be thinking I'm insane, I mentally kick myself, I might as well get this out of the way. She's going to find out eventually, and then if she runs away from me, I'll let her go. No one should be tied to someone as broken as me.

The trail opens up into the meadow between the clubhouse and Matt's place. There is a small pond with a dock that's reflecting the moon light. This is where Doc usually takes me for our sessions. It has become the most peaceful spot in my world. I usually don't share it with anyone, but I want to share it with Alex.

We are both quiet as we walk towards the dock. As we sit on the edge, Alex takes off her sandals and puts her feet in the water.

"It's beautiful here," she says as the water ripples away from her.

My arm brushes hers as I sit next to her. I don't know where to start so I just go for it. My voice comes out heavy and a bit hoarse.

"I have PTSD." I expect her to look at me with pity or concern, but I don't expect to find her looking at me with understanding. "Matt found me when I was spiraling out of control. I was fighting in an underground ring just trying to make myself forget the crazy shit I've been through. He brought me here, to this dock. He told me this was his sanctuary and he was happy to share it with me, along with his therapist," I scoff, "That's how I met Doc. The rest just sort of fell together and the MC became my second family. I still

struggle with my flashbacks, but they aren't as often or as debilitating as they used to be.”

She doesn't say anything she just takes my hand giving it a comforting squeeze, I continue, “When you said, throw you off a cliff, I was thrown back to a few years ago. My platoon and I were sent to Northern Iraq to take out a target. We were a special elite unit that got dropped in and were told to figure out a way back. If we were caught, we were on our own. We had a rendezvous point for the five of us to meet up.

“Derek was taking too long to get back to us. So me and one other guy, Theo, went back for him. We weren't about to leave him behind. The compound we infiltrated was built into the side of a mountain. When I picked my way along the side of a cliff toward the side Derek was supposed to be on, I saw him fighting against three Iraqis. They had him on the cliff's edge and when I was about fifty yards away from him, they shoved him over the edge. My heart stopped and Theo and I went and attacked the men that threw him over. We got the three men taken care of, but when I looked over the edge, I was too late, Derek was gone. He fell and we weren't able to bring him back home with us. So that's where I went back to when you said that. Fighting my way to Derek only to be too late.”

My heart aches just thinking about it. My platoon and I had always been close and losing a brother was the worst feeling, but that was just one drop in the bucket compared to the heartache that came later.

“We got back to our camp and were immediately sent back out. My friend James joined our five-man team after that. Our missions just kept coming in and getting harder and harder. I was over there for eighteen months. The loss and destruction over there just hangs on you like a cloak and doesn't ever go away. But the worst of it, and the straw that broke the camel's back was when we were in a convoy. There were my five guys along with a small platoon of ten others. We were going with them to intercept a target and bring them back to extract intel from them.

“We had done this a few times. This time we were going into the heart of the war zone and there wasn't much we could do

for surveillance ahead of time. Their platoon leader was in charge and we were going to help extract, told to follow this guy's orders no questions asked," I say. My hands shake just recalling the fight Theo and I threw about not being allowed to go ahead of the group, scope things out, but our general didn't listen. I sigh and continue just letting all my worst memories out.

"So we followed. We were the second to last in the convoy, and when we came to a demolished village we were ambushed. The front and the rear of the convoy was taken out with an I.E.D. All hell broke loose after that, and the five of us tried to salvage the situation. We were blocked in, so we gathered what we could as the rebels started to close in on us. There were four men from the platoon still with us, and we ran for a partially standing building. On the way to it someone stepped on another I.E.D. The five of us stayed put behind some crumbled wall while the remaining platoon ran for the building. I'm not sure what the platoon leader did but the five of us knew to get back to our home base. We were surrounded. James and I were going to make our way up to a good sniper position to start picking people off. So the five of us split up." I clench my hand in Alex's, her eyes are shimmering with unshed tears as she listens. She squeezes back.

"James and I made it across the street up into an old building. We started making a path for Theo and the other two men to make a break for it. They started to snake their way through the rubble and the rebels, god there were so many of them. They had to have known we were coming. Theo and the others were pinned down about thirty yards from us, and about seventy-five yards from the building with the platoon leader inside. Theo was trying to get to them so we could all get out together, but there was no way he could've made it. The platoon leader must have called an airstrike in. Because just as I was starting to make a dent in the rebels closing in on Theo, it hit. Right where they were hunkered down. James and I had to take cover and our building started to partially collapse. We scrambled trying to get out of there. We made our way outside, and I remember seeing my teams scattered parts everywhere. There was nothing left. Except more rebels. We didn't realize

it at the time but they had an underground tunnel system, and we were sitting right on top of their main base.”

I squeeze my eyes shut trying to rid myself of the image. “I was hit twice. Once in the leg and once through my vest in my abdomen. I fell and James had to carry me out. We hid for a bit before we made it to an Iraqis car and James hightailed it out of there. The platoon didn’t make it. We got awarded, discharged from the hospital, and sent home. James reenlisted and I was declared medically unfit for duty. I didn’t know how to cope with not having a purpose, or how to deal with everything in my head. So I raged and that’s when Matt found me.”

“I’m so sorry you had to go through that,” Alex tucks herself under my arm, “So how do you pull yourself out of them, or how do I help you in the future?”

“Usually I just have to ride it out. Doc used to be a therapist, for the military actually, and has been working with me, but I haven’t seen him in a month or so. I feel like there isn’t much else for him to talk to me about. I just need time to heal, I guess.”

Chapter 23

Alex

I just want to hug this gorgeous man and help him piece his mind and heart back together. Hearing his story just makes me want to get to know him that much more. He's just staring blankly out across the beautiful pond with a grief stricken look on his face. I place my hand on his cheek and draw his face toward mine. His eyes are bright in the moonlight, the shadows from the moon making his features look dark almost dangerous. I gently kiss him, "If you ever need to talk, I'll happily listen."

He nods and brushes his hand across my cheek, "Thank you."

A comfortable silence falls around us as we watch the moon stretch into the sky. Across the pond I can make out what I assume is Matt's cabin. There is a large white dog lounging on the porch. Soaking up the moon's rays.

"It's so peaceful here, I can understand why the brothers consider this a sanctuary," I sigh snuggling closer into Rhett. The air is starting to chill and I shiver a little.

Rhett looks down at me, wrapping his arm around my back, "Let's head back, it's getting chilly."

We make our way back to the party which seems to be winding down. There are a few stragglers still sitting around the bonfire, but I don't spot Jasmine or Matt anywhere. Rhett and I find an open wicker sofa on the patio and snuggle down.

"Getting to know you has been one of the best things I have done in a long time," I say tucking my feet under me and snuggling closer to Rhett.

He wraps an arm around me, saying, "Me too."



After Rhett dropped me off at my bedroom door last night I found Jasmine fast asleep in our room. She didn't make a noise when I entered, but waking up this morning I can't help the rush of excitement of starting the day. Rhett is going to take Jasmine and I over to the shooting range.

I quickly dress and text Dad.

Me: *Hey what time do you think you'll be down?*

Dad: *I'll be there around noon today. Will you let Matt know?*

Me: *Sure thing!*

I leave my room and head downstairs toward the kitchen. Daphne had told me to make myself at home last night and I love to bake first thing in the morning. I round the corner and find the rest of the house quiet. Cole is passed out on the couch so I quietly start a pot of coffee.

Rummaging through the cabinets, I pull out everything I'll need to make a coffee cake. I also pull stuff out to make some ham, egg, and cheese puff pastries. I'm not a sweets fan but I do love a good puff pastry. Humming to myself since I can't turn any music on I get to work.

I'm just cleaning up when Matt and Rhett come into the kitchen. They must not be concerned about Cole sleeping on the couch because they aren't trying to be quiet. They get their coffees and sit at the bar. My timer on my phone goes off signaling that the cake and pastries are done. I start to pull them out of the oven but feel Rhett's arm wrap around my waist.

“Oh no little lady, you go sit down for a bit. You’ve already been too busy this morning. I’ll pull them out.”

I giggle and sit at the bar, not arguing. He pulls the trays out and sits them on the counter. Matt grabs a stack of plates and hands them out. I pluck a pastry and start to eat.

“Where’s Jasmine?” Matt asks.

“She’s not a morning person, unless coffee is involved so I didn’t wake her. She’s probably still asleep,” I place my coffee cup back down on the stone counter top.

Rhett’s moan draws my attention. I arch an eyebrow and look at him. *I wonder what other sounds he can make in a different setting.* Blushing I shake the thought from my head.

“This is so good!” Rhett says licking icing off his finger. I can’t seem to stop staring as his tongue darts out to lick the tip of his index finger. He has some almost reddish-brown scruff coating his hard square jaw today. *I wonder if it’s rough and scratchy...is it rude to wipe the spec of icing at the side of his mouth off. Or maybe I should just stick my own tongue out and...*

Matt slams a cabinet door, snapping my attention back to the present. Matt looks between Rhett and I, shaking his head. My cheeks flush, and Rhett looks mischievously back at me, like he got his hand caught in the cookie jar before dinner. Matt just chuckles and shakes his head. He grabs a serving tray and places two coffees and two plates of food on it. His eyes dart to mine and I arch a brow. Pink tints his cheeks as he practically runs from the room.

“Well that’s certainly a way to win her over,” I quickly pull my phone out and call Jasmine.

“Hello?” She mumbles groggily.

“Red alert, Jaz! Matt’s bringing you breakfast in bed in 5 seconds.”

“Shit!”

The line goes dead and I can’t help but laugh. I look up at Rhett and he’s grinning too. Yeah, staying at the clubhouse

might not be so bad after all.

Chapter 24

Matt

“Shit!” I hear as I knock on the door. There is scrambling and shuffling. I stand there for a solid minute. A door down the hall opens and I see Kayden stepping out of their room. She arches an eyebrow as she passes me but doesn’t say anything, thankfully. It’s not every day the president brings breakfast to someone’s door.

The door to Jasmine’s room finally opens. She’s got her hair in a lopsided messy bun, her oversized white t-shirt has water droplets on it like she splashed water on her face just seconds ago, and those shorts she’s wearing leave nothing to the imagination. I reach my hand up and thumb away a spec of toothpaste from the corner of her mouth.

