



*Broken*

DIRTY SOULS MC BOOK 13

**S**  **SOUL**

**EMMA CREED**

# BROKEN SOUL

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DIRTY SOULS MC BOOK 13

EMMA CREED

Broken Soul

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First Edition.

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*For Mother Maggie*

*Who will always be remembered with a smile.*

*Thank you for taking the ride with us.*

*xx*

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# AUTHOR NOTE

***\*\*Warning\*\****

*Broken Soul and all books in the Dirty Souls MC series are a work of fiction and contain adult content. Due to the nature of the series you should expect to come across various subject matter that some readers may find disturbing, and it is intended for readers 18+*

*Please contact the author if you have any questions.*

**[emmacreedauthor@gmail.com](mailto:emmacreedauthor@gmail.com)**



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**'Bound not by blood but loyalty.  
We live, we ride,  
and we die by our own laws'**

## THE STORY SO FAR

Skid has been waiting for years to get his revenge on the brother who killed his wife.

After the rival club, who the Souls suspected Chop was leading, betrayed him and turned him in, Skid was ready to finally get his vengeance.

However, Chop managed to get away before that could happen and his whereabouts have, once again, become a mystery.

Prez has been worried for some time about how his Long Beach Charter is being run by its president, Cliff, and now he's certain he has enough evidence to perform a takedown; he is focusing all of his attention on bringing Cliff to justice and repairing the damage he has done.

Brax is anxious as he awaits the birth of his first child with his old lady, Grace, while the rest of the club members are getting used to the ways in which the club is changing.

Meanwhile, Skid is reflecting on a mistake he made after Carly's death.

When he gets a chance to right that mistake can he put all his demons behind him and allow himself to be happy, or will he always be a broken soul...?



“He can’t take care of that kid by himself.” Mom looks worried as she stares out the kitchen window and watches my brother loading the black van parked on the drive. “I don’t even know where he’s planning on going.”

“He said he needed to get out of town.” I shrug, watching Tobias with the same concern. He ain’t acting right; he’s all manic, and skittish. I doubt he’s gonna see any reason in what I got to say but I guess the least I can do is try.

“I’ll talk to him.” I place my empty coffee mug in the sink and kiss Mom’s cheek before I head outside to try and talk some sense into him.

“So, what’s your plan?” I keep my voice calm and casual, resting my ass on the hood of Mom’s car while Tobias loads up all the tools he’s been storing in our parents’ garage into the back.

“My plan is to get the fuck outta here.” He doesn’t look up from what he’s doing and the determined expression on his face confirms that I’m wasting my breath with this.

“And what about him?” I flick my eyes toward my little nephew. I barely know the kid, his mom is some stripper from Idaho that my brother knocked up five years ago. I didn’t even realize Tobias was still playing a part in his life until he showed up here with him last night. Apparently, his Mom, Luciana, has gone AWOL and Tobias’s responsible for him now.

I can understand why Mom’s worried.

“Kids need stability, Tobe. They need security. Ain’t he supposed to be at school or some shit?”

“Yo, kid, how old are ya?” my brother stops to shout across at him, and I roll my eyes and remind myself to stay patient.

“Five.” Tommy stops kicking his ball against the garage wall and looks up at us nervously.

“You go to school?” Tobias frowns.

“Kindergarten,” the kid answers, and when Tobias looks back at me he simply shrugs his shoulders.

“You could set down some roots here. Mom could help take care of him, we could get him enrolled in a school. Hell, we could even set up that garage we always talked about.” I do my best to make him stop and think. Tobias has never been the type to stay in one place for too long. Mom and Dad are used to going months without hearing from him, and when he does eventually show up it’s usually because he needs something.

“Look, I don’t know Luciana; or what her problem is right now, but there’s every chance she’s gonna come to her senses. If you fuck off and take the kid on one of your exhibitions, how’s she ever gonna find you?”

Tobias drops the box he’s loading and thunders toward me. Getting right up in my face. “She ain’t fuckin’ comin’ back, okay?” he hisses through his teeth, but I stand firm, showing that I ain’t afraid of him and glancing toward his kid to remind my brother that he’s there, staring at us both helplessly.

“I ain’t stayin’ in this dead-end town, and if you got any sense of your own, neither will you.” Tobias doesn’t acknowledge Tommy, nor the fact he looks scared, he just gets back to what he was doing.

“You can’t live the way you’ve been livin’. Not when you got someone who’s relyin’ on you,” I remind him.

“Well as it happens, *Tristan*.” He says my name in the same tone Mom uses. “I’ve found a way to make some real fuckin’ money.”

“An illegal way to make money?” I cross my arms over my chest and glare at him.

“I got a meetin’ with the president of this Motorcycle Club in Colorado lined up—”

“Colorado?” Now I’m really confused, Colorado’s a long-assed way from home.

“You heard right. Colorado.” He nods.

“And you wanna be a fuckin’ biker?” I check I heard that part right too.

“You like bikes, you always have. You’d fit right in.”

“This ain’t about me, Tobe... This is about you, takin’ your kid away from the only family he’s got and havin’ full responsibility for him,” I point out, keeping my voice low enough not to scare the kid, but stern enough for my brother to realize how crazy all this is. “You think a bikers’ yard is a good place to raise him?” I look at the clueless little thing who’s now sat on Mom and Dad’s porch. “His mom just left him, you ain’t exactly been a hands-on dad to him over the years. You’re gonna need all the support you can get.”

“So support me, come with us.” Tobias has a real serious look on his face.

“Tobe, I—”

“At least think about it,” he cuts me off. “I’m leavin’ in a few hours, just got some loose ends to tie up. Have Mom take care of him while I’m gone.” He nods his head at the kid before climbing behind the wheel of his truck.

“There’s a whole world out there, Tristan, don’t get tied to one fuckin’ outcome.” He pulls off the drive with a screech, leaving his kid looking at me like I got all the answers.

---

“Well, it’s not a terrible idea.” Mom grins awkwardly when I explain how the conversation went, omitting the part about

Tobias joining a biker gang, of course. She's got enough on her plate without having to worry about that.

"You have always been the sensible one, and little Tommy here could use his uncle." She looks over to my dad for support and although he remains silent, I can tell all this has him worried too.

"Mom, it's a bad idea."

"It's a terrible idea," she agrees. "But you know your brother, once he has something in his head, not hell nor high water can stop him from seeing it through." She places a glass of milk in front of her grandchild and strokes her hand through his jet-black hair. "If it was just your brother, I wouldn't be asking." She looks up at me hopefully.

"So, you're *askin'* me now, huh?" I raise my eyebrows at her and after looking over to Dad, she fixes her eyes back to me.

"Yes, I'm asking. Go with him. Keep him out of trouble and keep this little one safe." She kisses the top of Tommy's head, making it impossible for me to refuse.

It's another four hours before Tobias returns and as he straps Tommy into the middle seat, then plants a kiss on Mom's cheek to say goodbye, I step out the house with my holdall over my shoulder. Dad sits on the porch with a smoke, nodding his approval at me as I pass him, and when Tobias sees that I'm packed up, his lips raise into a smile.

"Good choice, little brother." He slams his huge hand into my shoulder, squeezing it tight before taking my holdall and tossing it into the back. I wait until he's jumped behind the wheel before I step over to Mom.

"Thank you," she mouths the words silently before I kiss her goodbye. I nod my head to let her know it's gonna be okay, despite having no idea what's in store for me. I just know that her heart would break if anything happened to him.

I get into the passenger seat and smile at the poor, little soul sitting between us, who's being dragged along for the ride.

“Don’t forget to call,” Mom shouts out as we pull off the yard.

“You won’t regret this, Bro,” My brother assures me, sitting back in the driver’s seat comfortably as he drives us towards whatever Colorado has in store for us.



“I wasn’t expecting company,” I warn, opening the door to my cabin and letting Addison and her son inside.

She looks around my space warily as she carries her little boy through the door. I show her to the couch, quickly lifting off the old shirt that’s hanging over the armrest and picking up the empty wrappers. Having Addison here in the space that I shared with Carly seems a little strange, and as she places Charlie down on the couch she looks equally as awkward as she smiles at me.

“You wanna tell me why you’re here?” I get things started. The last person I was expecting to show up at the clubhouse was her. When I saw her at the cemetery last week, she made it clear she wanted nothing to do with me. I wonder what’s changed?

Addison closes her eyes and takes a breath. I can see she’s been crying and she’s still shaking, despite me telling her numerous times that she’s safe here. It proves that whatever’s got her spooked is real serious.

“You want me to see if someone can watch the kid so we can talk? I’m sure Jaz—”

“No!” she cuts me off sharply. “I need him here with me. I need him close.” Her arm wraps tighter around his shoulder, and the flicker of a flame that I can’t recall ever being there before burns inside her eyes.

“Addison, you have to tell me what’s wrong. I can’t fix it if you don’t.”

“I don’t think you can fix this.” She shakes her head as more tears flow freely over her cheeks. “Nobody can fix this.” Her voice breaks into a sob and when I see the way little Charlie is looking up at his mom, I quickly take her arm in my hand and drag her out of his earshot.

“You need to calm down. He’s scared, just like you are,” I whisper at her harshly. “Now, tell me what the fuck ya came here for, because believe me, I *will* fix it.”

Her eyes open wide and glisten from her tears as she takes in what I said, it’s a sharp reminder of how beautiful they are.

“His father has come for him.” She speaks so quietly I barely hear her, and the way she swallows deeply and closes her eyes makes the compulsion to pull her into my arms unstoppable. I wrap her up and squeeze her tight, unable to resist smelling her hair the way I used to. It brings with it a sense of comfort, and guilt, all at the same time. This was Carly’s home and it ain’t right for me to be appreciating another female in it.

“No one’s gonna take him. You’re safe here,” I tell her again because she don’t seem to be taking that part in.

“You don’t know his father.” She pulls back so she can look up at me again, and the vulnerability on her face makes me want to find whoever he is and make him bleed.

“Can we stay here?” She flicks her eyes between me and her son, and I can tell that she’s really going against all her pride in asking.

“Course you can stay here.” I manage a smile, despite my conscience telling me this is a bad idea. “I’ll make up the spare room.”

There are plenty of spare cabins I could put them in, but seeing her so scared has my impulse to keep them close overriding all logic. I drag myself away from her and head into the room that Carly always dreamed would become a nursery someday. There’s a double bed and some of Carly’s stuff that I’ve boxed up over the years but could never part with. I

quickly shove the boxes into the wardrobe and pull out the spare comforter so I can spread it over the bed for them.

“You can put him down in here.” I stand at the door and watch, as Addison takes her little boy’s hand and leads him past me. “It’s basic but, like I said, I wasn’t expectin’ company.”

“It’s perfect.” She smiles gratefully and I head to the kitchen, leaving her to make herself at home.

My own hands shake as I lift down the bottle of Jack from the cupboard and unscrew the lid. Then heading for the couch, I take a seat and stare blankly at the floor.

*“What are you doin’, Skid?”* the voice in my head asks.

Too much is going on in my brain for me to give it an answer. I haven’t even had time to worry about how my club brothers are gonna react to this. This is one hot mess, and Addison and her kid being here is all kindsa fuckin’ wrong. Yet, right now, knowing that they’re in danger... there’s nowhere else I’d rather ‘em be.

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“He’s finally asleep.” Addison’s voice startles me when she sneaks out of the bedroom and quietly closes the door, half an hour later.

“You want a drink?” I stand up, heading for the kitchen so I can grab her a glass, and when she takes it from my hand she watches as I pour her a good measure of Jack.

“I don’t usually drink.” She looks up at me and bites her lip.

“Well, tonight seems like the kinda night ya need to,” I tell her, placing the bottle down and sitting beside her.

“I’ll ‘cheers’ to that.” Addison raises her glass before taking a sip and pulling a real unimpressed face at what she gets.

“So, the kid’s dad, is he dangerous?” I get straight to what’s important. For me to fix this, I need to know what I’m up against.

“Very.” She nods, curling her legs up beneath her and making herself comfortable. I like that she relaxes around me the way she used to.

“Did ya love him?” The words blurt outta my mouth before I can stop ‘em, and the way she stares back at me in confusion as she shakes her head makes me regret the question. “Did he...?” I don’t want to finish the sentence. I don’t even want to fuckin’ *think* it.

“Not exactly.” She looks at the floor as she places her glass on the coffee table.

“It’s really complicated, and I wouldn’t expect you to understand.”

“I’ll never understand if ya don’t tell me,” I point out, getting frustrated that she’s still keeping whatever this is from me.

“Why did you leave us?” Those tears are back in her eyes when she diverts me from my question.

“Now, that *is* complicated,” I tell her, gripping my glass so tight I fear it could shatter in my hand.

“You hurt me,” she confesses, her lips trembling as she reaches for her drink, this time taking a much larger swallow of it. Hearing what she just said causes something inside me to crumble.

“I know, and trust me when I tell ya, Addy, I regret that. It’s why I’m determined to do all I can to fix this for ya. All you gotta do is give me a name. I’ll make sure the man never troubles you again.”

“You think it’s that simple?” She shakes her head and laughs.

“In my world, darlin’, yeah. It’s that simple.”

“Would you ki—”

“Yes.” I spare her from having to say the word. “If he’s a danger to you or to him,”—I tip my head toward the bedroom door where her little boy is sleeping—“I would kill if I had to.”

“Skid, I didn’t come here for that.”

“Then why did ya?” I take her hand in mine so she can’t avoid my question. Suddenly, it feels really important to hear the answer.

“I came here because there has never been a time in my life when I’ve felt safer than that time I spent with you.”

I close my eyes and drop my head when her confession hits me straight in the chest. My fingers automatically grip her tighter, and yet she remains silent until I open my eyes and feel brave enough to look back at her.

“I’m sor—”

“Please don’t say that again,” she interrupts.

“But I am. What I did to ya was wrong. It was outta character. I shouldn’t have—”

“I don’t want to talk about that now. Right now, I need to focus on Charlie. You were right before, he is picking up on how scared I am and I can’t have that. I need him to feel secure while I figure all this out.”

“Thank you.”

“For what?” Addison shakes her head, clearly confused.

“For coming to me. For still believing that I can take care of you despite what I did.”

Her defensive shield quickly reforms, and when she stands back on her feet, she lifts her glass and knocks back what’s left in it.

“Desperate people do desperate things, Skid.” Slamming it back down, she turns on her heels and marches back to the spare bedroom.



Seven Years Ago

*“Are you ready?” My father smiles at me as he takes my hand and I do the only thing I can do.*

*Nodding my head, I pull together all my courage and smile back at him. The nerves in my stomach are doing summersaults. I’m sure it’s going to throw up the raw offal I had to eat after I spoke my vows a few hours ago. I know what happens next, I’ve had long enough to prepare myself for it. Taking a breath and straightening out the crisp white tunic I’m wearing, I let him lead me out the door and through the village.*

*Everyone has turned out, their bodies forming an aisle that leads to the building where the elders hold their meetings. My father guides me through them, nodding his head at the people who bow their heads and make well wishes. My heart breaks when I see Charlie standing with his family, and knowing the bruises on his face are all my fault makes me want to cry.*

*“I’m sorry.” The words fall silently from his lips as we pass him, and I decide that I have to put a brave face on for him too. He’s suffered enough, his attempt to stop the ceremony from taking place this morning earned him a beating. I warned him that he was foolish to even try. I was chosen, there was never going to be anything he or I could do to stop it. Just like there’s nothing that will stop what will happen to me next.*

*My mother and sister stand on either side of the door that leads to the room where I will perform my first duty as Abraham’s wife. Both of them keep their heads bowed as we pass, but when my sister reaches out her hand so her fingertips can brush against mine, I lift my head and see the tiny, sad smile she offers me before I step inside.*

*The room is lit by candles, and all six of the village elders surround the four-poster bed that’s replaced the table in the center of the room. They are dressed in matching red tunics and have harsh, serious looks on their faces. Knowing that*

*they will be here to witness what's about to happen makes my legs feel as though they'll give in.*

*My father, who was recently appointed by Abraham for Elderman status, manages to keep me upright, and when I turn my head to look at him, I see no guilt nor remorse for what he knows I will suffer. Just pride and admiration as he passes my new husband my hand and then places a red tunic on himself.*

*For my father, it is a great honor that I was chosen. Abraham is our leader, the village's very own messiah, and earlier today I became his third wife. He would have had four, but Rowena died while pushing his tenth child into the world just a few days ago. He stands in front of me with a dark smile on his face, and every intention to 'gift' me with his eleventh.*

*The door behind me closes, making me jump, and when my father gestures his eyes toward the bed as if I need a reminder as to why I'm here, I swallow thickly and take the few final steps towards it.*

*The men surrounding us are placed evenly apart so every angle of the bed can be observed. Wasting no more time, my husband steps toward me, his fingers getting straight to work as he starts loosening the ties on the neck of my tunic. When he gathers it and drags it up my body, I automatically raise my arms to assist him. I keep my face straight, holding onto my dignity by refusing to cry when my naked form is exposed fully to the eight men in this room, one of whom is my father. Abraham takes a step back so he can study me, and humiliation flushes hot under my cheeks.*

*"Seems you are not just a pretty face." He smiles, revealing his rotten teeth and causing bile to rise in my throat. "Wide hips for childbearing too." He grabs hold of them, forcing me tight to his body, ensuring I feel the hardness under his robe when it presses against my stomach. It makes me shudder when I think of it being inside me.*

*Last night, my mother explained what my duty would entail. It sounded invasive and a lot like it's going to hurt. My hands are shaking uncontrollably now, and my heart is pounding out of my chest.*

*“I will be gentle with you, just for tonight,” he whispers as his dirty nails brush through my hair and his putrid breath spreads across my cheek.*

*“Lie for me, Addison. The wider you stretch your thighs, the less it will hurt.”*

*Four of the men step forward, pulling the see-through fabric that acts as a curtain around the bed while I do as I’m instructed.*

*There’s no point in me refusing. Charlie is proof that rebelling only makes things worse.*

*“Must they stay?” My voice comes out weak and helpless as I look up at him.*

*“It is part of the ceremony. They must bear witness to our union. But fear not, my love, we have plenty of time alone together.”*

*Abraham lifts up his tunic and takes his manhood in his hand. I don’t want to see what it looks like, so I flick my eyes up and focus on the ceiling.*

*“No, no, Addison, eyes on me.” He makes his order, and knowing I must obey my husband I do as he requests, enduring the pain as he forces himself inside me with a wicked smile on his face.*

“Mama, Mama.”

I jolt awake when I hear my little boy’s voice calling me. Before I can move, the door crashes open and Skid suddenly bounds through it, wearing nothing but his sweatpants and looking ready to do some serious damage.

“What happened?” He flicks on the light before his eyes search the room frantically.

“It was just a dream, we’re fine,” I assure him, catching my breath before taking Charlie’s sweet, little face in my hands to assure him too. “Mommy’s fine, I promise.” I kiss his forehead, hating how scared he looks.

“I’ll get you some water,” Skid growls, lowering his head as he steps back out the room and leaves me to comfort Charlie. It’s been a while since old memories like that one seeped their way into my dreams. But what happened yesterday has stirred everything from my past life back up again.

“Here.” Skid returns, towering over us as he holds out the glass of water.

When I take it I make small, steady sips, trying my best not to be distracted by the fact he’s wearing nothing on the top half of his body.

“Better?” he asks, taking the glass from my still-quivering hand when I’m finished and placing it on the nightstand.

“Thank you.” I nod.

“Mommy, you’re shaking,” Charlie points out, making the frown on Skid’s face crease even deeper into his forehead.

“It was just a dream, baby, go back to sleep,” I encourage him to roll back on his side, gently soothing my hand through his hair until he falls back to sleep.

I’m very aware of the fact that Skid hasn’t moved from the spot where he’s been standing. He’s watching me with a pained look on his face, his chest rising and falling like he’s the one who just had the nightmare.

“You good?” he eventually cuts through the silence and asks me again, his intense stare daring me to lie to him.

When I slowly shake my head, I’m almost as shocked by my admission as I am at the fact he lifts up the covers and carefully slides in beside me. His huge arm slides beneath me, managing to scoop Charlie up too, and when his free hand guides my head to rest against his bare chest, I put up no resistance. Instead, I allow myself to take comfort in his protection.

“Sleep. I ain’t gonna let anythin’ happen to either of ya,” he promises. His fingers stroke through my hair the same way I did Charlie’s, and when I feel his lips press into the top of my head, the familiar stir in my chest that comes with it is as comforting as it is dangerous.



The constant beeping in my head isn't going away, my entire body aches and my throat is so dry I feel like I'm suffocating.

"Hey, sleepyhead."

The vision in front of me is blurry, but I can just about make out her chin-length, brown hair and pretty, petite features. Her smile is warm, and her eyes are so full of kindness that I have to wonder if she's ever known pain.

"Carly." Her name comes out groggy, and as I feel myself start to lose focus again I remember the first time I saw that smile.

*"You wanna hear today's breakfast specials?" A sweet voice interrupts me from staring into my coffee. When I look up and see her for the first time, I swear my heart misses a fuckin' beat.*

*"I just came on shift, Cassandra says you've been sitting here all night." The pretty little waitress tilts her head to one side and smiles at me. It's the kind of smile that warms you from your head to your toes because it's genuine. Her lips are narrow and shiny from the gloss she has on them, and I can't help wondering how they might taste.*

*"If you're thinking of sticking around for breakfast, I highly recommend the blueberry pancakes." She raises her eyebrows in a way that isn't intended to be seductive, but boy does it make my fuckin' cock ache.*

*“Blueberry pancakes it is.” I nod back at her.*

*“Good choice.” She turns around and heads toward the kitchen, giving me the perfect view of her tight, peach ass as she leans over the service counter and puts in my order.*

*When she returns a few minutes later with a fresh jug of coffee to top me up, I watch her dainty, little hand as it pours and envision it gripping around my fat cock.*

*“You look like you got a lot on your mind.” She surprises me when she slides into the bench seat opposite, propping up her chin on her fist. “You could tell me about it, I ain’t exactly rushed off my feet.”*

*I take a look around and realize the diner’s now empty before I chuckle to myself.*

*If this was any other girl I’d be dragging her to the bathroom, hitching that tight, knee-length skirt up over her hips, and getting her acquainted with my cock right now. Which has me questioning why the fuck I ain’t.*

*“I got a decision to make.” I try to make it sound like it ain’t a big deal, when, in fact, it really is.*

*I came here for a fresh start, to get away from all the shit I left behind. The Bastards MC have everything I’m looking for, but you have to prove yourself before they let ya in. And what they’re asking of me is a lot.*

*“Sounds like an important one.” The girl smiles at me.*

*“You ever worry that this is all we’re gonna get outta life?” I ask her thoughtfully.*

*“I think everyone worries about that.” She lets out a tiny laugh.*

*“Well, what if you had an opportunity to be somethin’ better?”*

*“I say you should always take an opportunity, you don’t know when the next might come along.”*

*The poor, clueless girl has no idea what she’s helping me decide on here. I left Skid with Tommy in the motel we stayed*

*at last night so I could meet with Clunk, the Bastards' president. What he offered me came as a surprise, but at the same time gave me an ego boost. He needs someone intelligent, to go behind enemy lines, and he sees the fact that I have some baggage with me as a huge advantage.*

*The Dirty Souls are The Bastards' biggest rivals, they run out of a sleepy town called Manitou Springs. They've really expanded these past few years and by all accounts, they got a pretty good family setup, up on the mountain they just moved there to. Jimmer Carson is a hero in that town.*

*The fact there are whores living on-site at the compound works for me too. These kinda places take care of their own, and it'll be easy to sling one of the sluts a little extra to keep an eye on Tommy and make sure he's fed. Yeah, it ain't exactly what I came here for, but it's something, and gaining the Bastards' respect is my only way in.*

*"You know what, darlin'?" I think you might be right." I smile back at her as the chef hits the bell on the hatch.*

*"That'll be your pancakes." She grins as she gets up and makes her way over to grab them.*

*"There you go." She places them in front of me.*

*"What's your name, darlin'?" I pick up the syrup and coat the thick, fluffy pancakes all over. Usually, I wouldn't give a shit, but this one's got me wanting to know everything about her.*

*"Carly." She smiles back brightly, and the power of it hits me like a fuckin' tidal wave.*

*"You back with us?" The nurse asks when I come back around. I say nothing as she finishes writing on her chart, before tucking it back into its slot on the bottom of the bed.*

*"You've been out for quite some time, a whole week in fact," she informs me, grabbing me a glass of water and bringing the straw to my mouth.*

I suck hard, appreciating the moisture on my lips and the relief from the burning in my throat.

“Where am I?” I croak back at her. I can’t remember jack shit past those Bastards’ betrayal. Once I started getting beaten by ‘em I must have blacked out.

“You’re in St Mary’s hospital. You had no ID when you came in. You got a name, sweetie?”

“Michael, Michael Fender.” Even in my groggy state, I know I can’t give her my real name. I’m on wanted lists in God knows how many states. She doesn’t seem to doubt me and as I watch her nod her head I realize that her likeness to Carly is striking.

“Well don’t worry, we’ll take good care of you, Michael. The police will want to talk to you about your injuries but—”

“No,” I cut her off, realizing that I sounded much too aggressive when she takes a step back from the bed.

“I must have come off my bike on a hairpin bend. I can vaguely remember someone came and dragged me into their car. They must have brought me here.” I hope what I tell her will be enough. I can’t have the cops showing up, not while I’m too weak to run.

“Well, you have whoever that was to thank for saving your life.” She pats my arm gently before she heads out the room.

Staying awake feels like a real challenge, and I figure it’s due to the drugs they’re pumping into me through the tube I got stuck in my hand. It makes me vulnerable, but right now there ain’t nothing I can do about it. Nothing but let myself drift back off again...

*“You’re a little late this morning.” Carly flicks her eyes up to the clock on the wall when I step through the diner door.*

*“Just keepin’ you on ya toes.” I nod as I take a booth and watch her pour me a flat black.*

*It’s been two weeks since I showed up at the Dirty Souls compound with Tommy and Skid, and just like Clunk told me*

*they would, the Souls have welcomed us with open arms. They were happy with the skill set we got too, the garage at the compound is well equipped and, hopefully, my age and the fact I can bring in a legit income for the club will help shorten my prospect probation. Ain't no way I'm gonna get the Bastards the information I need until I've got a seat at the table.*

*I decided to keep the arrangement I have with the Bastards from Tristan. He thinks The Souls were part of my original plan and that they are the biker gang I brought us here for. It's my safest option. My brother has never been good at lying.*

*The Soul brothers have really taken to him. But that's hardly a surprise, Tristan has always had a way of luring people in. It ain't just charm, it's something that goes way beyond that. My brother seems to have an empathy for other people's feelings. He genuinely cares about the people he surrounds himself with, and what's sad about it, is that one day that quality will probably be his ruin. I don't like lying to him, but right now he's an asset to my plan, and I know he would never agree with my decision if I'd told him the truth.*

*"You want me to get you those pancakes?" Carly takes out her tiny notepad and slides the pencil from behind her ear.*

*"That's what I come here for." I wink and lie to her at the same time. Truth is, I come here every weekday morning to see her. Those big, green eyes have been on my mind ever since the first day I saw 'em.*

*"Coming right up," she chirps, turning around and heading off.*

*As I sit back and look out the window, I think about the future I could make here in Manitou Springs and how much better Carly would look serving me these pancakes in a kitchen of our own.*

*Carly returns ten minutes later with my order and I tuck straight in. I got some work to do on my bike today, club rules are strict, and to be a member you have to have put your own together. All of Jimmer Carson's rules are a little stupid, in my opinion. I'd heard enough about the Bastards over the years to know I wanted to be one. Who wouldn't want the life of a I*

*percenter? Where you get pussy on tap and a constant feed of fuckin' chaos?*

*The Souls are outlaws just the same, but Jimmer runs his club a little more morally than the Bastards do. He's smart, I'll give him that, but I can't help thinking his rules are a little too restrictive for a man like me.*

*"You done here?"*

*I turn my head when I hear her voice again, and that warm smile I see seeps inside all the crevices of my cold, black soul and makes it burn.*

*"Yeah, I'm done." I wipe off my mouth with a napkin before screwing it in my fist and tossing it at the plate.*

*"You must have hated 'em." She giggles and her words make the smile instantly drop off my lips. I see their faces. Their wide, scared eyes bulging from their sockets. Purple skin and shocked expressions. I did fuckin' hate 'em. They all pushed me too far.*

*"Tobias?" Carly places her hand over mine and it makes me go rigid.*

*"Your pancakes, you must have hated 'em, I was making a joke." She picks up my empty plate and makes a nervous giggle.*

*"Yeah, they were god damn awful." I snap myself out of it, angry at myself for letting those whore bitches ruin the limited time of the day I get to appreciate her.*

*"Carly." I quickly grab her wrist to stop her from walking away, and when her shocked eyes blink back at me like a deer in the headlights, all their screams ring in my ears. I feel Carly's pulse thumping against my fingertips just like theirs did when I stole their last breaths, and suddenly I release her.*

*"I'm sorry." I stand up, nearly knocking her over as I get outta the booth and barge past her toward the door.*

*"Wait, what did you want?" The stupid, naive bitch comes running after me, managing to catch up with my strides before I make it out the door. When I spin back around to face her,*

*I'm reminded of how tiny she is. Her head doesn't even make it past my chin. It makes the choice I'm about to make even more justified.*

*"Nothing." I shake my head, deciding that she will be saved. I won't drag her into my depravity, I won't steal her light.*

*The club I'm becoming a part of may have that family vibe, but it's still a dangerous place and I'm a dangerous man. I don't know where it's come from, but I got an urge to protect this young, sweet girl from anything bad, and that includes me.*

*"Goodbye." I manage a smile for her before I force myself out the door.*

*Now I'm gonna need to find a new fuckin' diner.*



“Be nice,” I warn Rogue as she scowls across the yard at Addison.

I dropped her and Charlie down here when I came to do my shift at the garage, figuring that spending some time with the other girls would do her some good.

“I’m *always* nice,” Rogue bites back sarcastically as she snatches the wrench outta my hand and gets to work.

I watch as Dylan hands Charlie his ball, and smile when I notice how the girls go out their way to make Addison feel welcome. I sent a text to the boys this morning asking them to have a word with their old ladies. She’s not ready to be bombarded with questions just yet, and I know the girls can be as curious as they are inviting. The last thing I want is for Addison to feel railroaded and not want to be here anymore.

“So, how long have you liked her for?” Rogue interrupts me from staring at her.

“I don’t like her... Not like that, anyway.”

“Bullshit. I’m not fuckin’ blind, Skid, I can tell from the way you’re lookin’ at her. You have the hots for her,” she sings as she flaps a dirty rag in my face.

“Well, you’re wrong. I got a lot of admiration for the girl, but nothin’ like you’re thinkin’. She’s strong and independent, she’s doing a good job of raisin’ that kid too.” I watch how she encourages Charlie to play with Dylan by kicking the ball herself. “Her comin’ here would have been a big deal for her.”

“You figure out what she’s here for yet?” Rogue downs tools and rests her ass against the hood like she wants to get into this with me.

“Didn’t Grimm warn ya? I said no quest—”

“If you’re referring to that stupid message you sent out to the boys this morning, I shouldn’t have to be reminding you that *I* don’t fall into that category. If I want answers, I’m gonna ask. Now, what’s her deal?”

I shake my head and admit defeat. Ain’t no use prolonging the agony when it comes to Rogue.

“I ain’t entirely sure right now—and that *is* the truth,” I add when she gives me a look that tells me she ain’t buying it.

“All I know is that the kid’s dad’s lookin’ for him, and he’s dangerous. For now, that’s all I need to know. Same goes for you, and them.” I nod my head out toward the group of old ladies that have gathered around Addison.

“You gonna kill him?” Rogue wiggles her eyebrows at me.

“If I have to,” I answer without any hesitation, surprised she even had to ask.

“How?” Her eyes find that psychotic little spark.

“I don’t know yet, I’m an in-the-moment kinda guy. Now get back to work.” I spin the rag I’m holding in my hand then use it to thrash her on the back of her legs. It makes her laugh, and when we realize that I’m laughing too, we both stop and look at each other.

“It’s good to have you back,” she tells me, that glint in her eye turning into a tear before she presses her lips to my cheek and gets back to work.

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“Make a list.” I ignore how weird it is coming home and finding Addison curled up on my couch reading a book that I’m pretty sure used to be Carly’s. Instead, I hand her a pad and pen.

“A list of what?” She places down the book she must have taken from the collection on the shelf in the spare room and stares up at me.

“Of all the shit you and Charlie are gonna need to stay here. I’m gonna head over to your place and get it.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea.” She looks over to where Charlie is playing on the floor before she gets up and drags me into the kitchen area so he can’t hear.

“What if they’re watching the house? They could see you and follow you back here,” she whispers, a petrified look on her face.

“*They?*” I frown when I pick up on what she just said.

“Him, you know what I mean.” She shakes her head and tries to brush it off but I ain’t a fool.

“*He’d* have to have some brass balls to come here, darlin’. Don’t worry, I’ll take someone with me to keep a look-out while I’m inside. If we see any signs of someone watchin’ the house we’ll hunt ‘em down.”

“I appreciate that, but—”

“But nothin’. You need your stuff. Your son needs familiar things around him. Now, make a list.” I tip my head at her before headin’ into the bathroom to shower all the oil and grease off my skin.

“Thank you,” she calls after me, and when I turn around and see her smiling it’s impossible for me not to smile back.

“It’s the least I can do for ya, Ads,” I remind her.

*Five years ago*

*“Thank you.” The young girl smiles when I lift up the box she just dropped.*

*“Not a problem, you headin’ for the soup kitchen too?” I check.*

*“Sure am.” She smiles enthusiastically but I can see there’s something she’s hiding.*

*“You must be the bad-boy biker Mrs. Patterson warned me to stay away from,” she tells me when we get inside and she starts emptying the apparatus from the box I’ve placed on the counter.*

*“What gave me away?” I look down at the cut I’m still wearing and inwardly curse myself for not taking it off. I ain’t here on club business. I’m here because Carly used to volunteer for this church group and, for some stupid reason, being here makes me feel close to her.*

*“Well, I’m the helpless girl who got herself in trouble.” She holds out her hand for me to shake and keeps a brave smile on her face.*

*“What kinda trouble?” I ain’t one for making conversation these days, but the girl seems to have me intrigued. She’s like a breath of fresh air compared to the people we usually get around here.*

*“It don’t matter.” She shakes her head and laughs when she realizes I haven’t been kept in the loop.*

*I may help out the church group but I don’t attend any services. The looks I’d get from the congregation would be far too much. I spoke to Carly’s pastor after she died and told him how I wanted to make myself useful to them. Just like Carly always told me, he’s a kind man who doesn’t judge, but I know that won’t stop the rumors floating around through the others. Carly was loved by everyone and I’m sure they all want to know why she ‘took her own life.’*

*If this girl has her suspicions of me, she doesn’t show it. We get on with setting everything up, and I manage to put on a front and make the people who arrive feel welcome.*

*Carly was always shattered when she did a shift at the soup kitchen, and now I know why. I didn’t even know Fountain had so many people that couldn’t afford a decent meal. As the night draws to an end and everyone starts to head*

*off, I can see the young woman I've been working with trying her best not to yawn.*

*"There's a little left if you're hungry?" I hand her a polystyrene cup full of soup and watch her try not to gag. She's looked pale all night, and that makes me even more curious about what kinda trouble she's got herself in.*

*"You okay?" I check.*

*"Fine." She holds up her hand, "Just tired. It's been a long shift."*

*"Well, you take care." I nod and hold my hand up to Jerry who runs the place before I head out to my truck.*

*Once I'm behind the wheel, I sit back in my seat and take out my wallet, pulling the picture I keep in here of Carly from the sleeve and looking into her eyes. I miss waking up to those eyes every morning. I miss the way they'd widen every time I made her come. The fact that I'll never watch those eyelashes flutter when I say something to make her blush seems too overwhelming to bear.*

*I have to quickly tuck the photo away when my anger begins to overcome my agony.*

*Flipping open my glove compartment I check the gun I keep in there is still in its place. Now would be as good a time as any for me to finally go through with it. I've thought about those I'd be leaving behind and how it would hurt 'em. The note's already written tellin' 'em how sorry I am for letting 'em down. I was gonna drive myself to Pines Peak because it's pretty up there, but then I thought about the poor, innocent fucker who'd have to live with finding me. Instead, I'll take myself to Sinnerman's Quarry. Grimm's the only person who ever goes there, he'd find me eventually and he's seen enough dead bodies for it not to leave a scar on his soul, it wouldn't even leave a scratch. That kid's far too fuckin' damaged already.*

*He can get rid of me however he deems best and give Prez my letter. Everything I own will go to Rogue. It ain't much of a consolation for bailing on her like every other fucker in her*

*life has, but I've asked Prez to watch out for her in my letter, and I know he's too good a man to ignore a dead man's last request. I got a note for her too, one that tells her I'm sorry and that I couldn't bear the pain anymore. The thought of her hating me is the only part of this that feels difficult. I already know that pulling the trigger will come with ease.*

*With that in mind, I start my engine, about to pull away and head for the quarry. Then I see the girl step out the door and into the darkness. She pulls the collar of the threadbare coat she's wearing up around her ears as she walks outta the parking lot and onto the main road. I follow my instinct and steadily drive up beside her, winding down my window and creeping along the sidewalk.*

*"You need a ride?" I check.*

*"I'm good, I'm only a few blocks away." She smiles.*

*"It ain't the nicest of neighborhoods, add to that the fact it's freezing. Hop on in, let me take ya home." I reach across the seat and pop the door open for her.*

*"Honestly, I'm fine." She shakes her head.*

*"Been listenin' to Mrs. Patterson's warnings, I see? Too scared of the bad-boy biker?" I raise my eyebrows at her.*

*"Somehow, I don't think the worst of them hang out at soup kitchens, volunteering." She looks back at me judgmentally.*

*"Ya got me. I'm tryin' to get some brownie points in the hope I can make it into Heaven. Gettin' you home safe could be my second good deed of the day."*

*"Well, for the sake of your soul..." She rolls her eyes, before hopping inside and closing the door.*

*"Where to?" I ask, trying to understand why her accepting my offer has me so relieved.*

*"My apartment's on Leamington Street." She bites her lip awkwardly.*

*"Leamington Street?" I check I've heard her right. The club has made a few busts there in the past. It ain't the kinda*

*place a girl like her should be passing through, let alone livin' in.*

*"And your folks don't mind you walkin' home this late?" I check.*

*"I don't live with my folks." She keeps her eyes focused on what's in front of her.*

*I can tell my questioning is making her feel uncomfortable and yet it doesn't stop me.*

*"What about your boyfriend?"*

*"I don't have one of those either." She shakes her head and laughs.*

*"You got a roommate or—"*

*"I live alone, okay?" she snaps defensively, making the atmosphere immediately turn cold.*

*We make the rest of the journey in silence, and when I pull onto Leamington Street and she directs me to her apartment block, I get outta the truck and move around it to open her door for her. There's a guy slumped at the entrance, off his fuckin' head, that she's gonna have to climb over to get inside. I lock up my truck and decide I'm gonna have to see her all the way to her door before I can leave her.*

*"Here's fine, honestly," she tells me, stepping over his limp body and putting her key into the lock.*

*"I'd rather see you to your door," I insist when I hear all the yelling that's coming from inside.*

*"You really don't have to do that." She smiles.*

*"I really want to." I stomp on the guy's arm when his hand wraps around her ankle and starts creeping up her leg.*

*"What the fuck, dude?" he yells up at me, so I stomp on his face and send him back into whatever coma he came out of.*

*"Lead the way." I gesture for her to move on, and she looks down at the man on the floor in shock, while I hold the door open for her.*

*We pass through the corridor and then she leads me up the stairs, where a girl around the same age as her lies with a needle hanging out of her arm. There's a baby screaming on the second floor and when she starts to unlock her door on the third and I hear a gun go off above us, I quickly rush her inside and slam it closed.*

*"That was probably just a warning shot." She bites her lip nervously.*

*Glancing down I see 'The Guide to Pregnancy' book that's resting on her couch, and she quickly takes off her coat and throws it over the top of it.*

*"So, that's me in and safe, you got your savior points, you can leave now."*

*"Safe?" I stare at her, wondering if she's lost her mind. "Darlin', you'd be safer sleepin' in the middle of a war zone. Pack a bag, you ain't stayin' here." It's just as cold in this room as it is outside and when I look up at the mold growing on the ceiling, I question how her landlord can be charging her for this health hazard.*

*"I know it isn't exactly a palace, but I don't have much choice," she bites back at me sarcastically.*

*"Yeah, well I'm givin' ya one. Go pack your things." I stand firm, and when the commotion that comes from the apartment above us becomes deafening, she huffs in defeat and heads over to her wardrobe.*

*She doesn't take long to pack her stuff, and I'm surprised that it all fits with ease into a small rucksack. I wait for her to stand in front of me with it before I take it from her and slide it over my shoulders. Lifting her coat, I wait for her to shrug inside it before I pick up the book she tried to cover up and watch her blush as I hand it to her.*

*"Come on." I take her hand and when her fingers wrap around mine, I move my gaze down to them and stare at the way it looks. The last woman whose hand I held was Carly's. It was cold and didn't clench me back.*

*“You don’t have to do this. You don’t even know me,” she points out, making me shake the memory outta my head and focus on what I need to do.*

*“I want to.” I pull together a smile as I rush her out the door and down the stairs, getting her the hell outta there and back to my truck.*

*“So, how far along are ya?” I ask, breaking through the silence as I drive toward Manitou Springs. There’s no way I can take the girl back to the club, there would be far too many questions from my brothers. They might get the wrong idea as to why she was there, and there’s no way this girl is ready for Squealer. Way I see it, I’ve only got one option.*

*“I’m not sure, I figure I should see a doctor, but I’ll need to get another job before I can do that. The one I got barely pays my rent.”*

*I want to ask her more, like where she came from and who got her in trouble. But I have a feeling that pushing the girl will only make her clam up more.*

*“You need to see a doctor.” I clear my throat, trying to think about what my wife would do in a situation like this. She sure as hell wouldn’t have left this poor, defenseless girl alone in that apartment, and when I pull up outside the house I bought a few months ago—that nobody else knows about—I get the sense this is what she’d want.*

*This place was gonna be a surprise for Carly, we’d been trying to get pregnant for some time, and I figured that when we did, she wouldn’t want to raise our kid at the club. I wanted to give her the white picket fence, big backyard dream, and this place was gonna be the start of it.*

*“Is this your place?” the girl asks, as I lean across her and take the key from the glove compartment. Thankfully, it’s far too dark for her to see what else is inside there.*

*“No, it belongs to a friend. I’m just takin’ care of it for him,” I lie as I lead her to the front door and open it for her.*

*The light flickers on when I find the switch and we both stare at the open space. This was not how I envisioned being*

*back here when I last left the place. I imagined bringing my wife here and hearing her squeal with excitement when I told her it was ours.*

*“It’s a fixer-upper but it has potential.” I scratch the back of my neck awkwardly when her eyes glance over the wallpaper that’s peeling off the walls and the loose floorboards that lead up the stairs.*

*I got the place real cheap and was looking forward to putting the work in and making it ours. I know Carly would have loved having a blank canvas to work on and watching her grow fat with our child, while I created the perfect home for them, was my ultimate dream.*

*“It’s perfect.” The girl’s voice brings me back to reality.*

*“There’s a couch through there, and some beddin’ in here,” I tell her, heading for the downstairs cupboard and pulling out a pillow and a blanket that I have stored away.*

*I started doing some work on the place when Carly went on a trip with Jasmine a few weeks before she died. I spent an entire week here sanding floors and patching up all the roof damage.*

*“Thanks.” The girl takes them outta my hands and places them on the couch that the previous occupiers left behind.*

*“I’ll stop by in the mornin’ and we’ll figure everythin’ else out, okay?” I take a few steps back from her when I start to question if what I’m doing here is too much. All this is exactly what Carly would do in the same situation, but that don’t make it fuckin’ easy.*

*“You don’t even know my name.” She shakes her head, seeming equally as overwhelmed by my kindness as I am.*

*“I don’t need to. You need help and I can offer it. It’s the decent thing to do.” I shrug as if it’s no big deal.*

*“Well, I appreciate it, and my name’s Addison.” She closes the gap between us and reaches up on her toes so she can kiss my cheek in appreciation.*

*“Like I said, just doin’ the decent thing.” I quickly pull away from her and head out the door.*

“What exactly am I lookin’ for?” Storm asks when I leave him out on the porch and open the front door to Addison’s house.

“For anyone who’s watchin’ us,” I hiss, leaving him sparking up a smoke as I let myself inside and head up the stairs to Addison’s room.

I check the list for what she needs and shove it all into the holdall I find in the wardrobe like she instructed. It only proves how scared she’s been when I find the suitcase already packed and filled with essentials under the bed where she told me it would be.

I flick through her wardrobe and when I see my old AC/DC shirt hanging up among her clothes I pause. During the last few weeks of her pregnancy, this was about the only thing Addison could fit into, she wore it all the time and I remember how much I loved the way it looked on her. The fact she’s kept it all these years gives me a little hope that she kept some happy memories from the time we spent together. I pull it from the hanger and inhale it; it smells like her now, and despite it not being on the list I toss it in the holdall before I head into Charlie’s room.



I t's late when Skid returns, and when he sees that I'm still awake he gives me that same strange look he did when he came home earlier. He's doing everything he can to make me and Charlie feel welcome here, and yet that one look seems to make me feel like we're imposing.

"I got your stuff." He places the holdall on the table along with the suitcase that I asked him to get from under my bed, then he heads for the refrigerator and pulls out two beers. He twists the cap off one before passing it to me, and when I accept it with a smile he opens the other for himself and throws both bottle tops at the trash can.

"Kid go down okay?" he asks, slouching into the seat beside me.

"Yeah, he's been out for hours. Probably shattered from all the attention he's been getting. Your friends are good people, Skid. They've made us feel really welcome."

I'd already met a few of the guys when they did work on the house before Charlie was born, but Skid always kept me distanced from them. I had no idea there was such a family atmosphere here. Over the years I've learned a lot about the Souls, you can't live near a town like Manitou Springs without hearing about these ruthless men who own the town and are respected by everyone. They don't seem so dangerous when they're surrounded by those they care about. But I guess I should have already known that. Skid may have broken my heart, but I'll forever be in his debt for what he did for me.

"Kids can get easily distracted." He rests his head back against the couch and looks up at the ceiling, sighing heavily.

“I don’t expect anything from you other than protection. I’m over all that now,” I assure him in case that’s what he needed to hear. I’m positive it was the affection I showed him before that pushed him away, and I’m surprised at the frown he’s wearing when he turns his head to face me.

“When I saw you at the cemetery, you said if I ever nee—”

“I know what I said.” He cuts me off, still looking confused, and maybe even a little mad.

“I just wanted you to know that it’s clear. We’re friends, right?”