“Sorry, I woke you up so early. Alex said you guys wanted to use the shooting range today. So I figured I’d come with a peace offering. Now, I know it’s not Chinese food...but it’s coffee...with sugar...so that counts for something, right?” I hate being unsure of myself and nervous.

After our conversation last night I think we are okay, but this is my way of starting over and I’m not sure what I will do if she doesn’t go with it. I’ve never had to work hard to get a woman’s attention, but I’d do almost anything to get hers.

Jasmine simply opens the door and goes back to the bed. She climbs in giving me a nice view of her backside, so I glance away. I’m not here for that.

I place the tray on the dresser and hand her the coffee and her plate. I’m not sure exactly where to sit since there aren’t any chairs in here so I opt for the end of Jasmine’s bed. She hasn’t said anything but she’s chugging her coffee like she might die if she doesn’t get more. So I wordlessly hand her my cup too.

That earns me a ‘Gah thanks’ murmur, as she starts to slowly drink my cup. I grab my plate and start to eat in the comfortable silence.

Finally Jasmine sighs and puts her plate back on the tray along with her two coffee cups, “Sorry, I’m not used to talking to anyone before ten. So I’m not usually very chatty in the mornings.”

“That’s okay. If you aren’t up for going to the range it’s fine. I like to get out there before it gets too hot.”

“No, no, I told Alex I’d come so I will. I just hate guns. I know how to use one. I’m not great with one, but if worse came to worse I could manage. I know Alex wants me to refresh my skills with everything going on and she is probably right,” Jasmine looks so small as she plucks the white comforter with her small delicate fingers. I lean forward and take her hand.

“I’ll help you feel more comfortable with a gun. How about you stick with me out there today? I’ll bring some handguns I think you’d actually enjoy.” She gives me a half smile and I stand gathering the tray and head for the door.

“Thanks for breakfast,” she almost whispers as she lays back down.

Chapter 25

Alex

Jasmine and I take the trail from the clubhouse toward Matt's house like Rhett had told me to. I have my gun range bag slung over my shoulder with everything I might need in it. Jasmine has been quiet all morning, but I know she's nervous about this. It's been almost four years since she's been to the gun range with me.

We emerge from the wooded trail and are greeted by a giant white Labrador. Tail wagging, tongue hanging out the side of his mouth, his entire body wiggling. He drops down in front of Jasmine and rolls over showing his belly. I scoff, animals have always been that way for her. The front door of the cabin opens and Matt and Rhett walk out onto the porch.

Jasmine stands from petting the wiggly beast and brushes the dirt from her knees. The dog saunters back toward Matt and sits next to his leg. He pats the dog's head lovingly, "This is Throttle."

Jasmine coos over Throttle and I eye Rhett who is watching me intensely. I can't quite read the expression on his face but I wonder how today will go since he's told me about his condition. Will the gun fire affect him? Will he have a flashback? He steps forward and takes my hand leading me toward the gun range. I'd thought I'd be helping Jasmine today, but as I look back I see Matt has taken that job on for himself.

Rhett leads me to a table at the far end of the clearing. I lay my stuff out in front of me and place my noise canceling headphones around my neck.

"I know you said you come to the gun range once a week. But what's your normal routine?" Rhett asks while eyeing my array of items on the table: A Glock, two clips, ammo, and some gun oil just in case.

"Well usually I just shoot the target with both hands a few times, then I'll switch and do one handed on each side. Pulling

out of the holster, you know the basics,” I shrug noticing Matt and Jasmine are at the other end engrossed in conversation.

“Okay let’s see it,” Rhett says with a smirk. I let a few rounds out, hitting my mark every time. I can feel Rhett’s body heat behind me, “Lord woman there is nothing more attractive than you shooting that gun.”

I smirk looking over my shoulder, but suddenly Rhett’s hands are on me, his thumbs are sliding under my shirt just above my jeans. My breath hitches as he leans into my ears, “Let’s see how your aim is when you’re distracted.”

He chuckles darkly as a shiver runs across my body. I raise my gun into my left-hand gripping firmly and empty the clip as Rhett’s nose is running softly up the column of my neck and its taking every bit of concentration to shoot. I pull the target toward us on the makeshift pulley. I had hit my target every time. I place my gun down and turn in Rhett’s arms.

I place my hands on his chest, “Hm, I’d say I do pretty great under pressure. Let’s see how you do.”

He smiles smugly while swapping places with me, his hands at my hips, “And how exactly are you planning on distracting me?”

As we are turning I glance over his shoulder towards Matt and Jasmine. Matt is currently behind her helping adjust her hands on a smaller hand gun. I can’t hear what they are saying but he is whispering in her ear and Jasmine’s cheeks are flushed pink.

“I have a few ideas in mind,” I hedge drawing my attention back to Rhett. He opens his mouth to respond but I cut him off with my lips slamming into his. I’ve been wanting to kiss him all morning. At first he’s surprised but he recovers quickly, and boy howdy this man can kiss. His hands pull me closer so our bodies are pressed up against each other. He turns us again and lifts me so I’m sitting on the table with him pressed between my legs. My black leggings don’t provide much of a barrier, considering what’s nudging between my thighs. The results have my body tingling all over with anticipation.

Just as I start to rock my hips against him, someone clears their throat, “Well now, here I thought I’d have my hands full trying to keep my daughters safe from some outside threat... boy was I wrong.”

“Dad!” I screech and try to slide away from Rhett, whose hands are reluctant to move but his shoulders have gone completely rigid, “Oh! Uh...hey...Dad I didn’t think you’d be in until later.” I stammer glaring at Bricker who is smothering a shit eating grin behind his massive hand. I swear he acts like the brother I never wanted.

Rhett clears his throat stepping forward, “Nice to meet you, Mr. Springfield, I’m Rhett.”

They clasp hands as my dad sizes Rhett up.

“Rhett, nice to meet you. Please refrain from putting your tongue down my daughter’s throat while I’m around, if you don’t mind,” Dad says giving him a warning glare. He then turns to Matt as he and Jasmine approach, “You must be Matt. Nice to meet you.”

They shake hands and Jasmine gives me a knowing look. *Well this should be fun*, she seems to say.

“Nice to meet you too. Alex mentioned you had a few things to talk about. Why don’t we head inside?” Matt motions toward the house and we all head that direction.

Jasmine presses next to me whispering, “You’re so busted!”

I give her my best side eye and I whisper back, “Oh honey not just me. Dad totally saw you snuggling up with Matt on his walk over. I’m not the only one busted, and I’m definitely going to need all of those details later.”

Jasmine’s face flushes as we head into the cabin, Throttle leading the group. The space is fairly similar to the clubhouse. A nice wide open living room-kitchen area, a big fire place, and warm homey decorations.

“This is a beautiful place,” Jasmine says to Matt.

He steps beside her, hands brushing and I notice Dad is tracking the movement, eyebrows lifting when Jasmine

intertwines their hands.

“Well what did you need to tell us Dad?” she asks when she notices his attention on her. Unashamed she steps a little closer to Matt. Their conversation last night clearly was a good one.

Rhett steps closer to me and ushers me toward one of the soft black leather couches.

Dad clears his throat, “Well you girls don’t know much about my time before I met your mother and there’s a good reason for that.”

He moves to take a seat across from Rhett and I, scrubbing a hand through his hair, he continues, “Before I met your Mother, I was an undercover cop.”

I suck in a surprised breath and Jasmine’s eyes go wide. He continues looking down at his hands, “My assignment was to try to arrest a major player in the Outlaw Motorcycle Gang in Nashville, for drug smuggling. I had been undercover for almost a year. I’d slowly been earning their trust as a prospect and was finally in a good place to make some serious moves. But when a new crew got involved things got a little dicey.”

Matt is leaning forward elbows resting on his knees studying him.

Dad sighs, “I was living with a guy named Gunner. He had been patched into the Outlaws for quite some time but he wasn’t really involved in the smuggling. He mainly stuck to security around the club. He ended up being my greatest ally,” Dad smiles, his eyes staring at nothing while he reminisces, “Anyway turns out the guy we were after was really not a part of the Outlaw crew at all, but the Outlaws dealt with him frequently. So my foothold was strong enough within the crew that I was still trying to figure out who was actually behind the drugs. Gunner and I had set up an exchange for some guns at a local bar, with the gang I thought was responsible for the drugs I was tracking. I was just trying to get my foot in the door with their crew but the exchange had turned sideways pretty quickly. The men we were meeting somehow knew I was undercover. So it turned into a bit of a blood bath. They worked for the guy I was after and wanted to take me out.

Gunner saved my life that night. When Gunner and I were finished cleaning up our mess, I had to go back to the police station, with Gunner knowing I was a cop, my cover was blown. Usually Outlaws don't let things like that slide. They would've taken me out themselves, but Gunner let me go. So I returned to the police station and they gave me a new assignment in Kentucky. Eventually I met your mom, retired from the force, and started the lumber yard. As far as I know the Outlaws think I was arrested that night and sent to Canada on an arrest warrant." Dad shrugs, "The only person that knew the whole truth was Gunner and given his past he wouldn't have told a soul what really happened that night."

All of us are quiet. I'm not sure why all of this is significant but now that I look at Dad I'm not totally surprised by his background. His tattooed arms have intricate patterns that I always just associated with his Celtic heritage. The bloody skull never really fit in with the pattern but he usually kept it covered up since it was on his bicep. The wrinkles around his eyes seem more prominent today, as does the gray in his hair. He's always been this rugged guy. I remember the girls we were friends with in high school always telling us how hot our dad was. He almost always wore jeans and a tight fitted black shirt. Just like today, and I could see the rugged undercover cop under all the layers of the man I know now as Dad. The one that taught me all my survival skills, how to shoot, and how to defend myself. I could totally see it. His eyes lift to meet mine, then to Jasmine, and then they finally land on Matt.

"So did your contact in Nashville get back with you?" Dad asks Matt.

Matt nods, "He did. The coffee shop was empty, but it is near the Outlaws territory," he eyes Dad, "So you kept one tie to the Outlaws open?"

"Is someone going to tell us what is actually going on, before you involve my dad in whatever you and your club have going?" Jasmine asks sharply, giving Matt a stern look, "I thought we agreed last night to be open with each other. If you can't do that, if you can't tell me what's going on, this..." She

gestures between the two of them sitting closely on the loveseat, “Will never work. So I suggest you start talking, mister.”

She pokes him roughly in the chest. Rhett’s arm comes around me protectively. I know he won’t tell me unless Matt gives him the okay, so I snuggle into his side and send a pointed look in Matt’s direction as well. Bricker, being Bricker, barks a laugh, “Boy I’m glad those two aren’t sending those looks my way.”

Matt glares at him, but sighs in resignation, “Alex, your ex was helping a man named Damien smuggle drugs and weapons across state lines into Nashville. Damien is in charge of supplying motorcycle gang’s across the area with whatever makes him money. Apparently a few gangs in Tennessee want to go to war against each other and he was more than happy to supply them. Like the Appalachian MC. The Appalachian’s have been trying to take over this part of the mountain for years, but we keep stopping them. We work with the police and turn in anything we find. Recently Damien has started smuggling women and girls down to Mexico. He uses different gangs to do it, but he mainly uses the Appalachians. Since this area is a tourist hub and the state parks are thickly wooded by the forest it makes smuggling a bit easier for him.

“Prior to when you girls got here, we raided a set of cabins with a few women in need of help. Before that we intercepted a cargo truck with about thirty women and teenagers in it heading south. We keep getting more and more traffic through here and we try to help the police monitor it the best we can with our connections in neighboring towns,” he places a comforting hand on Jasmine’s leg as she sucks in a shocked breath, “Justin was at a warehouse picking up weapons heading towards Nashville. He’s been arrested, however, someone was watching from an outside camera during that particular raid. Miles tracked it to a coffee shop in Nashville. I couldn’t go myself to check it out because it’s in the Outlaw gang’s territory. But I have a contact in the Nashville PD that checked it out. However it didn’t turn up anything. Damien has been evading us, and a few other gang’s for years. There are a few MC groups that have recently turned 100%

legitimate and we try to help each other out the best we can, but with Damien putting the Appalachian's all over the area it's hard to keep track of it all and it's even harder to pin him down."

"That's where I think I can help," Dad interrupts, "I haven't talked to Gunner in a few years. But we used to check on each other every once in a while. I know this Chapter of Outlaws has been trying to go legitimate for quite some time. I think I can get you a meeting if you think Damien is in Nashville. They may be your best bet at helping."



Jasmine and I are sitting with the Old Ladies around the patio fire pit later that evening. Rhett and Matt along with all of the other brothers present are in the pole barn having 'church'. Which according to Daphne means it's a mandatory meeting for the brothers and the Old Ladies will be filled in if needed.

"So," I hedge eyeing Jasmine, "You and Matt finally talk?"

She sighs, "Sort of."

I feel Daphne and Kayden's curiosity peek.

"And?" Lia asks. They all saw the confrontation when we got here between the two of them. So we all know something is going on.

"And nothing. He can be an ass, I told him as much, and he's going to try to be better. End of story. Until then," she shrugs.

"You mean to tell me that he brought your breakfast in bed this morning and nothing happened," I nudge her foot with mine and wiggle my eyebrows.

She blushes, "Nothing happened, Alex. I still don't know where I'm going to be after all this so it wouldn't be fair to start something anyways."

“Sweetie, if my brother is involved you may not have a choice. Once he sets his mind to something it always happens,” Daphne adds.

“We will see,” Jasmine says just as the pole barn door rolls to the side and a herd of burley leather clad bikers saunter out. If I didn’t have my eyes on Rhett I might be overwhelmed with the masculine display. I gotta admit almost all these men are ruggedly handsome in their own ways.

Dad, Matt, Rhett, Bricker, and Axel all head our way. Axel picks up Lia and plops her on his lap. She jostles the baby monitor for a second before righting it on her leg again. Layana wasn’t thrilled at the idea of bedtime but she finally relented about an hour ago. Bricker sits on the stool beside Daphne and Matt and Rhett look lost on where to sit when Dad sits between Jaz and I giving both men a stern look. Matt and Rhett glance at each other and decide to grab a few beers out of the cooler and sit on the loveseat across from us. I can’t help the smirk I try to hide. These big bikers are a bit intimidated by Dad or they are just being respectful. I haven’t decided yet.

“So how long are we stuck here?” Kayden asks as she places her legs over top of Everett’s when he joins her on the wicker chair.

Matt scrubs a hand down his face, “Well we have a meeting tomorrow in Nashville. Thanks to Tucker. So I’ll know more after that, but for now I’d say get comfy, cause it’ll be a day or two.”

Small conversations bounce between couples and I lean towards Dad, asking, “What’s mom think about all this?”

“She wasn’t very happy. But she knows I can handle myself. Plus she would much rather me be here than you be here by yourselves. I’m gonna hit the hay and see you girls in the morning,” Dad gets up and heads for the sliding glass door. He looks over his shoulder eyeing Rhett and Matt but doesn’t say anything further.

Chapter 26

Alex

Matt, Rhett, and Dad have all gone to their meeting in Nashville, and I have stress baked enough food to feed the army that is currently living in the clubhouse, but I'm going stir crazy. Cole is in his place on the couch, which seems to be his bedroom too since he sleeps out here every night. Miles is next to him with the laptop, fingers flying over the keys, and Jasmine and Daphne are watching a movie on the large television on the opposite couch.

"Okay, I can't be in this house any longer, and I can't bake anything else. Can I go for a run around the perimeter, or is that frowned upon?" I ask Cole and Miles.

They look at each other and Cole shrugs, "I'll go with you."

Jasmine jumps up as well, "I'll go with you, Matt asked me to check on Throttle while he is gone, but I'm not about to run. So I'll just check on him and come back if that's okay?"

"I need to run over to Matt's house anyway and check on the security system over there so I'll go with you guys too," Miles says shutting his laptop. He has a slight accent I haven't noticed before, and I can't place it.

"Well I, for one," Daphne stretches out on the couch, "Am going to take a nap."

After heading upstairs to change I come back down to find everyone on the front porch. Cole and I drop Miles and Jasmine off at Matt's cabin and begin running around the perimeter.

"I run this trail quite a bit so let me know if the pace I keep is too fast for you," Cole's steps are even and surefooted on the dirt trail. The woods aren't nearly as creepy in the light of day. His breathing isn't labored at all, but it's been about two weeks since I have had any sort of cardio so I am a different story.

"This is fine. I need to get back in shape. I haven't used a gym for a while now. How far around is it?" I pant.

“It’s about three miles if we take the long route, but there is a trail that cuts back about halfway through depending on what you want to do.”

“Well I’ll let you know when we get there if that’s okay. I should be good for three miles,” I pant.

Cole chuckles at my panting and slows his pace just a bit, which I appreciate. I have no clue how he can get blasted drunk the night before and wake up early and jog like this and be totally fine.

“So aside from this chaos, how do you feel about the move?” Cole asks.

“Good actually. I don’t mind a little chaos, and the club has been really welcoming,” I say panting now under control.

“Yeah, Rhett has really taken a liking to you,” he glances at me mischievously.

I duck my head hiding my grin, “Yes, he seems really nice, and we have a nice time hanging out together.”

“Rhett’s a good guy, although...” Cole pauses scanning the thick woods around us. We are starting to go back up a hill so my breath is coming in a bit rougher. The fence surrounding the perimeter is wooden and about ten feet tall. Every few feet I see some cameras, and the occasional motion sensor.

“Although?” I question.

Cole stops and starts stretching at the top of the hill. He grabs his foot behind him and starts to stretch.

“Although I haven’t ever seen him take to anyone as quickly as he has taken to you. So that’s a nice change, as long as you are sticking around for a while,” he states eyeing me suspiciously.

Cole has this little brother charm about him, even if he is 6’5” tall, broad shoulders, tattooed arms, and rugged facial features. I know he is just looking out for Rhett so I don’t mind the interrogation.

“You don’t have to worry about me. I like Rhett a lot. If he wants to take this further, we will. He has told me some of his

past so I get why he holds people at arm's length, but I do plan to stay here long term, so I don't see a reason not to continue as we are. If that's what you're after."

Cole seems to sigh in relief, "We all just don't want to see him get hurt. I know he is this big biker that acts like he is invincible, but I will always watch his back."

We move on to less serious topics as we run back down the hill towards the road. When Cole stops and places his hand on my arm stopping me as well. He steps in front of me blocking the trail and pulls a gun from his waist band.

"What is it?" I whisper.

The forest is thinner here, the road must be less than fifty feet from the fence. Cole just tucks me closer to his back and places my hand on his lower back.

"Stay behind me no matter what, and if something happens head back up the hill and use the cut through trail. There's a shed half way down and there's a gun inside under the work table," Cole whispers back.

I don't know why he is so on guard all of the sudden, and I don't question it. Whatever he saw has him spooked. I also don't get time to question him further when there is a screeching sound from the road. Then I see it. A chain is wrapped around a brace in the fence, and then that section of fence is gone with a *crack!*

Then all hell breaks loose. Cole shoves us behind the only big tree nearby and waits. My pulse is racing so hard I can feel it in my temples. I try to calm down and breathe through my nose and out of my mouth, but then a bullet whizzes past my head and splits a thinner tree nearby, bark flies in my face and I can't help but scream. Cole fires back once but he only has the one gun so I assume he is trying to save ammo.

Cole tucks me further between him and the tree his grip on me is bruising, "There are ten men. I only have 9 rounds. We are going to have to get back to the others."

I nod, adrenaline coursing through my veins. I can do this. Another bullet whizzes past. Cole grabs my arm and we shoot

back in the direction we came, but we don't take the path we dart through the trees. The bullets start flying past us faster and faster. Cole pushes me in front of him up the hill.

“Go!” He roars. As he turns and lays down a few cover fire shots. I don't look back again and I can hear Cole's feet pounding behind me up the hill.