“Friends.” He nods, but the expression on his face makes me question what’s going through his head. I can’t help wondering why the thought of only ever being his friend hurts me. Not when I’m supposed to be mad at him. I’m only here because I have no other option, and the fact he’s already stirring old emotions up inside me is not a good sign.

I stand up from the couch and move over to the table, unzipping the holdall and smiling to myself when I see Charlie’s blue elephant on the top of our things. Nora, next door, got it for him on his first birthday and I’d forgotten to put it on the list. Skid would have seen it on Charlie’s pillow, and the fact he picked it up is just another example of how thoughtful he can be.

I lift it out and when I see the faded AC/DC tee shirt beneath it, I slide my fingers over the fabric, and my smile drops. I don’t know why I’ve kept it all these years, maybe I wanted my own little reminder of how it felt to be cared for. There’s only ever been one other person who has taken care of me the way Skid did, and when I think about the price he had to pay for it, I feel my heart break all over again.

*“Pssst.” I hear Charlie call me from behind the woodshed when I go outside to collect the logs that Abraham’s older son, Solomon, has split. Then I check the coast is clear before I sneak behind it to join him.*

*“We haven’t got much time, Abraham just left with your father and Elder Andrew to get supplies,” he whispers,*

*pressing the small plastic bag that contains the pills I need into my hand. I quickly lift up my skirt and stuff them into my underwear to secure them until I can get them to my hiding place.*

*“They’re working, right?” he checks.*

*“They seem to be.” I keep my head down and feel my cheeks flush.*

*“Addison?” The tone of his voice tells me that he knows something is wrong and when I feel his hand push under my chin and he lifts my head, the disgust on his face brings tears to my eyes.*

*“He did that to you?” He shakes his head when he sees the bruise and throws his fist into the shed wall.*

*“Charlie,” I whisper-yell at him, grabbing the hand he’s trying to shake the pain out of and clutching it in mine.*

*“What do you expect? We’ve been wed for over a year, and thanks to your supply, I’m not... producing.”*

*“So, I’m not helping at all.” He makes a frustrated laugh as he snatches his hand away from me and forces it through his hair.*

*“Don’t you dare say that, what you do for me is already too much. Everything you risk—”*

*“And yet you still have to endure what that bastard does to you. Look at your face, Addison. Look at what he’s done.”*

*“Is it that bad?” I ask. Mirrors are not permitted in the house, Abraham tells us they are the Devil’s eyes into our world.*

*“It’s bad,” he tells me, closing his eyes like it hurts him to look at me. “I’ve got to get you out of here. I should have done it before you married him, then you would never have had to...” He struggles to finish his sentence.*

*“Charlie, you know that’s never gonna happen, and even if you could, where would we go? We aren’t prepared for the outside world. The evil—”*

*“I’ve been sneaking out,” he interrupts me, and the loud gasp I make has him slamming his hand over my mouth and pushing me into the shed. “Where do you think I’ve been getting those pills for you?” he tells me with a cocky grin on his face.*

*“I thought you were stealing them from the medical center.” I pull his hand away so I can answer.*

*“You know contraception is forbidden.” He gives me that same dumb look he always does when I prove how naive I am.*

*Of course, I knew Charlie was taking risks getting these for me, but I had no idea he would go beyond the perimeter. Anything could have happened to him out there.*

*“There’s more.” He keeps his voice low. “I’ve been learning stuff about life beyond the fence. The people aren’t so bad. Out there they trade with money and I’ve managed to get us some.” I feel my mouth drop open.*

*“Charlie, if you are caught...”*

*“Shhh, don’t you worry about that, you just keep on surviving until I collect enough to get us out. We can survive out there, Addison. I’ll get a job and I’ll take care of you. Out there, the women...they have careers too. They’re doctors and law people. They’re so much more than just—”*

*“I can’t leave without my sister,” I tell him, not liking the worried look on his face. She’s close to coming of age. As soon as she is, she will have to perform the same duties as I do.*

*“I know that, and I’m working on it. We’re gonna need more money for three of us. That means I’ll need more time.”*

*“This is too much of a risk. If you get caught with money you will be punished.” I shake my head.*

*“I won’t be caught. I keep it hidden. And you should know where just in case anything happens to me. There’s a tree behind my folks’ place. Its branches are easy enough to climb and will take you high enough to get over the fence. The only way out is over, Addison, don’t forget that, okay?” He grips my shoulders tight, making sure I take in what he’s telling me.*

*“Charlie, don’t speak like this.” I shake my head, unable to even think of the risks he’s been taking for me.”*

*“This is important. Listen. When you get over you’ll be surrounded by woodland. There’s an ash tree. You’ll know it because it has a white trunk and stands out from all the others. I keep the money tin buried under the big root that’s sticking out from the ground. You got all that?”*

*I nod my head, terrified just thinking about him leaving.*

*“And remember, the only way out is over. There’s no other way out, Addison. Don’t even attempt it.” I nod my head again. The thought of being on the other side of the perimeter is petrifying yet exciting all at the same time. I like the sound of freedom, despite the outside world being so scary. And the thought of Abraham not visiting my bed every night makes the risk of being caught seem almost worth it.*

*“Just stay strong.” Charlie nods his head at me and smiles, though I see the worry behind it, and it always makes me wonder why he would put so much on the line for me. He’s almost at the age where he could take a wife himself, his father may not be an Elder but he is respected. He could request a girl he actually liked and stand a chance of happiness.*

*“Charlie, if this doesn’t work...”*

*“It will work, how many times do I have to tell you to have faith in me?”*

*“But if it doesn’t, you should choose Everleigh. She would be a good wife, she’s kind and thoughtful, she can cook—”*

*“It’s not your sister I’m in love with.” He places his finger over my lips to silence me, and when he slowly slides it away I feel something pull us together. I know it’s a sin, and yet I do nothing to stop it.*

*“Addison?” I hear my name get called from the house before our lips connect.*

*“I must go.” I smile, feeling ashamed as I brush past Charlie, quickly gathering up the logs I was out here to collect.*

*“Addison.” Solomon slams the back door open against the wall and watches me struggle. He’s wearing that horrid smirk on his face, and his presence makes me so nervous I drop everything.*

*“Come on, you barren bitch, that fire ain’t gonna make itself.” He laughs at me, shaking his head as if I’m some kind of joke before he turns around and heads back inside.*

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*I sit at the huge table with Abraham and the rest of his wives. Some of the older children join us, while the younger ones are being fed in the nursery by one of the house staff.*

*Since I have none of my own yet, I’m expected to help my sister-wives take care of their offspring, and doing that never feels like a chore. They are all sweet, loving children, which comes as a surprise considering the fact they are barely spoken to. Their mothers show them no affection because all their attention must be directed toward our messiah.*

*Abraham sits at the head of the table studying me with a curious look on his face, he’s barely taken his eyes off me all through supper and I can’t shake off the feeling that something’s not right. Hilda, his first wife, rises from the table making sure she draws attention to her huge, protruding stomach, by rubbing her hand over her maternity smock. It earns her a proud little tap from Abraham that seems to satisfy her, and when I move to get up and help her collect the empty plates his voice freezes me.*

*“Not you, Addison, you come with me. I have something to show you.”*

*I put down the plate I’m holding and follow after him when he leaves the room, taking my cloak from the hook when I realize that we’re heading outside. He walks me around the side of the house and I watch in confusion as he drags one of the storage lockers that are pushed against the wall to one side, and reveals the two doors that lead underground and are bolted shut. Taking a set of keys from his pocket, he crouches*

*down and smiles up at me before he unlocks the padlock and pulls the doors open.*

*“What is this?” I ask, hearing the shiver in my voice.*

*“This...” He takes my hand and carefully guides me down the stairs into the darkness. “This is my secret hiding place.” He pulls a cord that turns on the single light bulb in the center of the room.*

*“It’s my duty to make sure all my wives and children are cared for, and you know the world beyond our confines is a dangerous place. Supposing there was an attack, what if our village was at threat? Nobody knows about this place, Addison, not even the other Elders.” The way he whispers into my ear makes that sound like a threat.*

*“We have been married for more than a year now.” He strokes his hand over the bruise he put on my face a few days ago. “And you are still yet to make use of the seed I give you.” His hand lowers to my stomach and it makes me squirm when I imagine his child growing inside me. “Your sister-wives put you to shame, we should be asking God for our second by now.”*

*“Please don’t hit me again,” The words escape from my lips and when he smiles at me, I can’t make out what’s going through his head. He doesn’t seem angry like he was before. He’s eerily calm.*

*“I don’t intend to strike you, Addison. I understand this must be as frustrating for you as it is for me. The villagers are talking, they say you must be barren, they think I was wrong and that you are not a chosen one after all. I want to prove them wrong just as much as you do. I believe in God’s prophecy, I don’t think there is anything wrong with you. You request your rest days when you bleed, so I know you are regular. That’s a good sign.”*

*I nod my head, at least pretending that I appreciate his version of kindness.*

*“I’ve been wondering if maybe there is something out there that’s preventing nature from taking its course.” The way*

*he looks back over his shoulder at the door has my heart beating frantically.*

*The hairs on the back of my neck stand up when I consider that maybe he knows of mine and Charlie's exchanges. Did someone see us today, or did one of the sister-wives notice me storing the pills he gave me under the loose floorboard under my bed?*

*"You look worried, dear." He shows me those rotten teeth before he pushes on my shoulder and forces me to my knees.*

*"Here, we can ensure no impurities mess with God's will." Loosening his slacks he takes out his flaccid cock and rubs it against my cheek as he attempts to get it hard.*

*"I can put all my attention to you. Hilda's belly is already full and Annie is still recovering from her birth, last month. Everything I have will be just for you. We will prevail." He forces his semi-hard cock between my lips and commands me to look up at him by pushing his finger up under my chin.*

*"Fear not, I will keep you here, away from shame and impurity until we do."*

"Addison, are you okay?" I look up and see the concern on Skid's face. I'm still clutching his AC/DC tee in my hands, and when I swallow the sick taste in my mouth that comes with my memories, I pull the tee to my face to give me the comfort I need.

"Addy?" he checks again, his eyebrows knitted tight together as, once again, he defies all the barriers we've both tried to pull up and wraps his arms around me. He holds me tight to his chest, forcing the tee I'm holding into my face again. It lost the smell of him ages ago, but now with that scent surrounding me again I feel like my feet can stop treading water. I'm not drowning anymore, just floating on the surface.

"What happened? Who are you so afraid of?" His voice whispers into my hair, sounding more like a desperate plea than a request. I want so badly to tell him, but living in this

world for this amount of time has made the place I came from seem so far from reality, I wonder if he'd even believe me.

"I should go to bed." I drag myself away from him, noticing that he looks a little hurt as he watches me walk away, taking the tee with me and heading into my room.

*I hear the door creak open and when the natural light bursts through, my body craves the fresh air so much that I stand on my wobbly legs and move toward it to greet him. Abraham smiles like he's pleased to see me as he hands me a plate of fresh berries and some granola. Despite my stomach growling at me, the smell of it instantly makes me gag, and when I quickly place the plate back in his hands and turn toward the porcelain basin in the corner of the room to empty my stomach, I hate the satisfied chuckle he makes from behind me. It makes me grip the edge of the basin in frustration.*

"Well, it seems my theory was correct." Abraham places the plate down on the floor and steps toward me. Sliding his hand around my body and resting it on my flat stomach. "It's been more than seven weeks since you bled. I think it's time we got you examined."

*The feeling of terror is outweighed by my desperation to leave this hovel, and as my husband guides me up the stairs and into the bright light of day, I have to shield my eyes from the sun.*

*My feet barely feel like they can carry me as he leads me back into the house and when I see Hilda nursing her new baby on the rocking chair in the kitchen, she spares me a mere glance to greet me.*

"Annie, take Addison upstairs and help her bathe. Make sure the water isn't too hot," he instructs before he looks across the room to Solomon. He's the same age as Charlie and will also soon be taking a wife. "Go and get Magna."

"Magna." Hilda looks up from her feeding child with a smirk on her face. She's never been kind to me. I swear that bitch can read me and gets off on my suffering.

*“Yes, I am more than sure that Addison has been blessed. We must have it confirmed and treat her delicately. This is her first time, remember. Kindness and patience will be required from us all.”*

*Annie silently leads me up the stairs to the bathroom, and as soon as the door is closed she turns on the facet.*

*‘Where did he take you? I was worried,’ she whispers.*

*“There’s a bunker-basement thing under the house.” I sit on the edge of the bath, exhausted from the exercise it took me to get up the stairs, and the heat from the steam rising off the bath is already making me dizzy.*

*“He’s had you there all this time? Addison, it’s been months!” She looks shocked, but as the dizziness and the tightening of my stomach combine, I have to quickly rush to the basin so I can throw up again.*

*“I’m sorry.”*

*She holds back my greasy hair for me and strokes my back with affection.*

*“At least he will leave you alone now.” She smiles when I steadily get back on my feet.*

*“I can’t have a child, not here.” I shake my head and sob. I’ve had my own suspicions for a few weeks now, but I’ve been too scared to even think it might be true.*

*“Come, let’s get you clean.” Annie helps me over to the bath, and as I sink into the lukewarm water I feel my muscles start to loosen.*

*Abraham provided me with a bowl and sponge to clean myself with each day, but it’s been so long since I’ve felt clean.*

*I don’t know how long I lie in the water but a sharp knock at the door tells me my time is up. Annie holds out a towel and aids me in climbing out. I dry off and put on a fresh robe before Abraham, who’s waiting outside, leads me to the master bedroom where Magna is waiting.*

*The old woman points her long, wrinkly finger to the bed before covering her hands with plastic gloves and lubricating*

*the tips of them. I lie back on the mattress while my husband watches impatiently as she guides my legs open and pushes my knees back. Her fingers enter me uncomfortably, making me squirm and my body climb up the mattress. She tuts at me impatiently and Annie quickly steps up to offer me some support, taking my hand as Magna's cold fingers fumble around inside me. When she eventually withdraws them, she nods to my husband before snapping the gloves off her hands, picking up her bag, and leaving.*

*"I will report our news to the Elders, we have been in their prayers," Abraham tells me as I close my legs and roll on my side. "Go to your room and rest, I have something special planned for you this evening." He bends over me so he can kiss my cheek before he follows out after her.*

*It's dusk when we all leave the house together. Everyone is dressed like they do for Sunday church. Perhaps that's where we are heading. I've been trapped in the bunker for so long that I don't even know what month it is, let alone what day. But it does strike me as strange that we would be going to church so late. Abraham always does his sermons in the morning.*

*There seems to be a bustle in the village. I can't tell if it's out of fear or excitement, but as Abraham leads us proudly to the announcement stand in the center, the nerves start to knot in my stomach. I search around for Charlie and when I see no sign of him, an overwhelming panic comes over me.*

*My husband pulls me up onto the platform, and my breath catches in my throat when Solomon and one of the other Elders bring Charlie out of the reflection hut that's on the other side of the village. He looks malnourished and weak as he stumbles on his feet to keep up with their strides. I close my eyes to contain my tears when I see that his feet are bare and his ankles and wrists are shackled.*

*Charlie isn't fighting them off when I'm brave enough to reopen them. He lets them drag him up the steps onto the platform beside me. I risk a glance in his direction, and he remains facing forward with a brave, determined look on his face. It's not convincing when compared with the way his chest moves to catch up with his breaths.*

*“We have gathered you all here tonight to share with you some news. Once again, the good Lord has graced us. My wife carries a child,” Abraham announces as his hand touches my stomach affectionately.*

*I see pride on my father’s face as he and Mom hang on Abraham’s words. And when I take another subtle look at Charlie, his head has dropped in disappointment.*

*“Where the Lord has gifted us, he has also found a means to test us.” My husband’s tone changes and his attention swiftly moves to my friend.*

*“No!” Charlie’s mother screams from the crowd.*

*“Benedict, control your woman,” he orders.*

*Charlie’s father steps forward and takes his wife’s elbow, looking every bit as devastated as she does, as he pulls her back and silences her.*

*“He was trying to save a life, you can’t do this.” She shakes her head, her voice coming out weak as she drops to her knees ready to beg.*

*“Charlie Fairman has not only been leaving the village without the Elders’ permission, but he has been trading with outsiders.” Gasps from all the bodies surrounding us echo his words. “He has brought forbidden substances into our community.” Solomon passes his father a see-through plastic bag that contains a small bottle of liquid and what I think could be a syringe, causing even more disruption among the villagers.*

*“It’s insulin,” Charlie croaks. “My brother is showing symptoms of a condition cal—”*

*“Silence!” My husband holds up his palm and cuts him off. “The village has a healer and your brother, Peter, has been in all of our prayers.”*

*“Prayers aren’t enough and the remedy is so simple—”*

*“In fifteen years, no one but your Elders have left this village. We take the burden of risk from the outside world to bring you your supplies, to provide you with the medicine you*

*need. It is the only way we can ensure we remain pure from the sins of the outsiders. What Charlie has done has put us in danger; he has risked the safety of this sanctuary and that is punishable by death.” Abraham stares Charlie coldly in the eyes.*

*“NO!” His mother screams again, her husband standing beside her with his arms crossed at his front and his head lowered, doing nothing to fight for his son. Whispers pick up among the villagers and my husband digs his fingers into my bicep and draws me closer to him.*

*“We won’t mention the impurities he provided for you, not now that the problem has been rectified,” he hisses quietly into my ear.*

*“I command that you all bear witness to what happens when a threat is made upon our village. Laws are made for our protection, to ensure the survival of our righteousness, and those who don’t abide shall be sent to God, for His judgment.”*

*I watch as Solomon and Elder Andrew release Charlie from his shackles, then roughly force him against the thick, wooden post that village notices are usually nailed to. Charlie’s mother sobs and everyone holds their breath as my husband steps in front of him. I can’t hold in my tears anymore, and when I open my mouth to scream and protest, Charlie shakes his head at me.*

*He tries not to show how scared he is as my husband takes the blade that my father passes him. I watch the terrified breaths Charlie blows out of his mouth, praying there is something that will prevent what’s coming.*

*There are tears in my friend’s eyes, instead of hope, when he looks at me again. The sad smile he gives me before my husband slices through his throat and spills his blood, makes my heart sink into the pit of my stomach before I black out and crash to the floor.*

*I startle myself awake, clutching my throat as if mine was the one that had been gashed open. My chest feels restricted as I try to catch my breath and my shaking is uncontrollable. The sweat makes the tee of Skid’s, that I’m wearing, cling to my*

body. And when I look to my side and see Charlie sound asleep, a relief starts to creep in and make my chest lift a little easier. I don't want him to see me like this. I'm the only constant my little boy has ever had in his life, and he needs me to be strong.

I tuck the covers back around him and get out of bed, following my instinct, and head into the room next door. Skid wakes up with a jolt when I click open his bedroom door, and he looks kinda fearful as he turns on the bedside light and sees me standing beside his bed.

“Ads, what’s wrong?”

I try to keep breathing, so I can get my words out for him

“I... I had another dream,” I explain. “I was... can I...?” I look to the space beside him, craving the comfort of his body against mine, and when all the color drains from his face I suddenly feel really stupid.

“Don't worry, I shouldn't have come in here. I'll grab some water and I'll be fine.” I turn my back and head for the door again, feeling sick with embarrassment as well as fear.

“Addy.” Skid's voice has me spinning around, and though his eyes seem sad, he pulls back the covers and invites me in. “Get yourself in here.” He growls at me softly.

I take him up on his offer and slowly sink into the mattress. I don't think about what a huge mistake relying on his comfort again is, instead, I let that instant relief wash over me when I rest my head on his chest. Skid pulls the covers around us both, wrapping his strong arm around my waist and drawing me tighter to his body, holding me exactly how I need him to. With his chest hair tickling my cheek and his head balanced on top of mine, I close my eyes and drift back off to a much more peaceful sleep.



I didn't sleep for the first hour after she came to me, I just lay awake feeling her body breathe against me and letting the betrayal of having her in mine and Carly's bed sink in. This was *our* space, and despite the fact Addison needed me, having her in it shouldn't feel right. Yet somehow, in amongst the war inside my head, I managed to drift off to sleep, and now waking up with her in my arms doesn't feel nearly as wrong as it ought to.

I feel something move between us, and when I look down and see a huge pair of brown eyes, alert and staring back up at me, I almost jump out of my skin.

"Morning, mister." Charlie beams enthusiastically as he continues to forge a space for himself between me and his mom.

"Sorry, kid." I shift out his way awkwardly, not sure if he's supposed to be here or not. Addison stirs awake and when she sees him in the bed, sandwiched between us, a panicked look overcomes the drowsiness in her eyes

"*Shit*, I mean... Morning, sweetheart." She smiles at her son and then looks at me with flushed, red cheeks as she smooths out her hair.

I like that it's all stuck up and outta place, I like even more that she's got that damn fuckin' tee of mine back on, and it takes me a few minutes to realize that this is the first time in years that I've woken up with a smile on my face.

"I don't think you should be in here, bud." Addison ruffles her son's hair playfully.

I spent the night before last comforting them both, but Charlie wouldn't have been aware of it. I made sure I was outta their bed before he woke up.

“Why not? You were in here.” He looks up at her innocently, and I do nothing to hide the smirk from my face as I watch her try and tackle his curiosity.

“I was just... I must have drifted off in here last night while we were talking.” Her cheeks flush even redder.

“Talkin’ about what?” Charlie screws his face into a frown, and when I see her start to stumble on her words I decide to help her out.

“I was askin’ your mom here if you’d like to stay here a while. I think Dylan likes havin’ a big boy his age around, and your house needs to have some work done to it. Does that sound okay to you?”

“I’m gonna need some of my toys.” He thinks hard before looking back at me like he’s negotiating some kinda deal.

“I can make that happen.”

“And pizza on a Friday. We always do pizza on a Friday, don’t we, Mom?”

“We do,” Addison confirms, starting to relax a little.

“Sounds like my kinda Friday,” I agree.

“Okay, deal.” He holds out his hand for me to shake and I laugh to myself as I take it and seal the deal.

“Deal,” I agree, catching the smile on Addison’s face as he clambers over her and races out the door.

“Where are you going?” She reaches out and grabs his hand.

“To the bathroom, don’t worry, Mama, the nasty man can’t get us here.” His sweet voice makes the smile fade from her face, and when she releases him and he leaves the room, she hides her face in her hands.

“Hey, what’s wrong?” I reach across to her.

“I should be protecting him from all this, he shouldn’t know we’re in danger.”

“You *are* protectin’ him, it’s why you’re here.”

“Yeah, but he shouldn’t know. The way you just handled that was amazing. Him coming in here and finding us like that... How you made the fact we have to stay here seem like it was his decision, it was incredible.”

“Trust me, I’ve had my fair share of dealin’ with difficult people, kids are a walk in the park.”

“Helloooo.” I freeze when I hear Rogue’s voice call out from the other side of the door.

“Speaking of which,” I manage to utter before she pokes her head round it. The shock of seeing us both in bed together must catch her off-guard because she pauses, but then that twisted little smile picks up on her lips and I know there’s no way she’s gonna let this slide.

“Well, do excuse me.” She tilts her head quite hauntingly as she surveys the scene in front of her.

“It ain’t what ya think, Rogue.” I get outta bed and pull on a tee.

“And what, exactly, do you think I’m thinking?” She raises her eyebrow mischievously.

“I don’t even wanna go there.” I sigh. “Addison, I don’t think you’ve been properly introduced. This is Rogue, Rogue, Addison.” I get the introduction outta the way, reminding myself to give Addison the Rogue warning once she’s left. I should have done it before now.