I race faster and the panic takes over and I forget for a second to listen for him, I can't hear him anymore. I look over my shoulder. The world slows around me, one second I see Cole running, a determined look on his face, then I hear the *boom* of another gunshot. Cole's shirt starts to turn red and he crumples to the ground.

“No!” I scream but it's too late.

Chapter 27

Rhett

Pulling my motorcycle in next to Tucker and Matt outside an old, abandoned church. I look around, I ask Tucker, “You sure this is the right place?”

“This is the address Gunner gave me,” he turns facing the dirt road we just drove up. In the distance I can just make out the sound of a motorcycle.

Matt grips my shoulder, “Rhett take your bike around back and stage up just in case shit goes south.”

I put my bike in neutral to silently wheel it around the side of the old white church.

I get off my bike and scan the area. There isn't much around. We are in a pretty open field just outside of Nashville, but I find a good spot and hunker down and wait. Pulling into the dirt drive are three Harleys, the guy in front must be Gunner since he has pistols tattooed on his forearms.

I'm close enough to hear the conversations and pleasantries being passed around. Gunner saying, “Hey Tuck, good seeing ya. This is Butch and Razor. They have the intel you all are looking for.”

Razor steps forward. I see how he got his name. He has a huge scar running across his throat like someone tried to slice it open, and when he speaks you can tell his vocal cords were damaged.

“Damien's been busy. He's been running his deliveries through plenty of cities in the area, but Nashville seems to be his main hub. There are a few warehouses around town he's been using. All the information is on here. We have been monitoring them for a while just to make sure he isn't supplying our enemies with anything,” he hands a thumb drive to Matt and steps back.

“And here is the background information on his second in command and all the assets he has in Tennessee along with

everything they have in Nashville, I hope this helps,” Butch says while handing the folder over to Matt.

Matt thumbs through it, “Looks like you guys are thorough. This is Damien’s main address in Tennessee?”

“Best we can tell. It’s a fortress and is heavily guarded,” Butch states.

Matt and Tucker continue to talk for a few more minutes and Tucker and Gunner shake hands. Hopefully we got some useful information. Gunner and his men head out and we follow suit about ten minutes later. It’s about a four-and-a-half-hour drive back to the clubhouse, and I’m itching to get back already. We left early this morning, but I feel like I have been gone for days. Alex was nervous when she went to bed last night and I tried to reassure her but I know she’s just nervous about her dad getting involved.

Hell, I’m nervous about her dad getting involved in all this. It would kill her if something happened to him, and it would kill me if something happened to her. I have only known Alex for a short time but she is consuming my thoughts, and I want her. I want her in a way I haven’t ever wanted anyone else. And I think I’m going to tell her that when we get back. Life is too short and we live fast and hard. She will have to come to accept that, but I don’t feel like that’s going to be an issue.

As we pull out of the drive I let the sound of the engine and the wind clear my head. I keep an eye on our surroundings, watching for threats as we go. That’s part of my job as an enforcer, a few hours later we pull over at a dive bar to get a late lunch.

We pick a table in the far corner away from everyone and place our orders. Matt and Tucker are looking over the folder when I feel my phone buzz in my pocket. It’s Bricker.

Bricker: *911 call me now!*

I interrupt their musings “Matt we got a 911 from Bricker.”

I put my phone on speaker. Bricker is panting in the background, “She’s gone.”

“Whose gone?” Matt growls.

“Alex. They’ve taken her,” Bricker spits over the line. My vision tunnels and panic starts to sink in. My hands shake and I start to breathe faster. Matt’s in front of me in a flash squeezing my shoulder grounding me. I can’t hear the rest of the conversation. I’m too focused on not losing it. I finally get control of myself as I hear Tucker’s bike start up.

Chapter 28

Jasmine

Cole and Alex dropped Miles and I off at Matt's house.

"I need to check the security system on the house and do an update really quick. Stay close to the house so I can hear you if you need anything. The guys are on patrol around the area so it's safe enough should anything happen," Miles heads upstairs to the office, and I let Throttle outside.

"Come on cutie, I'll take you for a quick walk." Throttle trots in front of me toward the pond out front. It's so strange we have been here for such a short amount of time, but I can't help the rightness of it all.

Matt and I have seemed to come to a truce of sorts. If that's what you want to call it. My mind drifts to the shooting range and how it felt to be in his arms. He may be a complete ass sometimes, but I can't help but be drawn to him. He is handsome and charming, and a total Alpha-hole when he wants to be, but I can't keep from thinking about him.

I hope their meeting goes well. This drama will be over before I know it and then I can look forward to my externship. It's so peaceful around this pond I could stay here forever. I sit on the bench not far from the dock. Throttle brings me his tennis ball and I throw it a few times before heading back.

As I step up on the front porch I think I hear a gunshot. Someone must be using the range. I reach for the door but I hear the gun fire again and it sounds like it's coming from the opposite direction. Throttle whines and I open the door to let him in. That's when I hear rapid fire gunshots, not just one gun it sounds like a bunch. I run in the house.

"*Miles!*" I shout as I run up the stairs. I have no clue where I'm going but an office shouldn't be too hard to find. I yell again, "*Miles!*"

Miles flies out of the room at the end of the hall eyes wild with adrenaline and phone to his ear.

“Stay inside, bar the door, grab all the weapons you can I’ll call Rex,” he hangs up, glances at me and puts the phone back up to his ear, “We are under attack, they breached the fence by the road. I counted ten men, Cole and Alex are down there by the cut through trail, send five guys to help them.”

He hangs up and starts moving down the stairs with Throttle and I on his heels, “I need you to do as I say no questions asked, understood?”

My heart is pounding in my ears. I stutter, “U- un-understood.”

My sister is in danger, danger, danger. That’s all I can think about. My breathing is coming harder and harder, god I’m going to have a panic attack.

Miles must see it on my face. Throttle must sense it too because he is pushed up against my legs whining and shaking. Miles’ calm tone reassures me, “Hey, stick with me, I’ll get us through this, okay?”

The look in his eyes should scare me. The cold hard murderous rage I see there, but it only makes me more determined. I have to get to my sister.

I nod, I can’t do anything else. Miles sits me on the couch, “Just breathe, I’m going to get some weapons. Throttle stay.”

Throttle sits by my feet, head in my lap and I find myself focusing on him.

“It’s going to be okay, Alex will be okay,” I tell Throttle, who pushes his head into my shaking hand as I pet him.

Miles is back in an instant, “You okay enough to use this?”

He holds up the gun I was using yesterday. I nod, I have myself under control, Alex is smart and she can take care of herself.

“Good come on, we need to get to the others. Bring Throttle with us.”

We head for the trail that connects the two houses through the woods. When we break back into the sunshine instead of heading to the house we head for the pole barn. Miles is next

to me and I didn't notice earlier but he has a backpack and a duffle bag on him now. They look stuffed, full, and heavy. As we enter the pole barn he throws the bags on the table in the middle of the room grabs his tablet that he always has with him and addresses the room. Around the room there are about fifteen bikers standing around. Some of them I have met; others I haven't. I step next to Bricker and he squeezes me quickly.

"Okay so there are ten of Damien's men that breached the south fence by the road," Miles starts punching things into his tablet and then behind him the television lights up with security footage.

"They breached about five minutes ago. Last I checked Cole and Alex were tucked behind a tree returning fire. Five of our guys are heading toward them, and Rex is setting up in the nest," Miles nods to Bricker as he pulls up more footage on the screen.

Bricker continues on with establishing a plan but I tune him out. I can't help but step closer, scanning each camera to find Alex. The television is broken into six different angles, Miles is switching between some that are just black like the camera isn't working and then moving on to others. That's when I see it.

"Stop," I all but shout, "Go back to that last one."

Miles looks at me quickly and does what I ask.

"There," I point and on the screen you can just make out Alex and she is turning around mid-run, then her face goes ashen white and she falls forward in the direction she came. She looks like she's shouting. Miles switches angles and there on the screen is Cole. He is in the dirt on his side. Men in black t-shirts, dark jeans, and ski-masks are surging behind him and he isn't moving. One of them grabs him up, and then slings him back down. Like he, my brain falters, like he's dead.

The room is silent. All I can hear is my hard breathing as I watch. I'm totally helpless. Bricker is barking orders and I hear the men rush out. Miles is still with me standing next to

me. So is Throttle. I watch in shock as Alex scrambles to her feet, her hands are empty.

“She’s defenseless,” Miles whispers next to me, and a shudder wracks my body. My face is wet. I didn’t even realize I was crying, but I make my eyes clear so I can see the footage and I watch. Alex is running, her arms pounding. Miles keeps switching cameras trying to keep up with her.

“I don’t have any camera angles where she is right now but she should be heading toward the shed. It should pick her up here,” he pulls up a screen, all I see is trees. We wait and we wait but Alex never shows up on the screen, “Shit she should be there by now.”

Miles pulls his hand through his hair roughly. We finally see some of our men getting into the area, we see them returning fire, but Alex is nowhere to be found on the screen.

Miles keeps scanning the images but I never see her. My breaths come faster and faster; Miles and I are so focused on the woods in the screens it doesn’t occur to me to keep an eye on my surroundings here, but then Throttle is growling and I glance at him. His hair is standing on end and he is creeping towards the open entry door. Miles sets his tablet down and pulls his gun, but before Miles can react; Throttle lunges through the door and *bang!* Another gunshot goes off right out front. Miles rushes through the door and I am frozen in place, gun shaking in my hand. I bring myself to raise the weapon towards the door. Willing whoever is on the other side to stay out. I’m not so lucky. I take a small step toward the door. I hear *bang, bang, bang!* I flinch on each one. I slowly make my way toward the door so I can see out. Taking calming breaths as I go trying to stave off the panic seeping in. I see Miles hunkered behind one of the bikes by the door of the pole barn but he is pinned down. I see him pull out his phone and put it to his ear.

Miles hangs up and shakes his head at me to stay back. So I don’t go any further. I don’t think I could anyways, fear is gripping me tightly and it’s hard for me to stay in the present and not let the panic totally win right now.