“You work together at the garage, right?” Addison says cheerily, smoothing her hand through her hair again and tugging down hard on the tee she’s wearing so it covers her thighs.

“Oh, we’re *way* more than that, aren’t we, Skid?” Rogue has that playful tone in her voice as she stalks toward me like a cat playing with a mouse.

“Skid’s more like...” She glances upwards while her brain searches for the words. “...my guardian.”

“A guardian?” Addison looks confused and impressed.

“Yeah, he looks out for me, has done since I was a little girl, and now *I* look out for *him*.”

*Oh shit, here it comes.*

“I should warn you that if—”

“Okay, that’s the introductions over, I’ll be down at the garage in half an hour.” I grab Rogue by her shoulders and march her back out the door.

“But I didn’t even get to the good bit where I threaten to kill her.” She giggles, as I rush her through the kitchen and out the front door.

“Rogue, can we have a little bit of sensitivity, just for fuckin’ once?” I hiss under my breath once we’re outside and the door is shut.

“You know me, I like people to know where they stand from the get-go, that way they know what’ll happen if they piss me off.” She checks her nails like she’s sharpening her claws.

“Well, it ain’t necessary. *I’m* the one who hurt *her*, okay?” I scrub my hand over my face and it hurts even more having to say it out loud.

“Skid, you’ve never hurt a person in your life,” she giggles back at me. “Well, except for the people you’ve killed and kicked the shit out of...” Her menacing grin has me pulling her further away from the door.

“Will you keep your damn voice down?” I whisper-yell at her again. Sure, Addison knows we’re outlaws, but I don’t want her hearing that shit and I sure as hell don’t want Charlie to.

“I guess what I’m saying is that I, erm... I don’t believe you. C’mon, Skid, you’re not the kinda guy who goes around breaking hearts.”

“Well, I did, okay? And I won’t do it to her a second time. I’ll figure shit out, make sure they’re safe, and then things can go back to how they were.”

“You mean with you wallowing in grief.” She bites back at me sarcastically.

“Rogue, I’m not what’s best for them. I’m just tryin’ to make good on somethin’ I did wrong.”

“I wish you saw yourself the way the rest of the world did.” Rogue doesn’t come back at me fightin’ like I expect her to, she just shakes her head at me sadly as she backs off my porch. “I came here to tell you to take the day off, Squealer’s gonna cover you. Guess you can start ‘figuring shit out’.” She air-quotes the last three words and rolls her eyes before turning around and going toward her cabin.

Addison is up and making breakfast when I go back inside, and when I see Charlie eagerly waiting at the table, I smile at him and take a seat next to him.

“Mom, when I’m older will I have all that hair on my chest?” he asks, staring at the black hairs that stick out over the v in my shirt.

“Maybe.” She shrugs, then blushes a little when I catch her staring at them too.

“Can I get these too?” He runs his little finger over the tattoos on my bicep and makes me chuckle.

“You’re far too young for those.” Addison places a coffee in front of me, in a way that’s so familiar it reminds me of how things used to be between us. I used to visit her every morning to make sure she had what she needed. She’d always make me breakfast, and we never ran out of things to talk about. Now, as she sits opposite me, I have no idea what to say to her.

“So, your friend’s nice.” She blows the steam off her coffee and smiles at me over the rim.

“Rogue’s a little overprotective, she takes a lot of gettin’ used to but she’s got her heart in the right place.”

“She cares about you, it’s good to see.” She nods.

“She’s also got things covered at the garage so me and you can figure out how to sort out this situation.”

Addison looks at Charlie to remind me that he’s there.

“You’re gonna have to tell me what happened back at the house so I can repair the damage.” I talk in code, and when I notice her starting to tremble my arm automatically reaches across the table to steady her.

“I know.” She looks up at me with a smile on her face, one that would be a lot more convincing if she didn’t have tears in her eyes.

“But first, we gotta eat.” I look to Charlie, who seems to agree with me.

After we’ve eaten, I text Nyx and call in a favor, Ella comes to collect Charlie for a few hours, and although I can tell Addison was doubtful about letting him go, she puts on a confident front for his sake as he leaves. Now that it’s just the two of us again, everything feels a little more intense. Having her get in my bed last night was a bad idea, it gave off the wrong signals. The natural instinct I got to comfort her made me lose sight of all that.

“You wanna take a walk?” I suggest, figuring it’ll be easier to hear what she’s got to say away from the confines of these walls. “It’s a nice day out.”

Addison doesn’t answer me straight away, she just stares at a spot on the wall like she’s in some kind of trance. The fact she’s avoiding telling me frustrates the hell outta me and it has to end.

“You ready?” I move to stand in front of her, holding out my hand, and she looks up at me with those same scared eyes she had all those years ago when I took her to the doctor’s office for her first appointment.

“Okay.” She blows out a breath and lets me lead her outside.

*“Pretty cool, huh?” I try to sound upbeat as I drive Addison back to the house. Her eyes haven’t moved from the*

*sonogram picture she's holding in her hands, and she's barely spoken a word.*

*"Yeah," she whispers, appearing to be lost in her thoughts. I'm assuming this baby she's having wasn't planned, and I get that she's scared. Maybe that's why she insisted that I went into the room with her when her name got called. She was offered options about what to do next, and despite the fact she's clearly shook up by everything, she seems intent on keeping the baby she's having.*

*"Do ya need to contact the father? You can use my cell?" I offer, curious as to who got her in this situation. Anyone can see the girl is innocent, she has such a naive outlook on everything it's almost worrying.*

*"No," she answers me back sharply, then smiles apologetically when she realizes how it came out.*

*I nod back at her, so she knows she caused no offense; just more interest because she seems so intent on doing this without him.*

*"We can head into town and pick up those prenatal vitamins the doc said you should be takin', there's a—"*

*"I have no money." She blurts the words out and when I notice her eyes filling up and her breathing start to get out of control, I pull over and cut the engine. "I have no money, the job I have barely covers my rent. How am I gonna do this?"*

*"It'll work out," I promise.*

*"How?" She lifts her eyes from the grainy image in her hands and looks across at me helplessly.*

*"Because I'm gonna help ya," I tell her, feeling some of that strength I lost when I lost Carly build back up inside me.*

*"You don't even know me." Addison shakes her head in disbelief.*

*"I told ya that don't matter. I spoke to my friend last night, the one who owns the house you're stayin' in. He was talkin' about making it a more permanent arrangement."*

*“Skid, I could never afford a place like that. He’s kind, letting me stay, but soon I’m gonna have to find somewhere affordable, and to do that, I’m gonna need a better job.”*

*“He doesn’t want any rent, he’s just happy knowin’ someone is takin’ care of the place.”*

*“I can’t stay there for free.” She stares back at me like I’m crazy.*

*“You’ll be doin’ him a favor. I can fix the place up for you and the baby. The doc said you were thirteen weeks along, that gives us just under six months to get it ready.” The thought triggers some enthusiasm I never thought I’d feel again. It feels good to have a purpose.*

*“And who’s gonna employ me? I can’t keep working at the bar.”*

*“You work in a bar?” I check I heard her right. I really don’t like the idea of that.*

*“Yeah, four nights a week,” she informs me.*

*“And you help out at the soup kitchen on your nights off?”*

*“We all want to get into heaven, Skid.” The tiny smile that twitches on her lips distracts her from her panic, but only for a moment.*

*“Quit your job at the bar, you can’t be workin’ there. Not in your condition.” I shake my head.*

*“I can’t just quit, it’s my only source of income,” she argues.*

*“I’ll find you another fuckin’ income source.” Now it’s my voice that gets snappy, and I’m confused and a little unnerved by how protective I feel over this girl I hardly know.*

*She looks startled by my reaction. The last thing I wanna do is scare her but she’s vulnerable, and being pregnant can’t be easy. She shouldn’t be working in a damn bar.*

*“Look,” I manage to calm my voice. “I get that you’re afraid, and all this is overwhelmin’ for ya right now. You just gotta let me help.” I feel my chest sag with relief when she*

*nods her head back at me and wipes away her tears. “Good, we’ll start by gettin’ your vitamins.” I smile reassuringly as I restart the engine.*



“You know there’s nothin’ you can’t tell me. I’m gonna help you, no matter what.” Skid eventually starts to talk when we get to the small pebbled beach on the other side of the lake to the cabins. The whole walk here I’ve been trying to think of a way to explain things to him. Everything about my life before I escaped seems so insane now, even to me.

“I thought he was dead.” I don’t kick things off exactly how I intended to, but since the words are coming I don’t hold them back.

“I thought I’d killed him, there was so much blood and...” My hands shake when I think about how his blood had soaked into my skin and Skid’s eyes dance over me, looking concerned and confused all at the same time.

“I wasn’t expecting to care for the child growing inside me. The thought of him putting one there made me wretch. But as soon as I knew for sure that he was there, I felt a gut instinct to protect him. I wasn’t like them, I always had doubts about the Elders and their ways. Then something happened. Something that made me sure I’d be safer away from them,” I explain, fully aware that I’m not making much sense. But Skid is letting me take my time and tell my story in my own way. “I managed to steal a knife from the kitchen, even though Annie told me he wouldn’t visit me anymore. I knew he would, he got too much of a satisfaction out of how scared he made me.” I close my eyes and see his menacing eyes hovering over me, the low grunts he used to make in my ear seems to drown out the pretty sounds of the birds chirping in the trees around us.

Skid takes my hand, remaining silent as the frown on his face becomes even more engraved.

“He came to me three nights after he’d killed Charlie, he lifted my nightdress and I was so scared he’d hurt my baby with his...” I feel so stupid and naive explaining this now.

“Go on.” Skid’s low grumble encourages me to continue.

“I pulled the knife from under my pillow and I rammed it into his flesh as hard as I could. I stabbed him over and over. I killed him, or at least I thought I had. Annie woke up and saw him laid on top of me. We shared a room, and she was the only person in that house who ever showed me any kindness. She gave me the time I needed to get from under him, climb out the window and run before she screamed for help. I ran. I ran to the tree behind Charlie’s house. I climbed it just like he told me to and then I found the money he’d been stowing away for us to use when we escaped. He was my friend. He died because he tried to help me.” My voice gets overtaken by sobs. I’ve never spoken to anyone about where I came from before and now my heart is beating as wildly as it had that night.

“Charlie.” Skid nods his head, obviously figuring for himself where my son got his name from.

“We were supposed to have left that place together. I knew nothing about what I’d find on the other side, I’d only ever been told of the evil. The Elders told us they were our protectors, they made us believe that they were saving us, but they were monsters, Skid.”

“Who?” Skid leans in closer, his hand squeezing tight at mine now.

“The Elders. I had to marry one. Abraham, he is in charge and he killed my friend, Charlie. He slit his throat in the middle of town in front of everyone. Charlie’s mother’s heart broke but his father... he just watched. He accepted it. Because the Elders’ words are the gospel to those people. That’s when I knew I had to get me and my baby out of there.” I feel my stomach go hollow when I remember that day.

“Shit, Addy, are you tellin’ me you escaped some kind of fuckin’ cult?” Skid looks even more worried than he did before. I can’t imagine what must be going through his head.

I nod back at him, hoping this won’t make him change his mind about helping us.

“And now they’ve found me,” I tell him, feeling helpless as the pad of Skid’s thumb wipes away the tears that spill onto my cheek.

“How can you be sure?” His voice whispers softly.

“It started off with little things, I found a dead bird on the porch last week, then the next day there was another. I started to get the feeling I was being watched, and then on Sunday when I was walking out of chapel, I saw him. Abraham’s alive, he was standing on the other side of the cemetery in the hat he always put on when he left the village. He’s alive and he’s coming for us.”

“You sure you weren’t just ima—?”

“He was real,” I interrupt. “He smiled at me like he knew he could still scare me. I got in my car and I drove straight here because I had nowhere else to go. I’ve never trusted anyone the way I did you and I can’t let him take Charlie,” I blurt out, sinking my head into my hands and letting all the fear and emotions I’ve been building unleash.

“Come on, now. No one’s gonna take your boy.” Skid’s hand strokes my back while I sob and when I eventually find my breath again, he guides my head back up to look at him. “You got family back at that village?” His question suddenly makes me realize that he hasn’t doubted a single thing I’ve told him. He’s not looking at me like I’m crazy either.

“My parents and my sister. We were planning on having Everleigh escape with us, but after what I did to Abraham I had to leave quickly. I had to leave her behind.” More tears fill my eyes as the weight of that guilt presses heavy on my shoulders.

“Okay.” Skid strokes my arm and tries to act like everything is gonna be alright, but I can see from the look on

his face that he's unnerved.

"Why didn't you just tell me all this before, I must have asked ya a hundred times?"

"I didn't think you'd believe me, and I hate thinking back to those days. When I do, I start to feel crazy." I snuffle back my tears.

"You and Charlie are gonna be okay here. No one's gonna find ya, and even if they do, they'll never get a chance to hurt you."

"I should have gotten further away but there was hardly any money in that tin, barely enough for a bus ticket. I made it to Fountain before I'd run out. That's why I had to take that job at the bar, you have no idea how hard it was adapting from that world to this one. I was stupid to think they wouldn't find us."

"None of that matters now that you're here," Skid assures me.

"Skid, they won't stop." I wish he understood how determined these people are. "Abraham thought I was one of the chosen, it's why he married me."

"And your parents let that happen?" He stares at me in confusion.

"My parents were honored by it." I laugh when I realize how crazy it must sound. "Like I said, that place is so detached from the real world, it's scary."

"I'm startin' to understand that," he admits, gravely.

"Me and Charlie, we're gonna have to move on and get further away. If I can just stay here long enough—"

"You're not doin' that," he cuts me off. "You shouldn't have to run."

"I have to, we're too close, the village is only four hours from here."

"You ain't runnin'. You and your little boy are stayin' right here. You're gonna let me fix this, and you are never gonna

look over your shoulder again.”

“Skid... I can’t expect—”

“I know I let you down before, but I won’t do it again. Let me prove that to ya. Please?” He cups my chin, forcing me to look at him, and I see the desperation behind his kind brown eyes.

I want to believe him, I also want to give in to that draw that pulls me toward him, but I can’t fall in love with this man again. My heart still hasn’t healed from the last time.

“I’ll let you help,” I agree, ignoring the crack he’s made in my heart.

Right now, trusting him again is my only option. Me and my son are in danger and the whole reason I came here is because I knew Skid could help us. Skid smiles at my answer and I feel that warm little glow in the pit of my stomach start to spread. Only, this time, I don’t welcome it, I fear it. I’m wise to the damage it can cause.

“Come on, let’s get ya back to the cabin. I think it’s time I speak to the brothers.” Skid stands up and drags me onto my feet.

“Skid, you can’t tell them, they’ll think I’m crazy.” I instantly begin to panic.

“No one’s gonna judge ya here, darlin’, and we don’t do secrets. Every single person here will work together to ensure you and Charlie stay safe.”

“Why would they do that? We’re nobody to them?”

“Because you’re someone to me.” His voice comes out soft and when his eyes focus on my lips like he’s thinking about kissing them, the thought makes my stomach flutter.

“Come on.” He clears his throat before scratching the back of his neck and then marching us back through the trees toward his cabin.

*“What’s wrong?” Skid arrives at the house and places the grocery bags he’s carrying on the table.*

*“Nothing.” I keep my eyes focused on the stitch I’m pulling on the hem of my shirt.*

*“Well, you don’t exactly look pleased to see me.” He chuckles. “I even bought your favorite.” He lifts out a box of Nutter Butters and shakes it at me.*

*“I don’t want any.” I avoid looking at them because the truth is, I really do.*

*“What d’ya mean you don’t want any? Ya can’t get enough of these things.”*

*“I don’t want any because I’m getting fat.” I raise my eyes to his, standing up and letting him see for himself. None of the jeans I got from the thrift store fit me anymore, and my belly has even started to stick out over sweatpants now.*

*“You’re not gettin’ fat.” Skid laughs at me. “That’s what’s supposed to happen. Just eat the damn Nutter Butters.” He shoves the box into my hand.*

*“I know it’s supposed to happen, I just wasn’t expecting it to happen so quickly,” I admit.*

*“Addy, you’re past twenty weeks now, and I hate to break it to ya, but you’ve been showin’ for a while.”*

*“Well, thank you for noticing,” I snigger back at him sarcastically.*

*For a while now, I’ve wondered if Skid finds me physically attractive, the way I do him. But I’m pretty sure him watching me balloon before his very eyes is gonna kill any chance of that ever happening.*

*“Pretty soon, you’re gonna start to feel him movin’ in there too.” He starts putting away the groceries before taking a seat beside me, opening the box of Nutter Butters, and shovels his huge hand in to help himself.*

*“Hey, I thought you said they were for me? And since when did you become a pregnancy expert?” I snatch the box from his hand and dig in myself. Guess there’s no preventing the inevitable.*

*“Since ya fell asleep on the couch the other night while we were supposed to be watchin’ that film. I picked up that book of yours and educated myself.”*

*“That film was awful, and you know how tired I get these days. I actually have no idea why you would even want to hang out with me. I’m boring, I’m getting really pregnant, and let’s be honest, I’m turning into a crank.” I crunch my teeth through the cookie in my hand. “Haven’t you got biker shit you should be doing?” I question him.*

*“Sometimes, it’s nice to get away,” he tells me, pulling that same sad face he always does when the conversation steers towards his life.*

*I don’t know much about Skid other than the warning Mrs. Patterson, from the church I attend, gave me. It’s no secret that he’s part of a biker gang and I know he had a wife who was part of the congregation before she died. Everyone talks highly of her and when I heard whispers that she killed herself, I couldn’t help being shocked.*

*Skid hasn’t been back to the soup kitchen since the night we first met, and he never shows up to church. Maybe he fears being judged. But if I’ve learned one thing since my time away from Abraham, it’s that I should follow my own mind. Right now, my mind tells me I can trust this kind, thoughtful man who’s become my lifeline. I guess if he wants to tell me about his past, he will when he’s ready.*

*“Well, I appreciate your company and everything else you do around here,” I tell him, stroking my hand over my neat, round bump.*

*Skid assures me that his friend is paying him to get the place up together and that the furniture he’s bought was all part of the renovation plan he had for the place, anyway. I know I can’t keep this in mind as a permanent option though. Soon, whoever the owner is will want to find tenants that can actually pay rent. But for now, staying here is giving me a real head start.*

*“How’s the job searching goin’?” Skid asks, helping himself to a bottle of water from the refrigerator and placing*

*one in front of me.*

*“Sucky, especially now it’s so obvious that I’m pregnant. People take one look at me and they’ve already made up their minds.”*

*“Don’t worry, somethin’ will come up,” he promises.*

*“I do have to worry, I can’t expect you to keep buying groceries, I’m not a charity case.”*

*“No one said you were. I like helpin’ out. If anythin’, it works in my favor.”*

*“How does this work in your favor?” I laugh at him.*

*“Because I promised myself I’d do somethin’ decent, and I hated workin’ in that fuckin’ soup kitchen.” He smiles but things quickly turn serious again when he decides to remind me that I’m still at the center of a real-life problem.*

*“You should hit up the father of your child, he should be takin’ care of you,” Skid points out, and I get up from the chair and quickly try to change the subject.*

*“You want me to make us a sandwich for lunch?” I pick up the chopping board.*

*“I just need a name and an address. I’ll go talk to him.” Skid refuses to take the hint. “Addison.” He moves up behind me, pressing his hand over the knife I’m using to slice the bread. His body is pressed firm against mine, and I can feel his breath in my ear. It’s soft, it’s warm, and I like the way it feels on my skin.*

*“I told you, I’m doing this without him,” I whisper.*

*“But you’re not doin’ it alone.” I feel the fingers of his other hand slide around my middle, his rough palm gently resting on the ridge of my stomach. “I need ya to let me help you,” he whispers, sounding like he’s the helpless one in this situation.*

*I quickly drop the knife from my hand and spin around so I’m facing him, realizing there’s no space between us. I look up at him and seeing the way his lips rub together makes it impossible not to think about kissing them.*

*I follow that instinct, stretching up on my toes a little, and when the soft look in his eyes turns to shock and he quickly pulls away I feel all kinds of stupid.*

*What the hell am I thinking? A man as handsome as Skid could have any woman he wants. What the hell would he see in a knocked-up failure like me? I've been taking his kindness in the wrong way, and now I want the ground to open up and swallow me.*

*"I'm gonna go get started on paintin' your room. You make sure to sleep down here tonight, those paint fumes ain't good for you or the baby." He clears his throat awkwardly as he heads out the room leaving me full of regret, but most of all... disappointed.*



“Glad to see ya managed to drag yourself outta your cabin.” Squealer winks at me as he takes his seat at the table. He’s the last man to arrive and now that everyone’s here, Prez looks to me to explain why I gathered everyone together.

“Addison and her son are gonna be stayin’ here,” I speak up.

“Most brothers just make their claim in the barroom, Skid. We don’t need a big speech and a club meetin’ over it.” Squealer tries getting smart.

“I ain’t claimin’ her. But I am gonna be takin’ care of her. She’s in trouble and she needs my help.”

“What kinda trouble?” Prez scowls at me. Everyone in this room knows that the club is already stretched. Prez is planning a takedown of the President of the Long Beach Charter, and the Bastards are back and rebuilding nearby. They may have offered us a truce, but you can’t ever trust those fuckers. Add that to the fact we still have no idea where my cunt of a brother is, I can understand his concern about having another situation to make our business.

“She’s runnin’ from the father of her kid,” I explain.

“So, find the fucker and beat the hell outta him,” Hayden suggests.

It’s exactly the kinda thing his father would have told me to do, and although what he says ain’t an option, I can’t help smiling at the vision of him sitting in the chair that used to be Tac’s.

“It ain’t that simple.” I scrub my hand over my face before I look back to Prez.

“You remember a few years ago when the Russians had some of their weapons stolen from that storage container in Denver?”

“Yeah.” He nods back.

“You remember how they paid us to get it back at any cost?”

“How could we forget? Those wannabe gangsters had no idea what was comin’ for ‘em.” Jessie leans across Nyx so he can touch knuckles with Brax.

“Yeah, and d’ya also remember who those wannabe gangsters sold some of that supply onto?” I ask, keeping this conversation on point.

“Yeah, I remember.” Thorne nods his head. “Some weird-ass cult out near Oak Creek. Those fuckers were bat-shit fucking crazy.”

“Well, those weird-ass, crazy fuckers are after Addison and her kid.” I bring them up to speed and watch their faces turn to shock.

“How come I don’t remember any of this?” Nyx rests back on his chair and folds his arms.

“You were locked up in county for smashin’ Luke Robinson’s head into a curb.” His brother Brax reminds him with a very straight and serious face.

“Remind me again why we didn’t storm in there and get the Russians part of their supply back?” Troj knits his brows together thoughtfully.

“It was only a few AKs, nothin’ worth losin’ your life over. The Russians were happy with what we’d managed to recover and for how we dealt with the people who stole from them,” Jessie answers.

“They that dangerous?” Storm looks confused.

“No, just some dirty, old perverts who label themselves as fuckin’ messiahs so they can get their dicks polished every day of the week,” Thorne explains. “What Jessie meant was the lengths those messiahs go to to protect that little, ideal world they’ve created for themselves. They got their whole perimeter rigged with enough C4 to blow up Manitou Springs.”

“What?” Hayden sits forward and stares at his uncle like he doesn’t believe him. “Don’t these kinda places have women and kids livin’ there?” he checks.

“Yep, like I said, crazy-assed fuckers.” Squealer shrugs before lighting up the blunt he has between his fingers.

“Is that where she came from?” Jessie asks me, looking real fuckin’ serious.

“Yeah, she escaped when she found out she was pregnant. I met her when I was helpin’ out at Carly’s old church.”

“That was years ago, how come this is the first time we’re hearin’ about her?” Storm asks.

“It ain’t,” Troj speaks up. “Few of us helped Skid get that house fixed up, ready for her before she had the kid. You said it was somethin’ to do with the church.” He turns his attention to me.

“Whether it was for the church or not, she was a girl in trouble and she needed our help.”

“Don’t look like much has changed.” Prez sniggers as he stubs out his cigar into the ashtray.

“A lot’s changed.” I hang my head before I make my confession. “I let her down when she needed me the most, and this is how I’m gonna make it up to her. I’m aware that a war on them could become a war on us, and I wanted to let you guys know that I’ll act alone if I have to. But I *will* be actin’. I won’t sit back and wait for them to find her. I won’t have her too scared to send her little boy to school. I will find the man who wants to take her back there and I will kill him, along with any other man who don’t get the message that she ain’t theirs no more.”

“And who said chivalry was dead?” Squealer laughs.

“I’m being fuckin’ serious.” I turn my head to look at him. There’s a time and a place for his kinda humor, and now ain’t one of ‘em.

“Oh, I know ya fuckin’ are, and you’re also fuckin’ stupid if you think any man around this table is gonna let you act alone. Do ya not understand the all-for-one and one-for-all shit we all got goin’ on here? We all know how the story goes, ya save the girl, she gets added to the group chat and we all live happily ever after.” He winks back at me

“That’s not how this one goes, I’m helpin’ her but there ain’t nothin’ between us.” I make sure that part stands out.

“I don’t believe you,” the smart bastard leans over Grimm and whispers loud enough for the whole damn table to hear.

“It don’t matter who she is to ya, if you need our help on this, you got it. Though I ain’t too happy about the C4 situation,” Prez admits.

“Well, there is somethin’ you could do about that.” Brax reaches across the table and takes the blunt Squealer’s offering, savoring it as he tokes back real hard. Since Grace has been pregnant he’s cut out smoking around her completely, and we all know how much he’s missing it.

“If you’re thinkin’ ‘bout Tripp, he’s retired.” Prez looks at him.

“Then drag the old boy outta retirement.” Brax shrugs.

“Who the hell’s Tripp?” Hayden asks, looking confused.

“One of Vex’s old military buddies, he went on to become a S.E.A.L. Never wore the cut but he’s a friend of the club. He’s a miserable fucker, but he’s a useful one. There ain’t nothin’ he don’t know about explosives,” Jessie explains, looking impressed with Brax’s suggestion.

“Vex knows how to contact him. Someone’s gonna have to ride up to his mountain and let him know we wanna get hold of him. I’d go myself but I ain’t leavin’ Gracie for that amount of time.”

“I got it.” Prez nods his head. “I ain’t seen the old fucker for a while. I’ll enjoy catching up with him. Plus, Troj and I have a few more Charters to visit before we can get things moving on Cliff.”

“I’d appreciate that,” I speak to everyone.

“Good, that settles it. If we can get Tripp on board, we’re going in, if we can’t, then we find another way. I ain’t being responsible for the deaths of a village full of women and kids, and I certainly ain’t bein’ held accountable for the deaths of any of you. Your old ladies would gut me from my bollocks to my eyeballs. In the meantime, you find out all you can from the girl about what we’re walkin’ into,” Prez orders, and I nod my head, grateful for his support.

“What about Chop?” Brax asks the question I should be askin’. That’s the good thing about having Addison back in my life, she’s a distraction.

“Maddy and Alex are workin’ hard at it. They’ve called every local hospital, searched all the police records. Nothin’,” Jessie explains, looking deflated.

“I hope the fucker bled out, slowly.” Troj cracks his knuckles.

“I don’t. If he’s already dead it means I don’t get to kill him,” I point out.



“It’s good to see you sitting up.” The nurse who reminds me of Carly is back on shift again and as she breezes into my room with that pretty smile on her face, I realize it’s the one thing I’ve been looking forward to.

“I’m feelin’ stronger, I should be ready to leave soon,” I tell her.

“Don’t be silly, it’s only been a few days, and you still haven’t got your memory back. We have a duty of care to see that you’re safe before you can be discharged.” She picks up her clipboard and checks my stats, and as I watch her work I let myself wonder what it would be like to fuck her deep and fuckin’ raw. I ain’t stuck my dick in anything other than cheap whore pussy lately, and once you’ve had one of ‘em, you’ve pretty much had ‘em, all. I much prefer a challenge, and this sweet, caring woman seems a lot like one.

“Someone from the police department should be out to speak to you soon, they would have been out sooner but they’re kinda busy and you aren’t an emergency, I’m afraid. Not while we’re taking care of you.”

“It’s fine, I don’t need to speak to anyone. I’m sure my memory will come back to me.” Last thing I want is the law sniffing around here. It’s a brutal reminder of the fact I’m gonna have to hurry up and move on.

“You’ve been through a lot.” She gives me that bossy stare that looks sexy as hell on her, and I don’t care how weak my body is, I’d find the energy to bend her over this bed and fill her pussy. I’ll bet she’s never had a man like me before. I can

tell that just from lookin' at her. I ain't her type. She's a wine-and-dine kinda woman, one who likes to be made a fuss outta.

"You got yourself a husband, Nurse McHenry?" I make small talk with her as she fluffs my pillows.

"I don't, actually. I just got out of a fifteen-year relationship."

"That sounds heavy. What happened?"

"That's not relevant to your recovery." She smiles.

"It's essential, if my mind is busy tryin' to figure what kinda fool would let a woman like you get away, then I can't focus on remembering what happened to me," I tell her cleverly, and when she rolls her eyes and smiles I know I've won.

"If you must know, he cheated." She blushes as she fills up my glass from the jug and hands me it to drink.

"I don't believe you."

"Well, it's true."

"I don't believe that any man who had a woman like you would do a thing to jeopardize it." I watch that flush in her cheeks turn even redder.

"Well, at least we've figured out one thing about you, you're a charmer." She smirks at me before placing down the jug and heading out the door.

"I'll tell you what else I am..." My words have her pausing and turning around, the playful smile on her face confirming that despite my injuries, there ain't fuck all wrong with my dick. "I'm a go-getter. If I want somethin', guaranteed I'll get it," I warn.

Making her and the docs buy my story about having no memory was the only thing I could think of to buy me some time. I was being honest when I told them I couldn't remember who saved me, though. That's still puzzling me.

"You made that sound like a promise." She raises her eyebrows at me seductively before she leaves me alone with a

memory of the one thing I didn't go after. The one selfless thing I ever did that blew right up in my face.

*"You ever gonna order anything different when you come in here?" Carly places the plate of blueberry pancakes in front of me.*

*"Someone once told me they were the best," I tell her, appreciating the way the colors in her eyes blend together like a kaleidoscope.*

*She is, without doubt, the most beautiful female I've ever seen, and she's got the personality to match. I've been coming in here for over six months now, I tried to stay away but it didn't work. seeing her may be torture but I'm a big boy. I can take it. I never wear my cut when I come here. I like that, in her eyes, I'm a good man. My conscience is clean, and the people I've killed never had to have existed in the first place.*

*I look at the couple in the corner of the diner who are staring at each other lovingly across the table, letting myself imagine that it could be us. Those kinda thoughts always hurt, because I know it can only ever be a fantasy. I may pretend to be someone else when I'm around her, but I can't lie to myself. I'm saving this pretty, intelligent girl from a cursed life because I know if I had her I'd never let her go. Time with me would take its toll. I'd rot her soul from the inside out and make it as black as mine. So, you can see where my problem is. Seeing her every day may hurt, but it's the kinda pain you just keep on coming back for more of.*

*I may have decided to save her, but that doesn't mean I have to stop appreciating her.*

*I finish up my breakfast and leave her tip on the table, nodding over to her as I head out the door toward my bike. Me and Skid got our rides built in no time, we even got ourselves patched in within a few months because of how useful we've been in getting the club garage at the new compound up and running.*

*One thing the club has been lacking over the years is legitimate businesses, and what me and my brother bring to the table is beyond valuable to them. I don't check in often with the Bastards for risk of being uncovered but I know how to if I need to, and despite the fact that Tommy and Skid have settled in with the Soul brothers nicely, it doesn't change the aim of my game.*

*"Wait." I hear Carly's voice call after me, and when I turn around and see her dashing across the street to catch up with me, I can't help imagining putting my hands around her dainty, little neck, though instead of choking her, I wanna pull her onto my lips.*

*The girl screams virgin vibes at me, and there ain't a price I wouldn't pay to be her fuckin' first.*

*"You left this." She holds out my cell for me. As I take it from her I let our fingers brush and feel the spark travel up my arm.*

*"Guess I'll see you tomorrow." She laughs before turning around and rushing back inside, while I stand still and let it sink in that this is all we can ever be.*

*When I arrive back at the club, Skid looks like he's got something he wants to say as he watches me step into my overalls.*

*"Don't look at me like that," I warn him.*

*"I'll look at ya however I want when your son is being passed around from whore to whore. You ain't seen the kid in four fuckin' days."*

*"I don't need to see him. They take better care of him than I ever could, and it ain't like I don't pay 'em for their troubles," I remind him.*

*"That's not the point, he's your kid, Chop. He ain't their responsibility."*

*"Well, I'm making him their responsibility, we got too much on here. And ain't that supposed to be the Soul way? We all look out for each other. Now come on, let's get to work."*

*“Mom called last night. Did you know Luciana was dead?”*

*“No.” I shake my head, doing my best to seem surprised. I guess it was only a matter of time before her body got found... I’m surprised it went uncovered for this long.*

*“They found her floatin’ in a river, twenty miles from her house. Coroner reckons she’d been there a while.” He eyeballs me suspiciously.*

*“Out with it.” I stare right back at him as I pop the hood on the Honda I’m gonna start working on.*

*“Was it you?” My little brother surprises me when he pulls no punches and gets right to the point. He’s changed a lot since he’s been here. Sure, he’s still a fuckin’ soft touch but at least he’s grown some balls.*

*“I know I can be a cunt, but I ain’t cunty enough to kill my own son’s mother,” I lie, and I make it sound convincing too. “But hearin’ about it makes sense, it must be the reason she dumped him on me. If she knew she was in trouble and that someone was comin’ for her, she would have tried to protect him. Now, despite what you think about me bein’ heartless, I’d appreciate some time to let it sink in that she’s gone.” I drop my head and get to work.*

*“I’m sorry, okay?” Skid looks guilty when I raise my eyes. “It’s just...”*

*“I know.” I nod my head understandingly.*

*I’ve always been a disappointment to my family. Mom and Dad were always bailing me outta jail. It’s why I never stuck around for too long. No parent wants to watch their child fail. I’m not an idiot, I know he’s here to keep an eye on me. But I have to admit, I like the idea of us sticking together. He’s the only person in this world I know I can trust.*

*“I guess I’m just a little on edge. I got someone comin’ over for dinner tonight, and I like her a helluva lot. I think she might be the one.”*

*“The one.” I chuckle at him.*

*“Don’t do that. Dad always told me I’d know when I saw her. And I knew right from the second she looked at me. She’s even cool with the whole club thing, in fact, I think she likes it. I’ve been datin’ her a little while now and I want to introduce her to you and Tommy. I just need you to be nice.”*

*“I better be, especially if she’s the one.” I shake my head and laugh before reaching up to smack my younger brother across that soft old head of his.*

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*Skid’s real nervous, he’s checked the pot roast in the oven five times in the last ten minutes and he’s even ironed the shirt he’s wearing. There’s wine on the table and a flower that he must have picked from the woods standing in an empty bottle of bud in the center of it.*

*“Will you relax? Why ya gettin’ so uptight over a female?” I knock back my beer and roll my eyes at Tommy. Kid’s got his mama’s eyes, and whenever I look into them for too long I see them bulging out and looking all desperate, the way they looked when I strangled the fuckin’ life outta them.*

*“Get your feet off that coffee table and go change your shirt, you’ve been workin’ in that all day.” Skid runs his hands nervously through his beard when the door knocks.*

*“Okay, okay. I’m goin’.” I raise my hands up in defeat and leave him to answer it. I laugh to myself as I head into my room and pull the sweaty tee off my back. Then after finding something fresh to put on, I head back out into the living space to meet the girl that’s got my brother’s head in a spin.*

*My feet stop still when I step through the door and see who it is.*

*“Oh my god!” Carly looks surprised to see me.*

*She pulls her lips up into that bright, beautiful smile and looks even more perfect outta her uniform. The cute, flowery dress she’s wearing shows off her petite, little figure so much*

*better, and seeing her hand placed inside my brother's puts a sting in my chest.*

*"Tobias, this is Carly. Carly, this is my brother, they call him Chop around here, now. I guess you can choose for yourself what you call him."*

*"We actually know each other." She stares up at him adoringly, exactly the same way the girl in the diner looked at her man this morning. The same way I've been wanting her to look at me since the first time I saw her.*

*"Chop's one of my morning regulars." She passes me off as if I'm just the same as any other fuckin' customer she serves on her shift.*

*"I thought I was your only regular." My brother grips her tiny, little hip in his hand and makes her giggle when he kisses her neck and growls playfully against her skin. I feel the snarl tug at my lip because seeing her with him doesn't just fuckin' hurt, it burns right to the fuckin' core.*

*He's selfish for bringing her into this life that I was determined to protect her from. And as her laughter gets louder the siren in my head that summons me to cause pain becomes almost unbearable.*

*"You good, Bro?" Skid pauses and looks up at me like he can sense something's wrong and suddenly that siren goes silent.*

*"Yeah, I'm good. Let's fuckin' eat."*



I was surprised at how well Skid took what I told him. He never doubted me or seemed fazed by my past, which makes me mad at myself for not being honest with him from the start. I really appreciate his optimism, and as much as I want to have faith in what he says I have to remain realistic. Skid doesn't know what he's up against with these people. They make their own rules, and the fact that Abraham came so far away from his precious village only shows how determined he is to get us back.

I spend the rest of the morning playing with Charlie and we watch his favorite TV show before dinner. It's amazing how kids can be. I've taken him from the only home he's ever known and brought him to this strange place, full of scary-looking men, and yet he hasn't stopped smiling since we've been here.

The door opens and when Skid steps inside I wish I could read the look that's on his face. He heads straight for the coffee machine and pours himself a straight black, then remains silent and thoughtful as he rests his ass against the counter and drinks it.

"How did your meeting go?" I ask when the silence becomes unbearable.

"It went well." He gives nothing away. In fact, he seems to be a million miles away.

"Charlie, why don't you go into our room and play with your trains?" I suggest, getting the feeling there's something on Skid's mind. The kind of something I wouldn't want Charlie to hear.

“But I’m watching this,” he complains.

“Just for five minutes.” I give him the look that tells him not to argue with me, and he pouts before he gets up and sulks into the bedroom. I wait for him to be out of earshot before I turn back to Skid.

“What aren’t you telling me?” I ask him quietly. A sick feeling is starting to settle in my stomach.

“These men, the ones you call Elders. We’ve heard about them before,” he admits, his hand scrubbing through his beard like he’s on edge.

“How? The village is miles away from here and the Elders work really hard to keep it concealed.” I can’t believe what I’m hearing is true. Especially when I think about all the forest I had to trek through to be free.

“A few years ago, those men bought some stolen guns, and we took on the job of gettin’ them back.”

“Guns?” I laugh because now I know what he’s saying can’t be true.

“What you findin’ funny?” Skid furrows his brow like he’s confused.

“Skid, the Elders are old men. They are preachers and farmers. Okay, they have agendas and are controlling in their ways but they are anti-weaponists. It’s one of the things they constantly preach about. The reason they protect from the outside.”

“Addy, those men purchased a case of AK’s. Those are high artillery weapons. Fully automatic guns. They ain’t used for making warnin’ shots. And there’s somethin’ else...” His head lowers like he might back out of telling me what that something else is.

“What?”

“Those bastards got that whole place rigged with C4. I didn’t wanna tell you this, but you’re right, those men are real dangerous. They are extremists, and there was a reason we didn’t storm in there and take back those guns for the

Russians, all those years ago. Club's number one rule is that we don't hurt women and kids. If we cross that perimeter without an invitation there's nothin' to say that whole place won't go boom."

"No, the Elders are bad men, Skid. Vile men. But their sole ambition is to protect the village. They would never destroy it."

"You never heard of fuckin' Jonestown or Heaven's Gate? These are madmen who call themselves leaders. They have no fuckin' limits on what they will do or who they will hurt."

*"The only way out is over, Addison, don't forget that okay?"* I hear Charlie's warning in my head as I sink into the chair beside me.

"My sister." She still lives among them. "I should have taken her with me. I was just so panicked and scared. I couldn't have my baby there, I had to get us out."

"Shhhhhh. You did what ya had to do." Skid moves to kneel in front of me.

"I have to get her out of there. It's been years, she will probably have a husband and children of her own by now."

"Addison, calm down." Skid holds me steady. "We're gonna work on it."

"Work on what? You can't stop him from coming for us. You can't be with us twenty-four hours a day, Skid. Charlie needs to go to school. I can't see this ever being over. He's got me just as trapped out here as I was back there. And knowing that Everleigh still suffers it—"

"Addison!" Skid's grip on my arms gets tighter as my breathing becomes more erratic. He's trying to calm me down, but he doesn't understand. I lived there for all those years. The Elders are leading these people to believe the outside world is cursed when, in reality, they are the threat.

"Breathe," he reminds me, taking deep, steady breaths to try and encourage me to join in. "You don't want Charlie to see you like this." His voice remains calm but it does no good. My chest is tightening by the second. I haven't had a panic

attack for years and with my heartbeat thudding in my ears, I try so hard to focus on the fact that right now, in this moment, we're safe.

“He can't hurt you, now. You did the right thing, you got both of you out. And look at me.” Skid takes my face in his hands harshly. “I *will* make sure he never comes near you again. I'm going to find that man and I am goin' to kill him. I will kill every single one of 'em if that's what it takes.” I see the sincerity in his eyes and what happens next is an act of pure impulse.

I lean forward and press my lips against his. His rough palms still frame my face and he doesn't use them to push me away, instead he clings to me tighter. I feel them slide up to the back of my head and grip my hair, his tongue slipping between my lips and making all my anxieties disappear.

A loud crash comes from the bedroom, and when Skid quickly pulls away we both rush to the bedroom door and find Charlie standing among the track and trains that have been tipped out all over the floor.

“Sorry, Mama.” He looks up at us and I breathe a sigh of relief that he's okay, picking him up into my arms, but I don't miss the look of guilt that's on Skid's face.

“I just remembered there's somewhere I gotta be.” He nods his head, making no eye contact as he rushes out the front door and leaves me wondering if it will always be this way between us.

*“Skid!” I scream his name and he comes crashing through the door like a tornado looking real worried.*

*“Come quick, you have to feel this.” I reach out for his hand and place it on my stomach where I can feel the baby moving around. “Do you feel that?”*

*“Yeah, I feel it.” He looks a little uncomfortable at first but it doesn't take long for a smile to creep onto his face. Skid looks real handsome when he smiles, it feels kinda special too, since he doesn't do it all that often.*

*“Is this the first time?”*

*“Yeah.” I nod back, suddenly very aware that his fingertips are touching my bare skin, it puts a real strange feeling in the pit of my stomach and makes my whole body feel tingly. “I mean, I’ve felt flutters before but never this. This feels completely different.”*

*Skid keeps his eyes focused on the hand he has placed on my stomach, seeming every bit as fascinated as I am.*

*“Do you ever think about having kids?” I ask, curious to how Skid plans to move on with his life. If what I heard about him having a wife that died was true, I wonder if he’ll ever be able to love again.*

*He pulls his hand away like my skin suddenly burns.*

*“I should get back to lookin’ at the heater.” He keeps his eyes on the floor as he leaves me alone and walks out the room almost as quickly as he came into it.*

*I sigh and stroke my expanding tummy. When I found out I was pregnant, I instantly went into protection mode. My first focus was to get me and my unborn child away from that horrendous place. And the more time that passes, the more I’ve realized how crazy it all was.*

*Sometimes, thinking that the child that grows inside me belongs to Abraham makes me shudder. I have nightmares of my time in that cold, damp prison he kept me in until I conceived, and just lately, the only way to make myself feel better is to imagine that things were different. When I’m alone with my memories and they start to become too painful, I make new ones up in my head. Ones where the child that grows inside me belongs to Skid. I pretend that this house that he’s been working so hard on is for the three of us to live in together.*

*Sharing moments like the one we just did makes me excited for my future, not scared of it. It’s something I have to keep to myself. I could never admit to Skid how I feel. Yet every now and again I catch the way he looks at me and wonder if maybe he might feel it a little too.*

*It's getting dark when Skid finally comes down the stairs, his tee is stuck to his skin from sweat and his black hair is stuck to his forehead causing him to look damn hot.*

*"Well, it's workin', I had to near enough take the damn thing apart but I got there in the end." He smiles at me awkwardly as he moves toward the basin to wash his hands.*

*"Thanks." I smile, trying my best not to stare at him.*

*I don't know if it's pregnancy hormones, but lately, I've been craving a lot more than just Nutter Butters. I often think about Skid in other ways than just being my baby's father. I think about how it would be to kiss him, and how it might be to have him hold me at night in bed. A few days ago I even touched myself in the shower when I thought about how it would feel to have him lathering my body with the sponge instead of doing it myself.*

*"You okay?" He snaps me out of my daydream when he reaches past me to grab a dish towel.*

*"Yeah, I'm good. Great in fact." I try too hard to sound convincing, and when he looks back at me strangely, I make myself look busy by clearing the kitchen table. My lack of concentration and the fact that these days, I'm a clumsy mess has me knocking the glass of water that's resting on it. It falls to the floor, smashing to pieces, and Skid looks down at my bare feet and impulsively sweeps me off them.*

*"I'm sorry I was—"*

*"It's fine." He rests me on the table before crouching down and starting to pick up the bigger pieces of glass with his hands. "Just stay there while I clean it up."*

*I sit on the table and watch him clean up my mess, and after he places all the broken glass in an empty Nutter Butter box he uses the dustpan and brush to collect up any smaller pieces. I remain still when he gets back onto his knees and starts closely examining my feet.*

*"I'm fine. I didn't step in any," I tell him, loving how tentative he can be as he continues to check, despite me telling him I'm okay. My hand moves spontaneously, reaching to his*

*face and steering his eyes up to mine. He keeps them fixed as he slowly gets back on his feet and when our heads start tentatively moving closer together that throb in the pit of my stomach starts to get stronger.*

*Our lips are almost touching, our eyes aren't moving from each other's, and I hold my breath, bracing for impact, but the feeling plummets when he takes my wrists in his hands and gently slides them away.*

*"Floor's all clean. I should head off." He looks disappointed in himself as he backs away from me. Grabbing his cut from the chair on the other side of the table, he heads straight out the door without looking back.*



“What the hell you doin’ here? You’re supposed to have the day off.” Rogue looks surprised when I storm through the garage and into the office.

I slam the door and through the clear window that looks out into the workshop I see the look she throws at Squealer. Eventually, he rolls his eyes in defeat and when he opens the door and lets himself in, I make it clear that I ain’t got the patience for him.

“Not now, Squeal. I ain’t in the mood for wisecracks.” I massage the bridge of my nose before opening up the desk cabinet and pulling out the bottle of scotch I keep there for days like this one.

“Chill, I was just tryin’ to do you a solid. It was either her or me, and right now I’m assumin’ you’d rather wisecracks than the sympathy of the fuckin’ devil.”