I make myself look out the door, Throttle is nowhere in sight but I can see a pair of boots to the left of the door. They are unmoving and pointed into the air, I'm not sure who it is and I can't bring myself to look. So I glance beyond it. There seem to be three men merging on the house and two heading toward us in the pole barn. I watch as one of the men by the house goes down. The bullet seems to have come out of thin air. The two men firing at Miles aren't stopping. Miles pops up to return fire, and as his shoulders crest the seat of the bike *bang*, blood spurts from his shoulder. I scream and Miles falls back toward the door. He tries to crawl back but his arm seems useless. The two men are surging closer, their ski masks making it impossible to see what they look like. *Bang*, one man goes down, and it breaks the panic going through my mind. We must have a sniper close. I surge forward and drag Miles in by his leather cut. He's losing too much blood. I glance back up and my heart stops. The second man is crouching next to the bike, stone cold eyes stare back at me.

The guy lunges for me and I drop Miles. I don't think I just scream, pull my gun up, and fire. I keep firing until the click, click, click sounds and the ski masked man before me goes down. I keep pulling the trigger *click, click, click*.

"Jaz," I'm staring at the dead body before me, my entire body shaking, "Jaz."

Someone is calling my name but I'm detached; I can't respond, my body is in shock.

"Jasmine!" Miles shouts and I jerk out of it.

A new panic seizes me as I see all the blood. Right below Miles collar bone. I don't think, I go into doctor mode. I just pull my shirt over my head and step next to him putting pressure on the wound. I know humans are nothing like animals but I have done plenty of surgeries in my veterinary schooling, and while helping during the summers at mom's clinic. I have to stop the bleeding. I hear two more gunshots from outside and then it's quiet.

Miles is breathing fine, there is quite a bit of blood, I roll him to his right side and notice there is an exit wound so that's

good. There isn't any spurting blood, so I don't think the bullet hit anything serious.

"Jasmine I'm okay, I promise. I need you to hand me my gun," I look at him like he has lost his mind. He can't even lift his arm. I glance toward the door and see his gun. It's just on the other side of the sidewalk. I can reach it fairly easily. But I don't know if I can move. I'm putting all my weight on Miles' wound trying to staunch the bleeding.

"Jasmine," Miles tries again.

"Okay," Miles' hand reaches up and presses on the wound where my hand was. I squat by the door and peak out. I don't see anyone so I go for it. I grab the gun and come back to Miles. I hand him the gun and go back to putting pressure on his seeping wound.

"We need to get behind that table. We are sitting ducks right here."

"Okay on three," steeling my voice, I answer and I help Miles up. "One, two, three."

I half drag Miles behind the table just as footsteps scrunch on the gravel outside. We both freeze. Miles raises his gun toward the door, neither of us making a peep.

"Friendly," Bricker calls before he comes in. Miles lowers his gun and sighs in relief.

"Looks like we got all the ones up here," Bricker says squatting next Miles and moves my hands to assess the wound. I swat his hands away and resume putting pressure on it.

"And the others? Cole, Alex?" Miles asks the question I can't bring myself to ask.

Bricker's face goes grim, "Cole is in bad shape, Drake threw him in the truck and they are heading to the hospital with a few enforcers for back up."

"And Alex?" I whisper.

"They got her. Three of them dragged her back to the road and we were too late. From the looks of things she definitely didn't make it easy on them," Bricker looks down at his hands,

“Come on let’s get you patched up and then we can track the car.”

Bricker stands, grabs Miles’ tablet and helps me heft him off the ground. We make our way out the door, and I stop short. Throttle is laying on top of the dead guy right outside the door. His fluffy white fur is blood stained and he is slowly whining. I suck in a breath and leave Miles and Bricker to kneel next to him.

Guilt strikes, I was supposed to be looking after him, and now he’s hurt. I look up and Rex is standing to the right of me.

“Help me get him inside please. “

Rex nods solemnly and grabs Throttle and carries him inside behind Miles. I clear off the kitchen table and Rex lays Throttle down. Daphne is next to Miles as soon as we walk through the back door. She sits him down and starts cleaning his wound as Bricker rushes upstairs to get his laptop, and a med kit for Miles.

“What do you need?” Rex asks me, his voice low and gravelly. Throttle is covered in blood.

“I’m not sure where the wound is. I need clippers, a suture kit, some towels, if you have iv fluids and some line that would be great, and something to clean the wound.”

Rex returns a few minutes later with all the supplies I need and Doc’s med kit. I place the IV in Throttle’s front left leg and I start to clip the bloody hair away. Blood starts flowing profusely from Throttle’s shoulder. I act on instinct when Rex hands me cloth, pressing it into Throttle’s shoulder to staunch the bleeding.

“Got them!” Miles all but shouts, “They are on the interstate heading west.”

“Hold still,” Daphne barks. The hemostats clanging to the floor as he sits back down.

Bricker pulls out his phone and calls Matt and puts it on speaker. “They are getting off at exit 198.”

I finally found the wound, tuning all the other drama out. Throttle got shot near his shoulder.

“Can you hand me those hemostats?” I ask no one in particular,

“Is that Jasmine?” Is she okay?” Matt asks breaths coming faster, I hear gravel crunching under their feet like they are running.

“I’m okay. Just working on Throttle. He got shot in the shoulder,” I say as I grab the hemostats from Rex. Thankfully I found some injectable pain meds in Doc’s medical bag that I could use to sedate him or else this would be impossible.

“Okay I’m coming baby, I’ll be there in thirty minutes,” Matt says and then the line goes dead.

I glance up at Rex as Daphne rounds the corner, finally finished with Miles.

“Baby, huh?” She says cheerily trying to lighten the mood, “I told you, he always gets what he wants. Now let me help.”

“We’ll see about that,” I say, I hand her the clippers, and instruct her to start shaving away the bloody hair as close to the skin as she can get. I remove the bloody cloth Rex handed me, and realize it was a clean t-shirt. *Well, shit.*

I cut a hole in a cheese cloth towel and drape it over the gunshot wound like a surgical cloth to keep any hair out. I grab a scalpel and make the hole just a bit bigger. Rex hands me the hemostats again and I go to work trying to dig the bullet out.

“I finally got it. Do you have a flashlight?” I ask the air around me. I’m not sure who all is still in the kitchen. I have tuned everyone out and am just trying to get Throttle fixed up. Rex holds one over the wound.

“Shit,” There is still a piece of the bullet lodged in his shoulder. I go back in and try to get the sliver out. I finally get the tip of the hemostats to clap around it and sigh in relief. Finally, I pull the hemostats out and hand them to Rex. Doc had a seriously stocked medical bag so I grab a stethoscope and check Throttle’s vitals again. It’s taken me a while to get him sedated and to get the bullet taken out, but he seems to be

stable. I start to suture the wound closed. Just as I'm putting the last stitch in I hear the back door open in the other room.

Bricker and Miles fill in Rhett, Matt, and Dad on everything. Miles has still been tracking the vehicle they used. I hear footsteps coming into the kitchen just as I'm washing the blood off my hands. Matt is instantly by my side, hands land on my bare stomach. He spins me around, eyes searching my whole body making sure I am okay. Matt's brows furrow. I have been doing surgery in my black lace bra.

"Why are you naked?" He asks softly but then reaches for his shirt and pulls it over his head, and then slips it over me, "Never mind, we are going to get her back, I promise."

I finally let it all hit me as he pulls me into his arms, the flood gates open and a sob sneaks out of my throat. Matt pulls me into a bear hug like he is trying to hold me together and I let him. He kisses me softly and over my head, he starts to plan with the others. Letting me burrow into his warm, hard chest.

"I killed someone," I whisper and a sob racks my body.

Chapter 29

Alex

I wake up in a cold dark place. I have no idea where I am, but the memories start to come back. Cole crumpling to the ground, running, men's rough hands grabbing me, fighting tooth and nail to get away, a sharp poke to my neck and then nothing. They got me.

They drugged me, and now? Now I'm in trouble. I feel around for anything but it's so dark in here I can't see anything. There is a poorly tied rope on my hands and I work quickly to undo the knot. Okay Alex, think. I move back as far as I can until I hit a wall. I stand up on shaking legs and feel it. It's cold, metal, and bumpy. And about every four or five inches there is a new raised edge like it's rippled. I move around the space, the darkness is so disorienting, but I feel like it's a square or maybe a rectangle. So I'm in a metal box. Maybe a storage container or a semi-trailer.

I hear footsteps on the metal, it sounds like they are above me. A short time later a hatch opens in the roof of the room. I rush toward it. I observe everything I can. It's daylight out so it's either still the same day, or maybe the next day. The hatch has a handle on it that can open from the inside. But I doubt I could reach it from down here. I glance around the inside and sure enough it's a storage container, but there isn't anything in here. A man appears above me.

"She's awake," he hollers over his shoulder.

There's a shuffling outside and I notice a canopy of leaves and limbs, we must be in the woods. Another man comes into view and he is wearing a light gray suit.

"Well, aren't you a pretty little thing?" He leers down at me, "I'm Damien. You may have heard of me. You may also be wondering what I want with you, but that's of no concern to you right now. You're just a pawn at my disposal."

He motions over his shoulder and then drops down a bottle of water and a granola bar. "I'd make that last if I were you. I'm not sure when I'll be back."

He gets to his feet and turns to walk away. I don't have time to say anything as the hatch closes, taking the light with it. My eyes flash around trying to find anything to help me get out of here, but the light is gone and the hatch slams closed. Leaving me in total darkness. I can't even see my hand in front of my face.

I sink down feeling weak and disoriented. I lay on the cold floor and drift off to sleep hoping someone finds me and tears leak out of my eyes as my mind flashes back to Cole crumpling to the ground in the woods.

Chapter 30

Rhett

I'm pacing in the dining room. Throttle is still asleep on the kitchen table. Matt has ordered everyone to pack their bags, load every weapon we have and head out within the next ten minutes. I'm waiting for everyone. My bags are packed and Tucker is saying goodbye to Jasmine. She has argued to go with us but Matt and Tucker both refuse. I can't say I blame them.