“I just wanna be alone,” I growl, unscrewing the lid and knocking a mouthful back.

“Sorry, brother, no can do. Now, I don’t mind sittin’ here in silence, but I ain’t lettin’ you drink that bottle of scotch alone. Not when there’s work I can be gettin’ out of.” He reaches his hand out for the bottle and when I pass it over, he sinks into the chair on the other side of the desk and kicks up his feet.

“Good shit.” He releases a satisfied breath once he’s swallowed, then handing the bottle back to me he does what he promised and remains silent.

“She kissed me.” The words come out unexpectedly before I take another swig.

“Of course she fuckin’ kissed ya, she came here for your help and you gave her the big ole’ *I’ll be your protector* welcome. What did ya expect?” He proves he’s gonna be no help at all when he laughs at me.

“Your problem ain’t the fact she kissed ya, Skid. It’s the fact you liked it, and now you’re feelin’ bad because you think you’re betrayin’ Carly.”

I stare at him in absolute shock.

“Don’t give me that look, I can do the deep shit too, I used to watch Dr. Phil.”

I huff a laugh, unsure if it’s outta humor or fear that I’m actually considering having this conversation with Squealer.

“You knew your wife, right?” he questions me with a serious look on his face.

“Course I fuckin’ knew her.”

“Well then, you’d know that all she’d want is for you to be happy. That woman, she didn’t have a selfish bone in her hot-assed body.”

“That’s still my wife you’re talkin’ about,” I warn, and when he holds up his hands in apology I decide to let him off.

“What I’m tellin’ ya, Skid, is that if she were sittin’ here instead of me, she’d be tellin’ ya to stop running away from the chance of bein’ happy.”

“But she ain’t here, Squeal, my brother fu—”

“He killed her,” Squeal finishes my sentence for me. “Now, you gotta decide if you’re gonna let him kill ya too. Way I see it, you got a woman in your cabin who’s terrified of somethin’, and the one person in this whole world she chose to run to was you. She’s puttin’ the life of the most precious thing she’s got in your hands and she’s doin’ that because she believes in ya. That’s somethin’ real special, and it’s somethin’ that your beautiful, kind-hearted wife would be very proud of. Get the fuck over whatever it is that’s holdin’ ya back and

don't let either of 'em down." He stands up and heads for the door.

"It ain't that easy, Squeal. I still love her."

"You ain't supposed to stop lovin' her, Skid. She was your wife, and she was taken from ya in a way I can't even bear to imagine. But that don't mean you can't love someone else. You got a heart bigger than any man I know, don't try tellin' me that there ain't room in it for ya to love 'em both." His hand reaches for the door handle but he decides he ain't finished yet and turns to face me again. "Now, when Rogue questions ya on what I said in here, you tell her that I told ya to go home and drill that cult girl on your back porch. I got a reputation to uphold."

"Gotcha." I tip my chin at him before he sees himself out, then pulling out the top drawer of the desk I lift out the framed photograph of Carly I keep there and place it on the desk. I took down all the pictures from the house 'cause I couldn't bear to look at 'em. This one here is my favorite. It's a selfie of us together that Carly took with her camera phone, and while I rest back in my chair and take another hit from the bottle, I stare at it and let the hate I feel for my own flesh and blood swell. How can someone be so cruel, take the life away from someone so pure? Carly never wronged Chop, she showed him nothing other than kindness and he crushed the life outta her like she was nothing.

It's hard to think about loving someone else when I'm so overwhelmed by hate and the need to cause pain. Now that I know what Addison has suffered and who she's running from, I wanna hurt those bastards too.

"I'm closing up, you ready to leave too?" Rogue pokes her head around the door making me realize how long I've been here. The whiskey's half gone, and the rage inside me seems to have simmered.

"You wanna ride up to the cabins?" she offers.

I shake my head back at her. "I'll close up." I keep my eyes focused on the picture of Carly.

“Okay.” She smiles at me sadly before she closes the door. Rogue must get the sense I wanna be alone because she doesn’t argue, and although she tries not to show it, I see the concern on her face as she goes against her instinct and backs down.

The garage is silent now, it’s just me and my thoughts, and nothing in this world scares me like they do.

“It’s horrible bein’ the one left behind,” I speak to the picture in front of me, staring into those wide eyes that were so full of life.

“I wish you were here to tell me what to do.” I place the bottle beside her. “That’s the first thing you’d tell me to do, right?” When I imagine her agreeing, I smile to myself.

“I wanna believe what Squealer said was true, but even tryin’ to be happy without ya seems cruel. All the plans I made for my future had you in ‘em.” I drop my head into my hands and grip my hair, closing my eyes and trying to escape my own head for a little while.

Right now, I feel like I’m being pulled in two directions. I don’t want Carly to think I’m moving on and forgetting about her, but letting Addison down for a second time ain’t an option. “I’m sorry if this ain’t what you want for me, Carly.” My eyes fill with tears as I kiss two fingers and press them to my beautiful wife’s lips through the glass. Then, dragging my ass up out of the chair, I head back to my cabin.

A sound of giggling comes from inside as I step up onto my porch, and when I open the door and see Addison wrestling Charlie on the couch, a smile I don’t even try to make lifts onto my face. She stops when she notices I’m here, staring at me as if she expects me to be mad.

“I wasn’t sure what time you were gonna be home, I hope you don’t mind. I went ahead and cooked dinner. We saved you some though.” I nod my head at her gratefully, ruffling Charlie’s hair over the back of the couch as I pass him on my way to the kitchen counter. I serve myself up a plate of the lasagna she’s made and while I sit at the table and eat it, I listen to her in the bathroom telling him some story about

pirates while she bathes him. It feels strange hearing happiness among these walls again. For so long they've been tainted, and it makes everything Squealer said back at the garage make even more sense.

“Come on, straight to bed, it's late.” Addison leads her son out the bathroom, he's wearing the PJs I picked up for him yesterday.

“Night, Skid.” He looks at me and smiles.

“Good night, kid.” I grin back at him before his mom takes him to their room to settle him down for the night. I've finished eating and done the dishes by the time she comes back out and I make a start on putting everything away. I still don't feel ready to face her or what happened before I raced outta here earlier.

“I'm sorry.” Her voice comes out a little wobbly, and when I turn around and realize that she's way closer to me than I thought, I feel that tug between us all over again. “I shouldn't have done what I did, I got caught up in the moment, and I... I don't want to ruin things between us. I appreciate your help and everything you're doing for me and Charlie, I wanted to say thank you and I misread—”

I cut off her nervous ramble by slamming my lips onto hers, holding her chin with my thumb, and kissing her the way I should have earlier. My tongue explores the inside of her mouth, and not a thing about it feels wrong. A sweet, satisfied noise comes from the back of her throat and when I start to feel guilt clamp its fist around my throat, I fight against it and lift Addison under her thighs onto my kitchen counter. There's so much tension between us, over five years of it, and when she starts to lift my shirt up over my body, I have to remind myself that this is a marathon, not a sprint.

I stop her by grabbing her wrists and retracting my lips from hers. She looks up at me through her lashes, confused and disappointed. I slowly lift my hand up between us and swipe my thumb over her bottom lip, liking how it looks all plump and red from the friction of mine. I can practically see her heart beating outta her chest, and for the first time in so

long, I think I feel mine too. I stare into her pretty, green eyes, silently begging for her to be patient with me and when she smiles, I reach forward and place a soft kiss on her forehead.

“Night, Addy,” I whisper, dragging myself away from her so I can get an early night and start a fresh day tomorrow.



I stay up after Skid takes himself to bed, tracing my fingers over my lips and thinking about that kiss. It seemed spontaneous, and yet it was different to any other we've shared. This time there was no look of regret after.

This is not why I came here; I shouldn't even be venturing into it after what happened last time we got close. And yet all those feelings have come flooding back with full force. I get that same flutter in my tummy the way I used to when he'd walk through the door, or when he touched me. It's ironic how feelings, you spend so long trying to forget, can come back so fast. I read the look in his eyes, whatever he's going through in having us here is hard for him and whatever it is that me and Skid have between us can't be my focus now, not while me and Charlie are in danger. Yet as I sit here alone in the silence, I can't help thinking about how it could be.

*"You look ready to pop." Skid laughs at me when he kicks shut the door and starts placing the Chinese food on the coffee table.*

*"I feel ready to pop." I struggle to sit forward from where I'm slouched back on the couch. My stomach's gotten so big now, that even Skid's tee feels tight around it.*

*Skid saves me the effort and passes me the chicken chow mien before taking his own food and sitting beside me.*

*"What's up?" He stops eating when he notices me poking around mine with my chopsticks.*

*"Nothing." I shrug my shoulders.*

*“C’mon, it’s been five minutes and you ain’t touched that food. Usually you—”*

*“I’m scared,” I blurt the words I’ve been avoiding right out, trying not to cry with them. These past few days I’ve been so tearful, and allowing all the thoughts in my head to run loose has not been helping.*

*“Scared of what?” Skid places his food on the table and frowns at me.*

*“Of this.” I look down at my heavy stomach. “Skid, I can’t even take care of myself, you’ve done everything around here, you’ve gotten me everything I need, you even bring me food to make sure I eat.” I hold up the cardboard container in my hand as evidence. “How am I gonna take care of this baby when it comes?” I sigh, feeling useless.*

*“I ain’t goin’ anywhere. I’m gonna help you with that too.” He takes the food out of my hand and places it beside his, shifting a little closer and letting his hand stroke over my tummy.*

*“You are gonna be a phenomenal mom, Addy. Just listen to yourself, your kid ain’t even here yet, and already you’re worried about lettin’ him down. That proves that there’s no way on this earth that you will.”*

*“I can’t rely on you forever. We’re not your responsibility.” I take in a shaky breath and wipe away my tears.*

*“None of that matters. You should know that by now.”*

*“It’s not just that, Skid, I’ve got no one else. What am I supposed to do when I go into labor? What if I’m on my own?” I think about the women in the village who have died birthing their children. I know things will be different here, there are hospitals and professionals, but the thought of being with strangers makes me nervous.*

*“You got my number, all you have to do is call me,” he assures me.*

*“And you’ll come with me?” I check although I’m pretty sure I already know the answer. Skid has been there for me through all of this, he’s taken me to every single doctor’s*

*appointment and sonogram. I don't know why I'm so surprised that he would see it through to the end.*

*"And what if I can't get hold of you?" More tears come as the overwhelming situation I'm in becomes more and more threatening.*

*"Look, you're gettin' real close now, you're bound to get worried about stuff. Would it make you feel better if I slept here on the couch until he gets here?" he offers like it's no big deal, and my body reacts before my head does when I wrap my arms around his neck and pull him tight against me.*

*"Steady, darlin', don't get too excited. Junior ain't ready yet." He chuckles as he pats my tummy and when he puts space between us again I instantly regret my actions.*

*Nothing like this has happened since that time I almost kissed him in the kitchen. I didn't mean to push anything, but I can't help my feelings. This man has been my savior, and my affection for him seems to grow by the day.*

*"Do you mean it, will you stay?" I ask, blinking back tears. I still don't know what happened to his wife. I've heard so many different stories from the church but never felt brave enough to ask him. I'm so scared that if I push too hard he'll back away.*

*"Of course I will." He nods back at me before picking up my food and placing it back in my hands, then picking up his own he settles back into the couch.*

*"Thanks," I whisper so quietly he doesn't even notice. His eyes are fixed on the television, concentrating on the gameshow that's on and oblivious to the fact that he's changed my life.*

*"What ya still doin' up?" His voice tugs me out of the memory and I quickly shake my head and focus on him. He's not wearing a shirt and his legs look like tree trunks in the tight boxer shorts he's got on.*

*"Can't sleep." I smile, getting up from the couch and joining him in the kitchen.*

“You want some tea? Carly used to swear by this chamomile shit.” I don’t know if he meant to mention her, but it feels like a relief that he has. Around me, he pretends she never existed, but I can feel her presence. It’s impossible not to.

“Sure.” I nod back, hauling myself up on the kitchen counter and watching him fill the kettle before he puts it on the stove.

“Was this your place together?” I ask, looking around the space surrounding us. There are too many nice touches here for his answer to be no, and Skid proves he doesn’t want to talk about it when he nods his head stiffly and keeps his eyes facing down.

“You must have loved her very much.” I smile sadly at him. And although he says nothing, I see the way his eyes start to fill.

“More than can be explained,” he eventually answers in a gruff voice that sounds pained.

“I can’t imagine how hard it must be for you.” When I reach out my hand to touch his arm he stares at it, making me wonder if he wants it there.

“I hope you never have to find out.” He swallows thickly, keeping his head low and surprising me when he shifts a little closer to me.

“And do you think you could ever...” I can’t believe I’m gonna ask him this. “Do you think you might be able to feel that way about someone else?” I look up at him hopefully.

“I’m starting to.” He shocks me further when he places his body between my knees, his fingers sliding the hair that’s fallen into my face behind my ear before he draws me closer to his lips. He stares right at me, almost daring me to stop him before they touch.

The tension between us makes my blood hot and my skin cold, then just as his breath touches mine the kettle starts to whistle, tearing him away from me again. He goes to move but I tug him back, kissing him fiercely and clinging my arms

around his neck tight. He kisses me with the same desperation, gripping one hand in my hair as he reaches across to the stove with his other to take off the kettle.

Once he silences it, he holds my head in both his hands, kissing me slow and deep, in a way that makes my pussy throb and my stomach flip.

“I don’t know how this is supposed to work,” he admits, keeping my head in his hands.

“We’ll figure it out,” I whisper.

“I hurt you. You didn’t deserve it. I’m terrified I’ll do it again.” His forehead presses into mine. I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t scared too. But I’m prepared to take a leap of faith with him.

“None of that matters now.”

“How can you say that?” He shakes his head.

“Because I think it needed to happen, Skid. You were taking such good care of me, I was relying on you far too much. I needed to learn to take care of myself. Yeah, it was a shock, and it was hard, but I’m a better person for it. I’m a better Mom for it too.”

“Well, that part can’t be argued.” Skid frowns, keeping us close. I wonder if he can tell that my whole body is pulsing for him. Craving to know how it feels to be with a man I actually want.

“I’m gonna make sure the two of you never have to worry again, you may not like how I gotta go about it but—”

“I want him dead,” I blurt the words out. “When I stabbed him, I prayed to God that it would kill him. That’s why I never miss a Sunday in church. It’s why I was helping at that soup kitchen the night we met. I need God’s forgiveness.” Skid doesn’t show any shock from my confession. He nods his head, calmly accepting it.

“Men like him, they got a God complex, Ads. He won’t stop until he gets you back and I’ve lost too much to ever let that be an option.”

“And what about when this is over, what happens then?” I hold my breath while I wait for his answer.

“I don’t know. I’m gonna need time and some patience. But I like how it’s playin’ out.” He kisses my forehead before he starts making my tea, and then we take a seat at the table together and drink it in silence.

I enjoy being in his company again.



“I should really get hold of Nora,” Addison says thoughtfully as she clears the breakfast table. I watch her, wondering how she makes normal day-to-day activities so intriguing. “Are you even listening to me?” She waves her hand in front of my face.

“Yeah, Nora...”

“She’s our neighbor. Your friend left her in charge of his house after you...” She smiles awkwardly before glancing at Charlie. “Well, she’s been good to us. She helps me take care of Charlie while I work. I’ll bet she’ll be worried.”

“You wanna call her?”

“I don’t have her number.” Addison bites her lip and wrinkles up her nose at me.

“What?” I laugh.

“I don’t have a cell phone. Never needed one. The less people I get close to the better.” I feel a little sad hearing that. Back when she was pregnant I got her a burner phone so she could call me if she needed anything, I guess when I left she didn’t have use for it anymore.

“I’ll call by your neighbor’s place and let her know you’re both okay when I pick up more of your stuff later,” I assure her, watching Charlie run his finger over the maze that’s on the back of the cereal box.

“Do you mind?” Addison smiles through her teeth like she’s worried she’s a burden.

“It ain’t a problem, just get me a list of what else ya need, and I’ll make sure I get the message to her.”

“She’s not exactly welcoming at first, she’s opinionated, and I’m not sure how she’s gonna take to a big, bearded biker turning up at her front door,” Addison explains as she scribbles down more stuff she needs and tears it off the notepad. She holds it up between her fingers for me.

“Guess we’ll see.” I snatch the paper from her and kiss her on her lips. It’s not until I hear a little giggle come from behind me, and see Addison blushing, that I realize how naturally doing it came to me. I didn’t consider the fact her son’s still in the room. It makes me blush a little before I turn around and face the kid.

“And don’t think you’re gonna be watchin’ cartoons all day, either. I got Jasmine pickin’ ya up to do some schoolin’ with her back at her place, while your mama here speaks to Grace.” I try to distract him from the fact I just kissed his mom right in front of him.

“Grace?” Addison looks surprised and I move her away from Charlie so I can explain.

“Grace is a trained counselor. The club needs as much information about the cult as we can get. She has a much kinder nature in gettin’ that information than I ever could. She’s calm and understandin’. It’s gonna be hard for you to talk about your past, but it’s essential. Especially if ya want us to get your sister out.” I can tell by the look on her face that she’s scared, but she puts on a brave smile and nods at me regardless.

“I’m outta here.” I grab my cut from the back of the chair and swing it over my shoulders.

“You gonna kiss her again?” Charlie looks up from his cereals with a cheeky little grin on his face.

“You got a problem if I do?” I ask him straight.

“Nope.” His eyes glance between me and his mom.

“Then I guess I am.” I slide my hand around the back of Addison’s head and draw her onto my mouth, pressing my lips

hard into hers before I release her.

“You two have a good day now.” I nod before heading out the door and taking in a chest full of fresh fuckin’ air.

“Skid.” My nephew Tommy is waiting for me by my bike.

“What’s up?” I don’t see much of my nephew these days, he has a trailer down in Sluts Sanctuary and prefers to keep his head down. I had to beg the club to give him a home after what Chop did, the fact he went AWOL after didn’t help him. I guess he repays me by staying out of trouble.

“I was wonderin’ if you could speak to Prez for me?” There’s a flare that’s replaced the sullen in his eyes and the tone of his voice is much more enthusiastic than usual.

“Look, if this is about the way Haven talks to you, there’s not much else—”

“I want in,” he interrupts me.

“What?” I stare at him in shock.

“I wanna be considered as the club’s next prospect.” The fact he has a dead serious look on his face makes me chuckle.

“Kid, you ain’t gotta prayer.”

“Who says I ain’t gotta prayer? The club don’t have a prospect right now, and you’re my uncle. You could be my sponsor.” I scrub my hand over my face and take a calming breath when I realize he’s actually serious about this.

“Why?” I stare at him, wondering what the hell’s changed all of a sudden.

“I dunno, it just kinda feels like the next step. Right now, I ain’t anyone. I’m just Tommy, who cleans shit up and sleeps down in the trailer park with the whores. I wanna be someone better than that. I wanna be like you,” he admits, scratching the back of his neck and avoiding eye contact as if he’s embarrassed.

“It’s hard work makin’ the cut. You gotta have no doubt in your mind that you would die for any man wearin’ it too. When ya think ya can do that, come and find me.” I kickstart

my bike and leave him with something to think about as I pull off and make my way down to the clubhouse.

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“When you left the club, did Addison have somethin’ to do with that?” Jessie asks as we let ourselves into her place.

He asked to ride out here with me so I’ve been waiting for his questions to start coming. He takes a chair from the kitchen table and swivels it so he can straddle it.

Figuring there ain’t no use me denying it, I take the chair beside him and nod my head.

“I met her at the church when I was helpin’ out, not long after Carly died. Thought I was doin’ the right thing by helping a girl in need, that’s why I had you guys help fix up this place. I was strugglin’ real bad, doing something useful felt good, kinda like a drug. I became what she needed when I was with her. I was strong and reliable, everythin’ Carly thought I was. Then I’d leave and get back to the club and I’d fall apart. It got too much, I was gettin’ too close. When I was at the club everythin’ reminded me of Carly, coming here and being with Addison allowed me to focus on somethin’ else, but it felt like a betrayal. Nothing I did felt right. It’s why I flipped out in your basement that day we found Tommy, it’s why I had to leave for a while.”

“Figured.” He proves he doesn’t miss a thing. His head drops between the arms he’s got resting over the back of the chair like he’s just stopped himself from saying something.

“You like her?” He raises it back up and looks me head-on.

“Course I fuckin’ like her, Jess. She’s beautiful, she’s got a heart of fuckin’ gold and for some reason only God knows the answer to, she’s forgiven me for what I did to her.”

“And what exactly *did* you do to her?” Jessie asks.

“I don’t wanna talk about it.” I stand up and turn away from him, focusing out the kitchen window and out onto the street. Even thinking about it makes me ashamed of myself.

“Well, whatever it is, if she’s willing to forgive ya, maybe you should start forgivin’ yourself.” He comes up from behind me and clasps my shoulder in his hand.

“I gotta go speak to Nora, you wanna grab the last few things off this list for me? Most of it’s in the kid’s room,” I tell him, taking the list from the inside of my cut and passing it to him.

“I’m on it.” Jessie sets straight to work, while I head out the door and cross the path through the perfectly mowed front lawn that belongs to Nora Taylor.

I knock on her door and when she opens it, she doesn’t look impressed or disappointed to see me.

“I was wondering when you’d show your face again.” She rolls her eyes and moves away from the door so I can step inside. I follow her as she hobbles her way through the hall toward her kitchen.

“Coffee?” she yells at me over the sound of the TV she has turned up full volume.

“I’m good, thanks,” I call back. Having to repeat myself when she irritably grabs the remote and points it at the screen, pressing hard on the extra-large buttons to turn it off.

“Look, Nora. I’m sor—”

“Save it!” She cuts me off, crossing her arms over her chest and intimidating me with the harsh eyes hidden behind her wrinkles.

“Five years,” she points out, strumming her fingers against her arm. “I don’t like telling lies and I sure as hell don’t like having to get inventive.”

“Are you kiddin’ me?” I shake my head at her and laugh.

Nora moved here ten years ago after wiping out all the casinos in Vegas, she’s wanted for fraud in three different states. She had connections with our Nevada Charter, which brought her protection from us. Prez put me in charge of checking in with her when she got housed out here and it was

while I was doing that, that I noticed the house next door was for sale and bought it for Carly.

“You can laugh at me all you want, Skid, but I don’t con innocent young girls.” She keeps her lips tightly pressed together.

“You weren’t connin’ her, you were watchin’ out for her,” I point out.

“I was lying to her, and I had to start making up my own stories when you disappeared without a fucking trace. She was always worrying that your *‘friend’* would need his house back someday and that she and Charlie would be homeless.”

“I know, and you did good. Real fuckin’ good.”

“Well, it wasn’t easy.” The old woman still looks pissed at me.

“She tells me you’ve been helpin’ her out with the kid too. If I didn’t know better I’d say you were goin’ soft in your old age.” I wink.

“Well, you can think on that again. Ain’t no softness in me, boy. I was just doing the decent thing. How else was the girl supposed to work?” The fact she refuses to look me in the eye tells me she’s lying.

“So, what’s going on? Her and the kid haven’t been home for days.” She pulls a cigarette from the kitchen drawer and lights it from the gas stove before she takes a seat.

“The father of her kid showed up and freaked her out. She’s stayin’ with me at the club.”

“*You?*” Nora laughs.

“I’m glad ya find that amusin’.”

“Skid, I ain’t taking away what you’ve done for that girl, letting her have the house, paying her wages at that place she works just so they keep her on.”

“Wait... I never told you that... How did ya—?”

“I’m not stupid, that vacation park she works at barely gets a hundred visitors a year. The couple who run it may be

getting on in age but it ain't nothing they couldn't handle on their own. One thing I've learned from hustling is that if something is too good to be true, it probably is. Now who do you wanna accuse of going soft?" She widens her eyes at me expectantly, and without any argument, I nod for her to continue.

"Like I was saying, there ain't no denying that you've been good to the girl, but what you did and how you left, I'm surprised she ever wanted to see you again."

The truth in her words coils around my heart and puts a frustration in me that I can't be releasin' here.

"Well, she asked me to head over here and tell ya that she's okay," I tell her what I came to say so I can get the hell outta here.

"And I assume you've now told her of our association and the fact that *you* are the mysterious *friend* who owns the house she's been living in all these years?"

"I ain't gotten round to that part yet," I admit, scratching my fingers through my beard.

"Well, I suggest, this time, you don't break her heart. I get what happened to you was awful, but there's no justice in making sweet girls like her pay for it." Nora gives it to me straight as she always does.

"I hear ya." I move forward and kiss her on the cheek.

"You *owe* me. I don't even like kids," she adds.

"Well that's a shame, it looks as if kids like you." I nod my head to the picture she has of her and Charlie together on the refrigerator and she scowls at me when she realizes she's been caught out.

"Just look after them," she warns before I say my goodbyes and head back to Addison's house to join Jessie.

Soon as I step through the door and see the way he's standing I know there's something wrong. It's defensive and a little anxious like the time he was blocking me from getting

through the door of my cabin to see for myself that Carly was dead.

“What’s happened, Jess?” I try to stay calm.

“You better follow me.” He sighs as he turns around and leads me up the stairs.

“I was lookin’ for those pills Addison has on her list, and they weren’t in the bathroom so I figured they might be by her bed. They weren’t, so I checked her top drawer.” Jessie leads me into her room and pulls out one on her nightstand so I can see for myself what’s got him on edge.

It’s full of Addison’s underwear, but what’s got Jessie so disturbed, and me fuckin’ furious, is the fact that all of her underwear is covered in something that looks a lot like fuckin’ jizz.

“I don’t think I need to tell ya what that is, or that it’s not been there long,” Jessie points out the fuckin’ obvious as I pull one of the garments out and hold it between my thumb and finger, in disgust.

“That fucker wants her to know he’s watchin’,” I growl, suddenly feeling like there are eyes on me too.

“If he’s watchin’ us, he’s gonna know where she is.” Jess drags his hand through his hair. “There’s no reasonin’ with these kinda men.”

“I know that.” I drop her panties back into the drawer and slam it shut, sitting my ass on her bed and looking up at the ceiling for some fuckin’ answers.

“They won’t come to the club, they ain’t got enough numbers. They can’t risk anyone other than Elders leavin’ the village because of the scaremongering they do to keep everyone in line,” I assure him. The last thing I want is for him to be worrying about Maddy. She’s another victim of my brother’s destruction and she’s only just started to heal.

“No, but this shows they ain’t gonna give up. He’ll be waitin’ around every corner.” Jessie’s words ring in my head.

I want Addison to have a normal life. For Charlie to be able to go to school without her worrying. I need to find this man, and I need to find him now. And not just him, every one of those Elders need to die for Addison and Charlie's safety to be ensured.

"You ready for a fight, Jess?" I ask when I figure there ain't no other way around this.

"Hell yeah, brother, it's what we fuckin' live for." He smirks.

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My pulse is still racing when I get back to the compound, and I figure it's best that I keep my distance from Addison. I don't want her to see me like this. I've always kept her sheltered from this side of me. She would have had a tough enough day as it is, opening up to Grace.

So, I take my aggression to the gym, hitting the punch bag until Storm shows up and I have someone to spar with. I don't even go home to shower before I spend most the night drinking in the members-only bar to avoid all the others. They've learned how to sense when I need to be alone and I'm sure Jessie has filled 'em in on what we found back at the house.

I sit and let the rage inside me swirl around my head, imagining killing all the men who want to take her. I don't even know what their faces look like, but I can see the color of their blood and hear the way they scream when I cause 'em pain.



“How much longer do you have left?” I ask Grace as she clutches her boyfriend’s arm and steadily lowers herself on the couch.

“My due date is in three weeks, so I’m trying to keep myself busy.” She blows the hair that’s fallen from her messy bun out of her face, reminding me of how tough those last few weeks can be.

“You can leave us now.” She turns to look at the man who’s hovering over her like a bodyguard.

“I ain’t leavin’, what if somethin’ happens?” He stares back at her as if she’s crazy.

“Like what? Worst we’re gonna do is take a dip in the lake.”

His eyes bulge out of his head, but before he can protest she starts to giggle. “Relax, that’s not gonna happen. I can’t even get myself out of bed, let alone take a swim. Go hang out with Storm and talk torture tactics or something.” She waves her hand at him.

“Fine.” He doesn’t seem happy about it, but he does as she asks, kissing the top of her head before he heads out.

“Honestly, he hasn’t left my side for days now. It’s suffocating.” She shakes her head as I hand her the tea I’ve made her.

“So how are you settling in?” She smiles.

“I know why you’re here and I’ll tell you whatever information I can.” I cut to the chase. This is going to be

awkward. We might as well get straight to it.

“I’m not just here to get information from you, Addison. Us girls, we all tend to stick together. Hell, we need to. Living with a Soul man doesn’t come with a handbook. We all kinda learn from each other,” she explains.

“Me and Skid, we aren’t really together.” In fact, I don’t have a clue what we are.

“Don’t isolate yourself, there isn’t a woman here who hasn’t been through her own kinda trauma, it sounds like a cliché but the best way to heal is to talk.”

“You ever wanted someone to be dead?” I ask her outright. Grace seems like a nice girl, she’s smiley and bright. It’s hard to believe there’s ever been a dark thought in her mind.

“Plenty. And if you want me to get real with ya, I can tell you that the majority of those people *are* dead.” Her words shock me, but not as much as the casual shrug she makes.

“My son wasn’t created out of love.” I look down at her big, round belly and feel a little envy. “I was forced to marry a man much older than me. He raped me continuously until I got pregnant.”

Grace takes in what I’m telling her, showing no shock, but a whole lot of empathy.

“I don’t care how he came to be. I hadn’t even felt him move inside me before I knew I needed to get us out of there. They killed my friend for trying to help me. They lied to us about the world outside to keep us isolated from it, but I risked all the horrors we’d been warned of because I knew even Hell would be better than staying there. The night I escaped, I thought I’d killed him. There was blood everywhere and he was howling in pain. But it turns out I didn’t and now that he’s found me, I wish I had driven that kitchen knife into him ten times more.” I don’t cry like I should, instead, I get angry.

“Most people would feel the same, given the circumstances,” Grace agrees, placing her hand on top of mine.

“I know Skid is gonna kill him, and I can make peace with that. I don’t need you to tell me that that’s okay. So, how about I draw you a map of the village, write down all the names and descriptions of the Elders, and tell you where I escaped from? Then we can talk about some of the things that make me grateful for the fact I got the hell away from that place.”

“That sounds like a really good plan.” Grace smiles back at me warmly.

I spend some time putting together all the information the club are going to need and find myself talking to Grace with ease about some of the things that happened there. I tell her about my sister and unexpectedly confess the hate I feel toward my parents. I’ve always felt burdened by the thoughts I have about the people who are responsible for creating me, but saying them out loud seems to take the weight off it a little. Once Grace is sure we have more than enough for the club to work with, she fills me in on how everything works and tells me the story about how her and Brax met.

“Wow.” I remain stunned when she’s finished, and hearing her explain about the men her mother was dedicated to bringing to justice makes me understand why she wanted them dead.

“Did you know Carly?” I ask when I notice her starting to shift uncomfortably. She’s going to want to leave soon and I have to find out something.

“No, I never got to meet her, none of us did, except for Rogue and Maddy.” She looks sad about that fact.

“What happened?” I whisper, feeling a little deceitful asking her about it.

“He hasn’t told you, has he?” The way Grace hangs her head to the side tells me that whatever it is, is going to be heartbreaking.

“Skid never talks about her with me, I wish he would.”

“Skid’s been through a lot. He didn’t just lose his wife. You need to try and get him to open up. It’s not for me to tell

you.” She smiles sadly, finishing up the last of her third cup of tea then taking her phone from her purse.

It’s less than a minute when the door bursts open and Brax rushes through it all red-faced and panting like a dog. Myself and Grace both look at him confused.

“You okay?” Grace asks.

“Are *you*?” He marches over, placing one arm round her back so he can haul her up off the couch.

“I’m fine, what the hell’s wrong?”

“Your text. It said *ready*.” He stares at her.

“And?”

“I thought you were ready-ready.” He scrubs his hand over his face.

“Brax, you really need to loosen up, babies can be late and I can’t take another few weeks of you living on your nerves like this.” She shakes her head and kisses his cheek calmly before waddling her way to the door.

Brax takes a deep breath and follows her out.

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Skid doesn’t make it home for dinner. So Charlie and me eat together before I bathe him and put something we can both watch on TV. I never pushed Grace for more information on Carly earlier. Maybe subconsciously I was scared to. Whoever she was, I know how much Skid loved her, it wouldn’t be human of me not to question if he could ever love me equally.

Maybe, sitting here, in her house where she made her memories with him, should make me feel like an imposter. Yet it doesn’t because I don’t want Skid to forget about those memories. I want him to share them with me. I hope Carly knows that my intention is only to give back to him what he’s given me.

I knew from the day I met Skid that he was broken, you could see it in his eyes. We came so close just before Charlie was born, each day we spent together Skid seemed to drop his walls around me a little more. He never made me feel like a burden to him. I thought he was enjoying the experience the same way I was and that we were heading into it together. The day I realized I was wrong broke my heart.

*“What’s up?” Skid whispers from the couch as I slowly hobble myself down the stairs.*

*“Nothing, go back to sleep,” I whisper back, though I have no idea why. We’re the only ones in the house and we’re both awake.*

*Skid flicks on the lamp and seeing him lying on the sofa in just a tight white tee and boxers distracts me from the ache in my lower back.*

*“It’s 3 am.” He rubs the sleep out of his eyes and gets up to come to me.*

*“I just can’t get comfortable. My back’s aching worse than ever, and no matter how I lie I can’t get to sleep.”*

*“Come over here.” He guides me over to the couch, placing my hands flat on the arm before stepping behind me and rotating his thumbs into my lower back. It instantly releases the tension there and I breathe a sigh of relief as he continues.*

*“Feelin’ better?” He laughs to himself when I start moaning.*

*“Feeling awesome,” I tell him.*

*“I ain’t heard you make a noise like that since I brought you a slice of Marilyn’s peanut butter cheesecake.” I have to picture the grin on his face because I’m far too comfortable to glance over my shoulder.*

*“Which I will be needing another slice of in the future,” I remind him, steadily rocking my hips and enjoying the relief from the pain I was in.*

*“Can you do this for me all night?” I ask.*

*“If it’ll help,” he responds, and the beautiful thing about his answer is the fact I know he would. I straighten myself up and when I turn around to face him, I notice there’s no humor on his face. He looks real serious.*

*“I’d do anythin’ for you,” he tells me, narrowing his eyes like his words are a confession from the heart.*

*As much as I want to move in and kiss him, I can’t. I fear rejection far too much and when he steadily starts to move closer, his hand sliding onto my cheek and steering me toward his lips, I feel an instant surge of fulfillment spread over me when his mouth touches mine. He kisses me gently and softly, and I have to tamp down my desperation so I don’t turn it into something hot and feral.*

*My hormones have been burning like balls of fire trapped inside my stomach. I’ve had an ache between my legs that I’ve convinced myself only he could cure, and it’s taken all of my willpower not to throw myself at him during the last few months. Now, with his tongue exploring my mouth and his lips sunk deep into mine, I can’t hold back. I want an experience that’s different from the times I had before. I want this... I yearn for it and having this man fill that ache inside me seems like all it would take to forget the horrors of my past.*

*Skid doesn’t seem bothered or put off by the very obvious obstacle that rests between us. He gives me exactly what I need, reaching one hand around me and grabbing my ass while he kisses me a little harder and glides the other one up under the nightdress I’m wearing. His rough hands splay over my outstretched skin, sliding them higher and taking one of my heavy tits in his palm.*

*“This okay?” he asks, his mouth pulling away from mine and placing kisses all over my neck.*

*“It’s perfect,” I assure him.*

*It’s more than perfect. It’s everything that I’ve been wanting for the past five months. I feel a clenching within me as his calloused palm gently kneads me, and my nipple rolls between his thumb and finger. When his mouth finds mine*

*again our tongues work together in the perfect sequence, and I try to ignore how painful that clenching has become.*

*Thankfully, it seems to fade before he hooks his hands under my thighs, lifting me up effortlessly onto the armrest. My hands explore him through his tee, as he continues to kiss me.*

*“You sure this is okay, Ads?” he checks in between the kisses he’s giving me, and I nod because, despite the dull ache in my back returning, I can’t remember a time when I’ve ever felt this good.*

*All the holding back between us is over, I can finally show him how I really feel, and having his hands on my bare flesh as they explore under my nightdress makes the wait all worth it. The next wave of pain that comes feels much stronger, so strong that I can’t hold in the gasp I make as my stomach tightens.*

*“You good?” Skid instantly pulls away when he senses something’s wrong and when I clamp my hand around his forearm and dig in my nails he looks down to where my other hand clenches my stomach. It’s at that same moment that I feel something release, my thighs turning warm as something gushes past them.*

*“Holy shit, Ads, your waters just broke.” Skid stares at the mess on the floor, his hand no longer on me but gripping at his hair while my pain starts to subside.*

*“Oh, my God!” I brace myself on the couch because this is it. My baby is ready to come into the world, and all I can think about is how grateful I am to have Skid with me.*



*“Don’t leave me, I’m scared.” Addison grips my arms as the hospital staff wheel her through the corridor on a gurney, her contractions are pretty close together which means, if the book is right, that the baby isn’t far off getting here.*

*“I’m not gonna leave ya. Just keep breathin’ and stay calm.” I follow her into the room, ignoring the fact her nails draw blood when her body tenses with another contraction.*

*“What happened back at the house...” She tries to talk in between her breathing, while a midwife hoists her legs up into some stirrups.*

*“Don’t worry about that, focus on this.” I drag over the stool that’s behind the door so I can sit beside her and hold her hand.*

*“Looks like you made it here just in time. You’re fully dilated.” The nurse tells her cheerily when her head pops back up from between her legs.*

*“Skid, I’m in love with you.” She ignores what the woman tells her and focuses on me. “I want this baby to be our fresh start. I want us both to raise this chil... oh fuck!” She screws up her face and focuses on what’s happening to her body while I let her words sink in.*

*Everything around me suddenly becomes so distant. I can hear the midwife encouraging her, telling her to push but she sounds muffled. Addison’s hand shakes from the tension she’s holding onto me with, but I can barely feel it. All I can think about is how selfish I’m being.*

*What right have I got to move on and be happy, when Carly had her life stolen from her? How can I drag this sweet girl and the child she's about to push into the world into my life? The sound of Addison howling is replaced by a cry and when the midwife places her baby all slippery and pink directly onto Addison's chest, she beams up at me proudly.*

*"You were right, it's a boy," she tells me with tears of joy in her eyes.*

*Natural intuition stops the baby from crying when she looks down at him and strokes her still-shaking hands over his precious little head. It's a beautiful sight, a vision of pure innocence that I don't fit into.*

*"Does Daddy want to cut the cord?" The midwife looks at me with a wide smile and the insanity of this whole situation hits me like a ten-ton truck.*

*Sweat seeps through my pores, my palms become too slippery to grab hold of anything. My chest squeezes so tight I feel like I'll never catch my next breath, and suddenly the image of my beautiful wife, lying dead with her eyes wide open is all my mind can focus on. I stand up and take a step back, tripping over the stool and jumping outta my skin when I hear the tray of instruments that were behind me clatter to the floor.*

*"Skid?" Addison looks at me so strangely, all that joy starting to fade from her face.*

*I hear Carly's voice screaming my name, begging for me to come while his filthy hands crush around her windpipe, squeezing the life outta her and our child. This should be her, she should be cradling our child and looking at me with all that happiness. All she ever wanted was to be a mother.*

*"Skid." Addison's desperate plea calls out to me again and when I draw my eyes back onto her and see the fear and confusion she's staring back at me with, I detest myself even more.*

*She didn't deserve this false hope I've given her. Any feelings I've convinced myself I have can't be real. I found my soulmate, I married her. I planned my whole life around our*

*dreams, how can that ever be replaced? This poor girl is just someone who got tangled up in my healing process. Another innocent creature who could be ruined if I let her into my life.*

*“Skid!” Her voice rings through all the chaos in my head as I continue to back away from her. Everyone in the room is staring at me, judging me.*

*This is a happy moment, probably the best moment Addison is ever gonna have in her whole life, and not only do I not belong in it, I’m ruining it.*

*“I’m sorry,” I tell her weakly, turning my back on her and her newborn son and running.*

*I’d rather ruin a moment than a whole fuckin’ lifetime. Addison may never know it, but what I’m doing right now is saving her. And as I get further and further away, I start to wonder how a heart that’s dead can still fuckin’ hurt.*

I wake up fighting for breath, my skin stuck to the sheets from sweat and my heart thudding wildly. The space beside me is empty, and after all these years, I still haven’t gotten used to waking up and seeing that. The other morning when I opened my eyes and saw Addison lying beside me, that heartbreaking second that starts off each morning didn’t come. But it was quickly replaced by guilt.

I sit up and run my hands through my damp hair, reminding myself to breathe. I’m always gonna hate myself for what I did to Addison. This isn’t the first time I’ve revisited the moment I hurt her, and as I close my eyes and try to focus on something else, what I realize is that I’m setting us up for the same thing again. I’ve learned over the five years that we’ve been apart that those feelings I had for her weren’t part of my grieving process. They were real, and now they’re back.

Time, distance, or fear of her hating me haven’t made them any less. If anything, seeing the woman she’s become has made ‘em stronger. Having her here, kissing her the way I did, and letting her sleep in my bed is all progress toward an outcome that I fear.

The air in here's far too stuffy. The fact there's only a wall between me and her seems as much of a curse as it is a temptation and so I pull on some jeans, grab a shirt, and get the hell outta here.

I find myself at the top of the hill that looks out over the club just in time for sunrise. This was one of Carly's favorite places. I can't count the times she dragged me outta bed to bring me here to watch the sun peek over the valleys that provide the landscape surrounding the compound.

*"Ain't nothing more perfect than the start of a new day,"* she'd tell me every time the rising sun would warm her face. Although I can just about hear her voice in my head, I don't feel that kiss on my cheek that used to follow the words. I barely feel her at all anymore. The house stopped smelling like her years ago.

It feels like she's fading away from me and the fact I kissed another woman in our damn kitchen proves that I'm letting her. What's worse about it all, is that kissing Addison felt good. It brought back a feelin' inside me that I thought I'd never feel again, and it didn't feel at all like a fuckin' sin. It felt right, and that seems like the biggest betrayal of all to a woman I promised to love, honor, and obey.

Now, more than ever, I feel the need to be close to her again. I'm hoping coming here will do that. I close my eyes and remember my wife, pushing away the haunting vision of her dead in my arms and focusing on all the memories I've got of her smiling. Carly was the happiest person I ever met, she never let nothin' get her down. Her happiness was infectious too, there wasn't a person in this world she couldn't make smile. When the memory of her lying dead on our living room floor casts its ugly shadow over that beautiful vision, I grip at the dirt beneath my hands and growl out from the agony it unleashes, and the fact there ain't an outlet for it. At least, not until I find the man who took her from me.

How the fuck can I make Addison promises about keeping her and her son safe when I couldn't protect my own wife? I couldn't protect our baby either. I let 'em down and I don't deserve a fresh start when they're lying in the fuckin' ground.

Yet there's a connection between me and Addison, one that's been there since the day I first met her. I told myself I was just being decent, that helping her was what Carly would have wanted. Hell, I even convinced myself that Carly had somehow sent her to me to help me heal, it's the kind of thing she would do.

But having Addison here, being around her again after all this time and what's starting to develop is making me realize that it's so much more than that. My heart wants to heal, but my head just ain't letting it.

I hang my arms over my knees and drop my head, wondering what Carly would be telling me if she was here. My wife was the most unselfish person in the world. I know, deep down, she'd tell me to chase happiness and try to love again, but that don't make it any easier to accept. Having Addison come here to find me, seeking out my help, and putting all her faith in me again, seems like a gift.

I let her go before because it felt like the right thing to do, she deserved so much more than a broken man who could never love her, and being who I am is what got Carly killed. I wasn't gonna ruin another life, in Addison's case, two.

Just thinking about hurting Addison again feels suffocating, so much that I feel my chest start to tighten. I lift my head to take in more air and notice the female deer that stands just a few meters away. I try to steady my breath so I don't scare it away. It ain't rare to see deer around here, especially this time in the morning when the dew is still on the grass and the compound is silent, but it *is* rare to have one come so close. She doesn't seem skittish like all the others I've seen. She's aware that I'm here and hasn't bolted. In fact, she's staring right at me, her big brown eyes not even blinking as they reach into my soul.

I slowly stand on my feet, expecting her to take off into the trees, but as I step closer toward her, she remains perfectly still. Something a little surreal comes over me as I continue to approach. I'm less than a meter away from her now, so close that I can see my reflection in her eyes, and yet she still doesn't act like I'm a threat. I take another careful step

forward, reaching out my shaky hand and becoming even more shocked when she lets my fingertips touch the fur on her nose. It sends an instant wave of comfort through my body and I swallow the lump in my throat when her eyes finally blink and I see a familiarity in them. There's no sadness there, just peace, and my chest feels close to bursting when her head slightly lowers.

"I hear ya, darlin'." I look into those rich, brown eyes knowing that she's saying goodbye to me. She's letting me go, and I think she's asking that I do the same for her. "Ain't nothin' better than the start of a new day."

I smile through my tears when I feel the heat from the sun rising over the mountain. Then quick as a flash, she bolts. It's hard to withstand the pain as I watch that pretty, little deer hop away from me and disappear into the trees out of sight, but I get the message loud and clear. And I leave any doubt, I came up here with, behind as I make my way back to my cabin.

My feet are almost running, I feel like I've been injected with some form of adrenaline. Suddenly it feels like nothing's holding me back. Sure, I've still got apprehensions about having Addison and Charlie here and letting them down, but I also have to take into consideration how much this place has changed in the last few years. All the club members are settled now, they've started having kids of their own, and Prez has proven time and time again that he's determined to make this club a safe place where families can be raised without fear. The only way I stand a chance of protecting Addison and her son is if I start to have a little faith in myself. Since Addison was brave enough to tell me her truth, I should find the courage to tell her mine.

I need to do that before I lose my nerve. Barging through my front door I see Addison stepping out the bathroom looking all cute and sleepy in an oversized button-up shirt. Seeing no reason to hold back I charge toward her and lift her off her feet.

I kiss the girl like she's mine. I kiss her like I'm gonna give her a whole lifetime of kisses just like it, because if I've

learned one thing, it's that life is too short to fuckin' waste a second.

"Skid?" She looks back at me like I've lost all sanity as I carry her over to the couch and sit down with her straddling my lap.

"I've been scared." I feel a sense of relief escape with my words. "I don't wanna be scared anymore."

She suddenly looks really concerned and it makes me realize that I'm doing this all wrong. I'm rambling like a madman when what I really want is for her to be assured that I'm not gonna hurt her again.