My hands are shaking and the rage pouring through me isn't helping. I have to get Alex back. Tucker turns to me, "We will get her back, but you need to keep a level head."

He squeezes my shoulder, as he continues, "My girls are strong and if anyone can take care of herself its Alex. Now come on before they move her."

We grab our bikes and head out. Miles had followed the men that took Alex for a long time on cameras until they turned off into a national forest. After that there wasn't much we could do. It's been hours and he has been monitoring the entrances and exits of the park, but no one has come in or out. My guess is they have another cabin and shipping containers up there. Let's just hope things turn out differently this time. I don't think I could come back from it if something happened to Alex.

Our bikes rumble down the road as we speed towards the park. Rex is in one of the trucks just in case Alex can't ride a bike back. The thought of her hurt has me spiraling and I push those thoughts away. I need to keep a level head.

A few hours later the sun is starting to set and we come into the park. We wind around the mountains looking for anything odd and Miles sends out a drone as he hops in the truck with Rex trying to spot something from the air on thermal imaging. It takes us another hour before he finally finds something.

"There's a few people up on top of that ridge," Miles points ahead of us to the north. There doesn't seem to be a noticeable road but that's okay, we will all be okay on foot. We load up

our packs and make sure all of us are loaded down with enough ammo to start a war and we storm the ridge. Silently, deadly, and I focus all my rage on finding my girl.

Tucker and I pair up with Miles and Matt. Two other groups fan out on either side of us and we continue on in the dark. My rifle has night vision on it so that's helpful, but the woods are overgrown and difficult to navigate at times. It takes us quite a while to get to the top of the ridge and I have sweat dripping down my back. There is one small ramshackle shed up here and not much else. Our groups fan out and surround it. Matt and I take the front door, Miles and Tucker stand guard. There is no back door. We break down the door and three men jump to their feet. Matt shoots one and I grab another. The third tries to plow past us and races for the door, but I can't focus on that. The guy in my hands is mine.

"Where is she?" I growl.

The man stays silent. I punch him in the stomach and the air whooshes out of him.

"This can be simple or this can last a long time. Now tell me where she is," I am met with silence.

I put him in the metal chair and pull out my zip ties. I tie him down and pull out my knife. I'm used to getting answers. That was part of my job in the military.

"Last chance," I warn, he just glares at me.

I slice his pinky finger off. He screams. I pull my lighter out.

"Are you ready to answer?"

Nothing. The man is biting his tongue. I flick my lighter on and cauterize his bleeding stub. He screams again. I repeat this process three more times. The man has sweat pouring off of him, tears are streaming down his face.

"Where is she?" I repeat.

"Not here," he says. He is grinding his teeth.

"Then where would we find her?" I ask again, shaking with my restraint everything in me is telling me to kill this guy and move on, but I need answers. More silence. I take out my knife

again and slice down his forearm. Then I stab him in the thigh. My rage takes over and the next thing I know I'm stabbing over and over again in his muscle hitting bone every time I take the blade out of his leg. My vision tunnels and I've lost control of myself. The blood, the screaming it surrounds me and I feel like I'm drowning.

"Rhett! *Enough*," Matt orders.

He grabs my arm and I turn and swing a fist in his direction but Tucker is there and blocks the blow. His green eyes are so much like Alex's I shudder.

"Rhett we need answers, take some deep breaths, control yourself or step outside," Matt says gruffly. He turns to the bleeding man in the chair who looks like he passed out. Matt takes water and dumps it on his head. The guys sputters. Matt lets him recover his bearings a moment before saying, "Now, tell us where she is or I will let him continue."

The man eyes me and nods, croaking, "They took her to the next camp. It's three ridges over to the East. They plan to move her at first light."

All the screaming made his throat dry. I pull my gun out and shoot him in the head, then turn and walk out the door. Tucker is hot on my heels. Matt relays the message to the others and we regroup.

Tucker is eyeing me cautiously, "Hold your demons back son, she will need you when this is over."

Chapter 31

Alex

I wake up. I'm not sure how much time has passed but my body is extremely sore. My stomach is gnawing on my backbone. So I have probably been out for a few hours. I take the tiniest sip of water and a small bite of the granola bar. I'm not sure when they will be back so I need to save as much as I can. I tuck the water bottle in my back pocket and the granola bar in the other. Then I make my way around the container feeling for any kind of crevice or hand hold that I can use to climb to the top of the container. Slowly I run my hands up and down the wall. I have passed three corners so I only have one wall left. My hope of getting out of here is waning quickly. If I can't get up there I am so screwed. Finally I make it to the fourth corner and I don't feel anything. My hope dies right there.

I collapse to the floor defeated, exhausted, and totally spent. I slam my hand against the wall behind me letting some of my frustration out, and I hear a slight *ting* sound.

"What was that?" I say to absolutely no one since I'm by myself.

I slam my hand again and try to pinpoint the sound. It is coming from across the room. I head towards it. I make it to the corner across from me and slam my hand again. It's above me. I jump with my arms raised. My hand catches on a piece of metal and it slices my hand. I hiss and pull my hand to me but the sound of metal bouncing and hitting the ceiling above me rejuvenates my will to find a way out of here. I rip the bottom of my shirt and tie a piece of the cloth around my hand.

I back up and jump toward the metal again and I grab ahold of it. It bends down with my weight and my feet hit the floor. I hear a few bolts or nails or something hit the ground and rattle around me. It must be a piece of trim. The metal is small, about an inch or so wide, it feels pretty flexible and I feel my way up the metal. It's still attached to the ceiling and I yank

hard on it. A few more bolts hit the floor around me and one rolls into my shoe. I bend down and pick it up and find it's really screws with sharp ends. I get on my hands and knees and put a few in my pocket. I don't have any weapons so anything sharp could be useful. I stand back up and work my way towards the higher side of the metal. I give it another good yank and it finally gives.

Okay now what. I look around. And then sigh, *It's pitch black, Alex you aren't going to be able to see anything.* I grab the metal at one end, keeping my hand tightly around it. I step more toward the middle. My guess is the piece is about eight feet long. I place one of my feet on the metal and step down while pulling my hands up trying to fold the piece in half. It takes some effort and by the time I manage it I have sweat coating my skin. It is so hot in here.

I find the bend in the metal and try to locate the center of the room. I have no clue which way I am facing and I don't know where the handle on the hatch is so this might take some effort. I lift the bent metal up and try to catch it on the metal on the hatch.

I miss. I don't hit anything. Raising the metal back up I take a calming breath and skim it back and forth across the ceiling. I take three steps to the left and hit the wall.

Okay so not that direction, I turn to my left, away from the wall and start sweeping the metal back and forth. I run into the other wall. I turn so the wall I just ran into is behind me and take three steps to my left. Then start the process over again. Three steps forward and *ting*.

I found it! I try to slide the metal this way and that way to determine what way the latch is. I finally get my metal to hook around the latch. With renewed determination I rip another piece of my shirt off and wrap it around my other hand. I then grab onto the metal with both hands and try to hoist myself up to the hatch. It takes some serious muscle to hold myself up on this thin piece of metal. And I feel the metal bending around the handle. I slide slightly and it bends a little more. When I finally make it to the top I feel the handle.

How am I going to turn the handle with all my weight on it.

I take my left hand and feel around the hatch. There is about a half inch of space to grip onto with my fingertips but I doubt it is enough. I dig my left hand in and move my right hand to the latch. I pull toward me. But it won't budge. My left hand slips off the ledge and I start to fall. I cling to the metal trim piece further slicing open part of my hand that's exposed and ripping into the fabric from my shirt. *Okay, Alex you can do this.*

I climb back up and try again. My arms are shaking and I'm barely able to hold on. This time I push the latch away from me. It moves. With a sigh of relief, I start trying to lift the hatch, but with all my weight on it, I have to alternate between working my fingers between the slightly open hatch and raising it further without making a lot of noise. Sweat is rolling down my back now and my tank top is slightly damp. The sky outside is dark but I can see some light coming from a small building in front of me through the small gap in the hatch and the container.

I now have both hands holding onto the edge of the opening and my body is dangling precariously, slightly swinging. My arms are trembling but I don't see anyone so I push the hatch with my head and start to heave my body out. My torso is out of the container and the hatch is resting on my ass. I take a second to get my breathing under control and look around. That's when they spot me.

"Hey!" one man by the building yells.

I don't take the time to see how many men there are. I just turn in the direction no one is coming from and I run. Branches smack me in the face but I race faster, my feet pound on the forest floor. The terrain is rugged and starts to go downhill. Bullets fly by me and one grazes my thigh. The burning pain that shoots through me brings me to my knees with a shrill scream. Tears instantly cloud my vision but adrenaline quickly washes them away. I have to keep moving.

"Don't shoot! We need her alive," one shouts.

I pull myself up by a tree. I rip more fabric off the bottom of my shirt, which is now just covering my bra at this point and

tie it tightly around my leg. I stand on shaking legs and limp/run away from my captors fading into the dark.

Instead of heading straight down the hill I turn to my left and head that way for a long time. My leg finally just goes numb so I don't feel the pain there anymore. The shouting fades and I start to feel a little better about my situation. I can survive out in the woods. As long as I'm not found I will be fine. I gingerly start to make my way down the mountain when a tree limb snaps behind me. I freeze, tucking myself behind a boulder.

"I know you're there little lady. Come out, come out wherever you are," his singsong voice has a slight Spanish accent and I shudder.

If this man catches me, I may not escape again. I will fight with everything I have before I let them take me a second time. I pull the screws out of my pocket and slide them between my fingers making makeshift spike brass knuckles on my right hand. It is my only option. I have no knife, no gun, this is it. My breathing is rapid shallow pants and I'm trying to stay quiet but that seems impossible.

"I can smell your fear, little angel. Come out and play with me. I promise I will be gentle. We can't ruin the merchandise too much after all, but they never said I couldn't take you for a test run."

Another branch snaps behind me and I jump cursing myself because rocks slide out from under my feet giving my location away.

"No need to hide, angel I will take care of you," he whispers.

I see him sliding around the boulder. I get into a fighting stance protecting my leg the best I can. I keep the boulder to my right side and wait for him to make the first move. All those self-defense classes coming to mind.

"Ah, the angel thinks she can take me. Okay then, I like it rough anyway."

He lunges at me, and I skirt to the side. He slams into the boulder pretty hard but recovers quickly. I refuse to turn my

back on him and ready my stance again. It's so dark I can't see his eyes so I have no way of reading his movements aside from the shadowy outline of his body. He rushes me again and this time I can't avoid him. He socks me in the face and stuns me then grabs a handful of my hair and he knees me in the face. He pins me against the boulder, his body crushing mine and I start to panic but Dad's voice is there coaching me on how to get out of this hold. I squirm until my elbow pops free. I nail him in the ribs and it gives me room to turn around. I hoist my fist back ready to punch him but he beats me to it. His hand wraps around my throat lifting me slightly off the ground.

"I bet you'd taste so good," he whispers and then runs his tongue up the side of my neck. My body revolts and bile rises in my throat. I struggle to breath, but I focus all my energy on getting away.

I bring my nail covered fist up and punch him in the ribs. I feel blood shoot out across my hand and I try not to gag. He staggers back and snarls. I try to rush past him but he jerks me down by my hair again slamming his knee into my stomach. I twist out of his reach, and double over in pain while stepping backwards.

It gives me space to recover but I know he is just toying with me now. I let him rush me a second time and then slam my nail covered fist right into his eye. I let my fist relax leaving the nails sticking out of his face, his eye is punctured, and he is screaming,

"You bitch!" he roars, but I'm already moving. I swing my leg around and give him a roundhouse kick to the chest, sending him flying over the ledge by the boulder I was hiding by. His arms windmill but he can't stop his momentum. His body surges over the side and he drops out of sight.

The adrenaline slowly leaves my body as I stand there frozen for a brief moment. I realize I just killed someone.

It was either him or me, I did the right thing, on shaky legs I start to head down the mountain again, away from the man that just fell and the fading voices from the camp. It has to be

the middle of the night at this point, but I have no way to tell for sure. Just like I have no way to tell what direction I am heading in, but surely there will be something at the bottom of this mountain.

I'm exhausted when I reach the bottom of the mountain but when I do, I find a creek. Knowing the men that took me will be looking for me I get into the stream and wade down river. The water is freezing and I'm shivering. It takes a while and I fall a few times but after what feels like forever my teeth are chattering and I can't take it anymore. I take a break. Stepping out of the water I realize I have lost my water bottle, but thankfully I still have my granola bar.

I take two tiny bites and rest for just a few minutes. My teeth are still chattering and I can feel my heartbeat in my leg, but it's time to move. I start heading downstream following the water, but I can't make myself get back in it. I'm just too exhausted. I need to find a safe place to get warm.

I walk and walk. It could be minutes or hours I have no idea, but I can't go any further. The shivers are wracking my body and the adrenaline is completely gone. Leaving me with shock, panic, hunger, and wet clothes. I need to make a fire. Thankfully the sky is starting to lighten up some so dawn shouldn't be too far off.

Ahead of me I can see that the water has washed out a section of the mountain making a small cave. I head for it intending to rest there for a while.

Chapter 32

Rhett

We find a small deer trail heading into the direction the dead man told us about. Miles sent his drone ahead of us but he hasn't spotted it yet. We are finally at the top of the second ridge.

"Got it," Miles whispers. We gather around his screen and see five red dots. Three seem to be unmoving, and two are pacing back and forth like they are patrolling.

"I like our odds," Rex whispers roughly through the comms.

"Me too but we still need to be careful," Matt sent the two other groups along with Rex to the left and right of our target. We are going to head straight for it.

Tucker and I keep pace with one another well and it helps having someone else to focus on at the moment instead of my rage. This section of woods isn't much better than the first, but it is a bit more established and is a little easier to navigate.

We crest the final ridge and come up on the target, but it's in chaos. We tuck ourselves in behind a pile of brush so we aren't seen. All five targets are shouting at one another outside in Spanish and I can't understand anything they are saying.

"What's happening?" I whisper to Tucker.

"She's gone," he whispers back. He places a hand on my arm as I move forward to slaughter these men that took my woman. Tucker continues to translate, "She escaped about thirty minutes ago. She can't be too far ahead of us."

Miles and Matt are behind us and I can see Miles has sent his drone on. Matt pulls out his phone and sends a message to Rex.

"Rex and the other group will deal with these guys. We are going after Alex," Matt states, and thank God because I am not about to stay here. Matt looks at Miles expectantly.

“I don’t see her,” Miles sighs in frustration. His thumbs keep making circles on the screen as he drives the drone around and around.

“She knows how to hide if she needs to. Are there any caves, rivers, or anything like that nearby?” Tucker asks.

I pull out my phone and pull up a topographic map. Tucker and I hover over the blue screen dimly lit in the moonlight.

“There,” I say. To the south of us is a small stream. It’s downhill and away from this camp. Just as we are turning to head in that direction we see Rex and his group rounding the building.



At the base of the mountain the stream is running south. If I were Alex, I’d follow the water and hope that it would eventually lead me to a town. So that’s what we do. A few hours later the sun is starting to turn the dark sky a light gray. Miles’ drone is about to lose its battery and we have no sign of Alex. My anxiety is starting to ratchet up. Rex got the camp secured and sent the second group in the other direction. Matt called our contact at the police station and the rangers are on their way to help with a grid search. There were no other women thankfully at that campsite. So that was a small relief.

I’m about to tell Matt we need to split up more when Tucker stops. He says softly, “Do you hear that?”

We all stop and listen. It sounds like rocks smacking together. And then I hear a frustrated growl. Tucker spins on his heels and smiles.

“Alex!” he shouts. He cups his hands over his mouth and shouts again, “Alex!”

I hear quiet shuffling behind me and spin around. Alex emerges from the trees. She’s covered in blood and dirt. She

can barely stand. I rush to her.

“Thank God,” I sweep her in my arms and she collapses against me.

“You found me,” she pulls back slightly and looks between the four of us. Her eyes find her dad’s and she reaches a hand out.

“You found me,” she whispers as tears stream down her face and shivers wrack her body.

“Always pumpkin, I will always find you,” her dad whispers back as he pulls her from my arms and squeezes her tightly. My gaze trails down her body. I see her bandaged hands and the tourniquet around her leg with a wound that is actively bleeding. When I look back up to tell her she needs to sit down her eyes roll back in her head and she passes out.

Chapter 33

Alex

I wake up with a pounding headache. I try to roll over but my leg won't move. My eyes fly open.

They found me, I'm strapped down, I have to get away.

"Shh Alex it's okay, You are safe," Rhett squeezes my hand and rubs gentle circles around the backside of it. My pounding heart finally relaxes.

"Where are we?" I rasp out. My mouth is drier than the Sahara Desert. Rhett leans over and grabs a glass with a straw in it. Holding it up to my mouth. I try to reach for it but my arms feel so heavy and my hands are bandaged.

"We are in the hospital in Asheville. You have been asleep for about fourteen hours," he sits the cup back down and he eyes me with concern, "Are you feeling any pain? Can I get you anything?"

He returns to rubbing my hand again. It's comforting having him here. And for a minute I soak in his strength. I don't want to look at how wrecked my body is, I feel it. I hurt all over, but I'm not about to tell Rhett that.

"I'm okay for now," I look down at my body and groan. My leg is in a cast, my hands are bandaged, my ribs are wrapped, and my skin is tight in multiple places.

"You were hit with a bullet that was a through and through but another one chipped your bone. You have a hairline fracture that will take a few weeks to heal. The cast is just temporary. You also have broken ribs, a few lacerations, are dehydrated, and you have some bruising around your neck," his face scrunches as his hand raises and gently touches my neck, "I am so sorry I wasn't there to protect you."

My mind flashes back to Cole, "Is Cole..."

I can't bring myself to ask the unthinkable. I saw his body crumble to the forest floor. Rhett squeezes my hand, "He's actually in the room across from you. He was also shot, he was

in the ICU for a day but he's on the mend now. We did however lose two of our men that were guarding the compound. Throttle was shot along with Miles but both of them are recovering just fine."

I sigh in relief. Things really could have been so much worse. Rhett caresses his fingers across my cheek.

"I know now probably isn't the best time, but my timing has never been that great in life. I know we haven't spent a ton of time together, but ..." he hesitates, and his eyes shine with some emotion I'm too nervous to read. He leans in careful of my ribs and my breath hitches. He gently takes my mouth with his and I know what's coming next. My heart swells and this man, this beautifully rugged man consumes me. My heart and soul want him and I would do anything for him, "...I don't know if I would have made it if something worse would have happened to you, Alex. I'm falling in love with you, and I can't live without you. Will you be my Old Lady?"

My heart burst and tears spring to my eyes. If the past few days have taught me anything it's that you are not guaranteed tomorrow and you need to follow your heart. I can't speak, my throat hurts too much but I nod and grab his face and slam it into mine. The kiss is rough, primal, and needy. But I can't help it. I won't be denying myself from him any longer.

Rhett pushes me back into the bed and my ribs scream at the shift in pressure. My breath hitches from the pain and Rhett immediately pulls back.

"Sorry. Are you okay?" he asks in a rush, his hands searching my body for the cause of my pain.

"I'm fine I swear," I rasp. The more I use my voice the harder it gets to talk. Rhett gives me another drink and I swallow hard.

"I love you too," I wheeze and his mouth tenderly finds mine again.

Chapter 34

Matt

Dealing with the fallout of everything that happened on that mountain a week ago is taxing, but it has to be done. I finally finish my phone call with Gunner, informing him of everything that has transpired. According to him, Damien has gone underground after the FBI raided his compound. Rumor has it he fled the country and is holed up in Mexico, but eventually someone will catch up with him. We have started recruiting new prospects and have decided to have them join the police force after we trust them a bit more. I have worked out a plan with the police chief to have them working undercover to make these kinds of situations easier in the future. Along with deputizing me, Miles, and Rhett. The guys weren't totally thrilled about it, but we need to be more on the legal side of things going forward.

My office door creaks open and Throttle trots in with Jasmine close behind him. He is wearing a huge clear cone and is running into everything, but Jasmine has informed me that it is in his best interest to leave it on. According to the Veterinarian at Asheville, Jaz did a fantastic job on his surgery all things considered.

"I brought you some dinner. I know you haven't left this office all day," Jasmine says as she sets two plates on the edge of my desk. She heads over to the mini fridge and grabs a water and a beer. I'm hungry but not for actual food. My eyes rake up and down her body.

"Mm you like taking care of me?" I say as I grab her hips and pull her onto my lap.

She rolls her eyes, "Well someone has to."

She leans her shoulder against my chest and I take her chin in my hand. I kiss her hungrily. I let my hands wander and glance at the door, it's locked. Clever girl. Last time we did this Bricker walked in on us. My hands skim her stomach under her shirt. Her breathing picks up and I know she wants the

same thing I do. Her shirt hits the floor just as her phone starts to ring.

She glances at it, “Asheville vet. I gotta take that.”

I groan inwardly but allow it. I can wait a few minutes.

“Hello... this is she.”

Her hand squeezes mine and she shifts excitedly, “Yes, thank you. I will be there first thing Monday. Thank you!”

She turns to me sharply after hanging up the phone.

“Eek!” She squeals, wiggling like a five-year-old in my lap, “I got it! I got the externship. They want me to come in on Monday to meet with the hospital managers and discuss a paid externship!”

I grin, “I am so proud of you.”

She looks at me, eyes shining with love and kisses me soundly. Pulling away she gets up and pulls me to the couch. “This is perfect! Alex is getting out of the hospital tomorrow, I start my dream job Monday, everything is right in the world.”

I sit down and pull her to straddle my lap, “Yes it is, now let me make my Old Lady the happiest lady in the world.”

I kiss her deeply, showing her all that I have to give her.

“Old Lady? Who the hell said I wanted to be your Old Lady?” She smacks my arm but I see it in her eyes she’s teasing me, “But if you actually asked me...I might say yes.”

Chapter 35

Alex

It's been four weeks since I was discharged from the hospital and I'm finally able to leave the clubhouse. Rhett has reluctantly agreed to drive me to the bakery so I can see what still needs to be done. My equipment was delivered during the chaos of my kidnapping and recovery so I want to make sure I received everything, but Daphne was acting strange when we left the clubhouse, like she wanted to come but didn't want to intrude.

Rhett parks the truck as close to the back door as he can get and runs around the truck. My cast came off yesterday and my doctor gave me the all-clear, so I can resume normal activities. Rhett however has decided that he wants to hover, caudle, and try to convince me otherwise. So as he extends his hand to help me out of the truck, I can't help but mess with him a little. He has been so worried lately and I would do anything to keep a smile on his face. I take his hand and fake stumble out of the truck right into him.

"Jesus, Alex are you okay? I told you we should have taken Lia's van," he has me squished against his chest, my head tilted back looking into his eyes, and I'm smothering a grin, my shoulders shaking, "Why are you laughing?"

"You are such a softie," I chuckle as I move around him to use the stairs. My leg muscles are a bit weak but they still work just fine, "You should have seen your face. I promise, babe I'm one hundred percent okay."

He grabs my hand turning me back towards him once I reach the landing at the back door. "I just want you safe. I know I have been stifling lately, but I almost lost you. Forgive me for hovering?"

He pins me against the back door and kisses me thoroughly. I ask, "With a kiss like that I'll always forgive you. Now can we go inside?"

I push against his chest and he nods, “We can but I need you to close your eyes and trust me.”

He puts his big hand over my eyes and opens the door, then places his arm around my waist pinning my back to his chest and starts walking me in.

“Why are you closing my eyes? It’s a mess isn’t it? Or half my stuff didn’t come in?” my voice keeps increasing in pitch, “Oh gosh, did that gang come in here and demolish it?”

All my thoughts are rushing out of me with how bad this was going to be, but Rhett just chuckles and keeps guiding me. He turns us in a circle and I assume we are in the front store at this point.

“Okay open your eyes,” he painstakingly removes his hand from my eyes, and I gasp.

“What the...” I can’t believe what I am seeing. “It’s perfect!”

I squeal and rush around the room. Everything is gleaming. There is a soft dark leather sofa in the corner with a walnut coffee table and my bookshelves, which are full of used books. A few small tables and chairs are spread out between the library and the front door leaving plenty of space for the glass dessert cabinet. There is so much room for desserts and a huge cake display on the checkout counter. Everywhere I look something amazing catches my eye, but then my eyes land on the sparkling, magnificent espresso machine, right next to the commercial coffee maker, sugars, flavored syrups, and all the toppings for a perfect coffee that are spread out and organized. “Who did all this?”

Rhett has been leaning against the checkout counter smiling from ear to ear watching me move around the room like a frantic squirrel.

“The Old Ladies and your sister have been sneaking off trying to get this done for you. Daphne organized your kitchen as best she could, but without you here she wasn’t exactly sure where everything should go. Once you get back there I’m sure you will be able to adjust things,” he says. I beeline for the kitchen door and Rhett beats me to it opening it wide for me.

I stop dead in my tracks and my eyes fill with tears. This is finally happening. My dream come true. “Wow.”

All the shining stainless-steel tables and appliances gleam ready for use. My hands itch to use that amazing industrial kitchen mixture. All my cabinets are full of the basics: flour, sugar, and spices. I open the fridge and am instantly shell-shocked. It is full of everything I will ever need. “When will it be safe to open?”

“Whenever you want. Daphne has been open all week and she hasn’t had any problems. As for the Damien stuff, well, you let us worry about that. Things have settled and we have plans in place if any of that changes. Plus Miles increased all the security and I also have something for you, but you can tell me if you don’t want it.” Rhett pulls out a long jewelry box. I open it and my breath catching on a beautiful necklace with angel wings, “Before you put that on, I had Miles put a tracking device in it.”

I spin glaring at him, of all the Alpha-hole things! He raises his hands in mock surrender as he rushes, “Before you rip my head off. It’s not like what it sounds. It’s activated by you.”

He flips the necklace over, “There is a small button on the back. You press and hold it for three solid seconds and it sends an alert to Miles, Matt, Bricker, and me. Matt and Bricker gave Jasmine and Daphne something similar, but I understand if you feel like it is an invasion of privacy.”

Rhett looks down at his boots. I step toward him, “I will wear this if you get one as well, because the thought of losing you terrifies me.”

He gently pulls a thick chain from around his neck along with his dog tags. Next to the tag with his name on it there is a small version of my necklace, “I figured you’d say that. This one works the same way.”

He pulls the box from my hands, removes the necklace, and turns me around placing it around my neck. As I’m facing the kitchen my heart bursts with warmth. This new life we are sharing is going to be perfect. I step away from Rhett and pull out a mixing bowl. He chuckles, “What are you doing?”

“You got somewhere to be, big guy?” I tease.

He steps up behind me pulling me back against him, kissing my neck, “Not at all, but I assume you aren’t going to be baking just for me?”

“You said I could open as soon as possible. Let me make a batch of cookies for everyone back at the clubhouse and then we can make a plan for opening next week,” I turn and hook my arms around his neck, “There is also something else I have been wanting to ask you.”

He looks at me deeply with concern, “What is it?”

“Well, I know I’m your Old Lady, and I know that you live at the clubhouse and your room is really nice, but with a baker’s schedule living here would be a bit more convenient,” I fiddle my fingers into his hair nervous he might say no, “Jasmine is already moving this week so we would have plenty of room, and...”

My rambling request is cut short as he lifts my chin up, forcing me to look into his eyes, “Yes, I will move in with you.”

He lifts me up on the counter and he starts to explore my body.

Epilogue

Sofiya

I have been coming into this bakery off and on for six months. Black Ridge was just a spot on a map when I arrived in the United States, smuggled into the back of a cargo container with some of my father's guns. No one was the wiser.

Sneaking out of the Pakhan's house should be extremely difficult, but I have been sneaking out of my father's house since I was twelve. Why did I sneak out?

Well, I was not about to marry into the Italian Mafia. Especially not to the sleaze ball currently running it, Antonio. Just thinking his name makes me shudder. He is cold, murderous, and pure evil.

So I ran, with the help of my older brother. I arrived in New York and headed south. So here I am working for an online translation company remotely here in Black Ridge with a fake ID and fake papers, and no one seems the wiser. I just have to keep my head down until Antonio marries someone else or he dies. Then maybe I can have the life I've always dreamed of.

Miles

Alex's bakery is always so busy on Friday mornings. It seems not only the bikers, but everyone in town has decided it is the best coffee around. I'm sitting in my usual spot by the window, back to the wall so I can see everyone while I work on my laptop.

I'm currently digging into the stunningly gorgeous woman across the room from me who is browsing the library shelves. She has a Russian accent and has been around town for almost seven months and I basically vet anyone we don't know that comes in here.

But she is a mystery. She only pays with cash, so finding financials is next to impossible without stealing her purse.

Especially when Alex gave me a hard time when she found out I was skimming all her customer's financial information from her cash register. When I ran Miss Russia's info through my facial recognition software, that also brought up nothing so far. It is frustrating.

So I decided today I'd try to get to know her the old fashion way. Shutting my laptop I placed it in my bag and walked over to her, just as I am about to reach her, my phone pings.

A notification from my facial recognition. Sofiya Romanov:
Missing Russian Bratva Princess.

I look up from my phone, my eyes connect with hers and I know at that moment I should walk away. I don't, instead I step closer to her, lower my head closer to her ear and whisper, "Hello Sofiya."

About the Author

A.D. Trent decided to write what she loves to read, romance with a bit of suspense. When she isn't writing she's busy playing with her little girl and enjoying time with her loving husband and family. Stay tuned for more to come!



Thank you for reading, please leave a review to help others find this book enjoyable.

Follow me on Facebook and TikTok for more announcements.

[Facebook https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=61551484532658&mibextid=ZbWKwL](https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=61551484532658&mibextid=ZbWKwL)

TikTok: a.d.trent_author