"You need to know some things, things I've kept from you." I rip off the Band-Aid and get straight to the point because I will not keep this woman in the dark for a second longer.

"Me and Carly. We lived here together. We were happy and I loved her more than I can put into words," I start, refusing to let the poison of what comes next seep into my veins and stop it from coming out. "I had a brother who was a club member too, I loved him. I trusted him and he came into this house and he killed her." Addison's mouth drops open in shock. Still, I continue to get it all out. "I saw the whole thing after it happened, turns out she was makin' me a video and the camera was still recordin'. I watched my brother rape and kill my wife and I've watched it over and over again, torturin' myself."

"*Skid.*" Addison wraps her arms around my neck and pulls me tight to her. Trying to comfort me but I have so much more to say. I'm scared that I'll put the lid back on if I don't get it out now.

"My world fell apart." I pull back a little. "Even more so when I found out that the reason she was makin' that video was because it was her quirky little way of tellin' me she was havin' our baby."

"Oh, no." Addison covers her mouth with her hand and tears instantly form in her eyes.

“I lost myself. I did anythin’ I could to feel close to her, that’s why I was at the soup kitchen that night. I had a handgun in my glove compartment and every fuckin’ reason to use it. Then I met you.” Her hand slips away from her face and she looks a little stunned by my confession.

“I told myself that Carly put us in the same place that night to give me a purpose, if you’d known her you’d understand why.” I laugh to myself sadly, and when I see the warm smile pick up on Addison’s lips it makes continuing a little easier.

“You gave me a reason to keep livin’, you made me feel like myself again. Everythin’ I did for you, I did because I cared. I kissed ya that night before you went into labor with every intention of makin’ us work. But then, when Charlie came out and that nurse mistook me for his dad, everythin’ became too much. I freaked out, it all felt so unfair. Carly was innocent, she did nothin’ to deserve what Chop did to her. I shouldn’t have been ready to move on and consider a future without her when it was my fault.”

“It wasn’t your fault,” Addison tries to reassure me.

“I knew Chop wasn’t safe. Deep down, I already knew he’d killed Tommy’s mom, but I thought him being here among these people would make him better. I convinced myself that he’d left all the bad shit behind him.”

“Skid, you can’t blame yourself for what he did.”

“That’s a matter of opinion, but I can fully blame myself for what I did to you.” A silence settles between us as she lets the reality of that sink in.

“I left you at a time when you needed me more than ever. I let you and your son down in a way I will never be able to forgive myself for. But I’m askin’ ya now to give me a second chance. No more hesitation, no more backin’ out. I wanna future, Addison, I know now that it’s what Carly would want for me too, and I’m certain that the person I want that future to be with, is you.” I wait for her to say something. I understand that all I’ve unloaded is a lot for her to take in but I’m hoping she believes that I mean it.

“You didn’t have a *friend*, did you? That house is yours.”

I nod back at her, refusing to tell another fuckin’ lie.

“I’d gotten the house a few months before Carly died. We were tryin’ to get pregnant and I wanted to give her the perfect family home. I was fixin’ it up ready to surprise her, then...” I can’t bring myself to say it again.

“You should have told me, why didn’t you? It would have all been so much easier to understand.” She shakes her head at me in confusion.

“Because I liked the person I got to be when I was with ya. I liked steppin’ outta my mayhem into a place where there was hope. I liked takin’ care of ya and makin’ ya happy. It filled all the voids I was missin’.”

“You wanted to replace her?” Addison says sadly.

“At first, maybe, you were pregnant, just like she was. I got to go through that experience with ya the way I should’ve with her, but it became so much more than that. Doin’ things for ya, makin’ you feel secure, and seein’ you smile became everythin’ I lived for.”

“I understand that.” She seems a little disappointed.

“I don’t think ya do.” I shake my head. “Addison, I was fallin’ in love with you and I had to stop myself because in my heart I was still married. I was betrayin’ a woman who lost her life because of me and I wasn’t ready to move on, back then.”

“So you left,” she reminds me.

“I still had so much hate inside me. I needed to kill Chop. I still do, but I let that override everythin’. I told myself I was protectin’ ya. and I stand by that. I’ve needed these years, Addison. I think what you said is true, you needed them too. I drove myself crazy after I left you, I let myself sink so fuckin’ low. I even left the club because I had to get away from it all.

But then I saw you at the cemetery and all those feelings came back. Feelings that I realize now weren’t just fabricated by a grievin’ man, they were real, Addy, and I don’t wanna ignore ‘em anymore.” I hope she’s understanding how serious

I am because all of a sudden the thought of losing her feels like it could finish me.

“It’s not just me I’ve got to think about, what about him?” Her eyes slowly move toward the room where her little boy must still be sleeping.

“Course ya do, and I’m makin’ this promise to the both of ya. I felt that boy’s first kick inside you. I was there when he came into the world. There were times when I’d watch you sleeping on the couch or rockin’ in that chair readin’ stories to him before he was even born when I’d wish he was mine. Back then it felt wrong, like a betrayal, but not anymore. I wanna be there for you both. You just gotta put your faith in me again. I know it’s a lot to ask, but—”

“I’m here, aren’t I?” She cuts me off, holding her hand against my bearded cheek. “I’m putting my faith in you. Skid. You broke my heart, but I could never hate you.

Believe me, I tried.

I came to you when I saw Abraham because I knew you would take care of us. I’m sorry about what happened to your wife. And it makes sense that you would have felt guilty about what we developed, but I need to know that guilt is gone because getting over you was too hard. I’m not strong enough to do it again.”

“Okay.” I grip her body tight against mine so I can raise us off the couch. Then carrying her to my room I kick the door shut after us, hoping Charlie stays asleep long enough for me to take my time and show her.



There's a softness in his eyes as he lays me carefully on his mattress, leaning his body over mine and kissing me in a way a man his size shouldn't be capable of. He covers me in those kisses as his lips lower down my body, and when he starts to unbutton my shirt I aid him by ripping apart the rest of them and stripping it off my arms. After everything he's just confessed, I feel like this is him giving a part of himself to me.

The concentration he puts into my body as his fingers skim over my skin and the way his mouth explores it makes it seem like no world outside this room exists, and our pasts have been erased. He takes my nipple in his mouth, grazing it lightly with his teeth, and I let out the desperate moan I've been trying so hard to hold in.

I study the way he looks up at me, watching me with those deep, brown eyes as I accept his pleasure. My back lifts from the mattress so I can take more of him and when he slowly moves lower down my body, kissing my stomach and making it spike on the inside, he takes my thighs in his strong hands and guides them over each of his shoulders.

He licks me through the cotton of my panties, making me grab the bedsheets for leverage. For so long, I've been desperate to feel his touch, and now that I have it, I feel like I could erupt any second. Skid is in no rush, he takes his time familiarizing himself with every inch of me and making the flame inside me burn hotter and more out of control. He looks up at me like he's seeking permission when his fingers curl into the waistband of my panties. I nod back at him, and he slowly peels them down my thighs, discarding them over his

shoulder before his head bows back down and his warm, wet tongue connects with my sensitive flesh.

“Oh, God.” I talk to the ceiling as I feel his mouth take me to a whole new level. It feels intimate, raw, and dirty, but at the same time incredibly beautiful. My hips naturally move to the strokes of his tongue and with his thick, black beard tickling the inside of my thighs, something within me threatens to unleash. It’s so strong I almost fear it and when I can’t keep it inside a second longer, I look down helplessly at Skid and watch his hooded eyes study me as I lose myself.

I have to bite down hard on my lip to stop myself from making a noise when I spill onto his tongue. It’s not until my thighs stop trembling and my heart starts to beat again that he climbs back up my body, lifting off his shirt so my hands can touch his strong, sturdy chest. I look down and see that the hand that isn’t propping him up over me is loosening his belt, and I watch in fascination as he forces the jeans off his hips.

I know what comes next. Looking down between us, I see his thick, solid cock hovering close to my entrance and I don’t fear it, I desire it.

His mouth finds mine again, and as his tongue rolls around mine I taste my pleasure on it. It distracts me from the fact he’s edging closer and when I feel his velvety tip brush against me, it sends another spine-chilling shiver over my skin.

“I’ve never... Not in a way I’ve wanted.” I feel the need to warn him. I have no idea how to do any of this, I’ve never been with a man purely for pleasure before.

“We’ll take it steady,” he promises, pressing himself against my entrance and easing the ache that’s already started to rebuild inside me when he pushes gently inside me. I grip his arms and look down in fascination as he slowly feeds me inch by inch, and when I’m completely full of him he raises my chin with the crook of his finger so my eyes focus on him.

“You okay?” he asks in that low, raspy whisper that never fails to soothe me.

“It’s perfect.” I somehow manage to form an answer. What I’m feeling almost borders on pain, because my body isn’t used to it, but it doesn’t hurt, it feels kind of spectacular.

“This is how it’s gonna be from now on. No holdin’ back,” he promises.

“No holding back,” I repeat his words with happy tears brimming my eyes.

He presses his lips over one of my eyelids and catches them with his lips, slowly stirring inside me and bringing me closer and closer to that climax again. I brace myself for it and realize that being Skid’s reason for living all those years ago, makes up for all the hurt I felt when he left us.

Skid was never a bad man, he’s a broken one. As his forehead drops into mine and his body stills, I feel the vibration of his growl penetrate my whole body as we climax together. We lie for a while with our chests beating rapidly and when he eventually lifts his head and I see the smile on his face, I wonder if maybe Abraham and all his preaching was right. Maybe I really *am* the chosen one. The one chosen to fix this man.



I'm feeling much better, a helluva lot stronger, and knowing that it's only a matter of time before the hospital staff allow the police to speak to me is becoming a problem. I'm gonna have to make a break for it soon, whether I'm physically fit enough or not.

I watch Jenna walk past the door, she's wearing a denim jacket over her uniform and a tote bag over her shoulder. It must be home time for her, she's been here since 6 am.

Over the past few days I've had nothing much to do but obsess over her. She's a hard worker, spends more time here than she does at home. She's kind, courteous, and makes people smile, yet there's a sadness in her eyes if you look deep enough.

I press my buzzer knowing that, despite the fact she's ready to leave, she won't leave me for someone else to deal with. That's the thing about women like her, they're easy to read. You can smell the desperation on them, and I may not know much about Nurse Jenna and what she does when she leaves her job, but I *do* know that she enjoys our encounters and that I ain't ready to let her leave yet.

"Are you determined to keep me here?" She pops her head back through the door.

"You usually say goodbye before you leave," I point out, wondering what it would be like to come home to a woman like her. Did her ex wait up for her after these long shifts? Did he appreciate her? Satisfy her needs? I'll bet it wouldn't take much, she seems the grateful kind.

“Well, aren’t you just the neediest patient on ward B?” she teases as she comes toward the bed.

“You intrigue me.” I allow her my thoughts. Her likeness to Carly seems to become more prominent each day, if she just cut her hair a little shorter it would be uncanny.

“*I intrigue you?*” She giggles, placing her tote on the foot of the bed and sitting on the edge. “You’re the man who can’t remember how he ended up here.” She looks into my eyes curiously, with that flirty, little smile beaming on her face.

“You were quieter than usual today. What’s been troublin’ ya?” I ask, taking a risk and letting my fingers touch over hers. She doesn’t flinch, in fact, she doesn’t even seem to notice, instead, she drops her guard and lets the sadness glaze over the brightness in her eyes.

“Am I that transparent?” She shakes her head and looks up at the ceiling to stop me from seeing the tears that form. Fuck, they look good on her, so good that it makes me crave more of ‘em.

“I got this yesterday.” She reaches into her bag and pulls out an envelope, and when she hands it over to me I waste no time taking out the letter that’s inside and scanning over it.

“He wants everything, the house, all we had saved... that cheating bastard wants to take my home.” Her voice cracks as she laughs a bitter laugh. As she wipes the tears from her eyes I stealthy slide the empty envelope, with her address on, under the bed sheet.

“He cheated on you?” I slide my hand over her arm to comfort her.

“Yeah, spineless asshole didn’t even have the nerve to tell me to my face. I came home from work a few months ago and he was gone. All I had was a lousy apology letter. I’ve not been able to track him down, not heard from him in months, and yesterday I got this.” She snatches the letter from my hand and shoves it back in her bag.

“You don’t need to hear all this. I don’t even know why I... I should get going.” She shakes her head.

“No.” I cling to her wrist to stop her from leaving. “I like that you told me.” Her pulse is throbbing against my fingertips, stirring arousal inside me, the feral kind that I know from experience goes far beyond dangerous.

“I haven’t told anyone here. I’m too ashamed.” She laughs, closing her eyes and squeezing out more tears.

“He’s the one who should be ashamed.” I release her from my grip.

“Who are you, Michael Fender?” When she opens her eyes back up, they glisten with hope, and it brings back a pain that I haven’t felt in a while. One that, if left to shimmer, can turn into something fatal...

*“There that should heal nicely.” Carly wraps a bandage around the bullet wound she’s just stitched up on my right bicep. “I’m sure when my mom taught me to sew, she didn’t expect me to use it to patch up bikers.” She smiles, taking the bowl and everything she’s used over to the sink and tidying it away.*

*It’s real hard to try and hate something so beautiful. Even harder when that beautiful person is so damn sweet. But Carly has become a permanent fixture around here and I’d rather hate than hurt.*

*“You know, I was thinking about what happened with Mary-Ann—”*

*“Ain’t nothin’ ever gonna happen to you, like that.” I stop her right there. I may be a bad man, but there is no one on this planet that I would ever let hurt her. My selfish cunt brother undid all the good I intended when I left her alone. He brought her into this life and what happened to Prez’s wife a few days ago was not just a solution to my problem, it was supposed to be a damn wake-up call for Skid too.*

*Anyone who says a man will get his dick wet anywhere had clearly never met Mary-Ann Carson. The bitch was intolerable, always talkin’ about herself, bleedin’ the fuckin’ life outta Prez just because he knocked her up sixteen years ago.*

*I had no idea when the Bastards sent me here to get information that I was part of a long-time fuckin' plan. Screwing Mary-Ann was part of my strategy, I learned real quick that she knew nothing. She kept herself, and that kid of hers, away from club life because she thought she was better than it. But once I'd dipped, I got myself stuck in the fuckin' honey.*

*I tried to pull away, but she threatened to tell Prez. I couldn't let that happen, not after the time and effort I'd already built to make good with the Bastards. So, I used that skill of mine that's always got me through... manipulation. I reported back to the Bastards that Jimmer Carson was planning on taking down their club's biggest earner.*

*The Bastards have three whore houses in Fountain, and I made up a detailed plot that went against The Souls 'no women, no children' moral. It pissed Clunk off enough to take some serious action. The intent was to kill Hayley too that night, but the prospect who can do no fuckin' wrong in Prez's eyes came through and saved her.*

*"Did you even hear me?" Carly giggles as she takes a seat back beside me. I always get lost in thought when I'm around her, wondering how things might have been different if I had told her how I felt.*

*"No, I was just thinkin' bout Mary-Ann." I lower my head like I got a fuckin' prayer for the bitch.*

*"I know the whole club is shaken. Some are talkin' about movin' Charters."*

*"And you?" I look at her with a frown.*

*"This is Skid's home, he loves everyone here. My family is close. I feel safe here, I know Skid would never let anything happen to me." Her words inject venom into my already-polluted bloodstream. How can she think that when he was the one who brought her here?*

*"How many died today?" she asks, referring to the Bastards whose compound we stormed in retaliation for what they did to Mary-Ann. Another smart move by me. I knew*

*exactly how the Souls would react to the death of their leader's wife. I gave Clunk the tip-off about it just a little too late, fully aware that he was safe and over a hundred miles away fixing a deal. The Bastards got raided, their numbers lessened, and I figure that now I will finally become needed by the club where I belong. I like to think I can make most things work to my advantage. Something had to be done about the Mary-Ann holding my dick in a vice situation.*

*"I know Skid won't tell me." Carly brings me back to the conversation we're having. "He still tries to shelter me from the things that he does." She sounds a little hurt. Poor little Carly whose bad-ass boyfriend don't wanna tell her 'bout the shit he does.*

*"Eight," I tell her honestly. "Skid killed three of 'em." That part's a lie. Skid only killed one. But it gives me satisfaction as I watch the look of disappointment shadow her face. Guess she'll be clutching that cross she wears round her dainty neck and saying an extra prayer for her husband's forgiveness when she gets on her knees tonight.*

*"It's hard to imagine him like that. He's always so gentle and kind." She puts on a brave smile, but the tears that threaten her eyes are real. I like that I caused them, they look pretty on her.*

*There's a moment that passes between us, one where I wonder if she can see through my eyes and read the fucked-up thoughts in my head. Like how my cock would feel buried in her sweet little cunt. There would be nothing kind and gentle about the way I took her, not after Skid's tainted her. I bet she'd like it too.*

*The door flies open and Carly seems relieved at the disruption, her hands are shaking like I've unnerved her as she smiles at her husband.*

*"Skid." She sounds relieved as she rushes toward him, and he lays his claim on her by lifting her up in his arms, kissing her like a soldier who just came home from the fuckin' battlefield.*

*“Did everything work out?” she asks, the joy in her eyes all for him as he places her back on her feet.*

*“Yeah, we met up with the Utah boys, they can take care of it for now.” He doesn’t give too much away to her. ‘Course, the Souls weren’t gonna just leave the Bastards compound with the lives they took. They raided their supplies as well, and the fact I managed to tip Clunk off about the fact we were coming gave him enough time for them to shift some of what they had. If he had put as much effort into preparing his men for the fight that was coming, maybe they wouldn’t have lost so many. Still, the more that fall, the more I’ll be needed and I can get away from this shit hole.*

*“How’s your arm? I can’t believe that new kid caught ya. Someone’s gonna have to teach him how to use a fuckin’ gun.” Skid chuckles.*

*“Leave him alone, it was a rookie mistake. He’ll learn from it.” Carly throws some optimism at the situation, though I see nothing endearing about getting fuckin’ shot at.*

*“Yeah, well if that rookie mistake had been a few feet higher he’d have given Chop his very own blowhole. Kid needs to start focusin’ on what’s important around here, instead of pussy chasin’.” Skid grabs three beers from the refrigerator. “You know what they’re callin’ him down at Sluts Sanctuary?” He chuckles, popping the top of the one he hands to his wife, then handing another to me.*

*“Squealer,” Carly answers with a slight flush on her cheeks.*

*I don’t know why she wastes her efforts talkin’ to those sluts, none of the other old ladies do. But then, being mean isn’t in Carly’s nature. “Haven tells me it’s because he’s guaranteed to get you squealing.” She chews on her lip innocently, but the glance she exchanges with my brother tells me something different. Carly knows how to be a slut, a good, little fuckin’ slut that keeps that side of herself reserved just for him.*

*“Yeah, well, you keep that clumsy cunt-greaser away from me, or I’ll give a whole new meanin’ to his little pet name,” I*

*warn, getting the fuck outta there and takin' my beer with me.*

“Michael,” Jenna’s voice sounds as concerned as it is confused as she snaps me back to the here and now.

“I asked who are you, Michael Fender,?”

*I’m a monster.* The voice in my head answers her question, yet I remain silent.

“You must remember something from before this?” She takes my hand in hers like she’s begging me for answers, answers that I couldn’t give her even if I wanted to.

Truth is, I’ve never really known who I am. I’m a man capable of the most horrific things, a man who can cut his emotions, who can betray those closest to him and still face himself in the mirror. I’m a destroyer, and yet I am capable of love. I loved my brother, and in a strange way I still kinda do. I love my son, even if he is pussy shit. But out of everyone, I loved Carly the most... and that was what killed her.



So, what we blowing?” Tripp slouches back in the chair he’s in and lights the spliff Hayden passes him.

“Nothin’. In fact, we called you here to do the opposite,” Prez informs him with a slight chuckle.

I left Addison in my bed to come down to the members-only when Jessie messaged to tell me Tripp had arrived. I’m pleased he’s here, now we can get things in motion, but despite my relief, I’m finding it hella hard to concentrate after what went down this morning. My whole life seems to have taken a turn in the space of a few hours, and I’m waiting for the high I’m riding on to suddenly crash.

Tripp stares back at Prez in confusion.

“There’s a village that’s a four-hour drive from here. A special kinda village.”

“Okaaay.” Tripp shuffles in his seat, confusion turning to curiosity.

“Far as we know, the men who run that village have the entire perimeter rigged with C4.”

“And I’m guessing you need to get in.” Tripp catches on.

“Yeah, we need in, but it ain’t that simple. The place is swarmin’ with women and kids, all of whom, we’re pretty sure, have no idea that they’re rigged inside a death trap. Last thing we wanna do is cause panic and have one of their deaths on our conscience.”

“I hear ya.” He nods his head while he thinks. “It’s gonna take some preparation, I’m gonna need to see what I’m

working with beforehand. It could take weeks. If there are innocents, we can't take any risks."

"I'll take ya there myself," I speak up, thinking about that sick, old fucker letting himself into Addison's home and jerking himself off all over her underwear. He wanted to scare her, make her feel violated, and for that I will do whatever I can to make sure he suffers.

"You really think that's a good idea?" Jess looks across at me from where he's propped against the bar. He saw how angry it made me, he knows I'm one step away from losing my shit. "This is just an intel job, Skid, there ain't gonna be any action. Addison's not feelin' safe. We're all still strangers to her and that boy of hers. I'm sure she'd prefer to have ya close," he points out.

Jessie has a real smart way of getting people to do what he wants 'em to, and I hate that he's right. Me being anywhere near those cult leaders right now is only gonna end one way; with violence and terror.

"How ya plannin' on casing the joint? Those paranoid fuckers will be on to you the second you get near the perimeter," Storm asks.

"That's what I'm trained for. It's also why I need time. I gotta learn their patterns and once I do, I can figure out a way in."

"There's an exit, one that Addy escaped through. It can't have been rigged. Of course, there's every chance that it's been patched up by now, but it's worth a shot." I point to the cross on the map Addison drew for Grace that's on the table between us.

"I'll check it out, and I *will* get you in. Just give me some time."

"I got no doubt." Prez slaps his back before he stands up.

"Come on, let's get ya a drink. You've had a long journey. You can leave tomorrow mornin'. The whores are rabid around here, I can guarantee you leavin' for your mission with

an empty sack.” Prez starts leading Tripp toward the door into the foyer.

“I get to kill him,” I call out before they can leave.

“That goes without sayin’” Prez slowly turns back around and slightly tilts his head at me.

“I want ‘em all. Anyone that might come for her. Those Elders or whatever they call themselves. All those sick fucks need to be dead.”

“We can’t go in there and cause a massacre, not with all those women and kids.” Jessie stubs out his smoke and turns his head to blow the last of it from his mouth.

“Addison’s sister is still there, she’s gonna want us to get her out too.” I point out, wondering how the hell we’re gonna pull this off without causing panic.

“We’ll do what we can, but you gotta remember, these people, they have their own minds. Some of them will have lived under the cult’s guidance for their whole lives. We can’t save people who don’t want savin’, Skid.” Prez smiles at me sadly.

“He’s right.” Jess shakes his head. “We’re gonna storm into that place and become exactly who these Elders have warned everyone about. It’s only gonna play into their hysteria.”

“Then we find another way. We take all the Elders’ power by provin’ to those people that they are wrong,” I explain.

“And how d’ya suppose we do that?” Hayden laughs.

“I don’t know yet.” I glare at him with a real serious look on my face. “But I’ll figure it out. You just find a way to get us in.” I look at Tripp before I get up from my chair and march out the door.

I bump into Ella on my way out the clubhouse, she’s loading Dylan and Sophia into the car. No doubt they’ve just stuffed their little faces full of Marilyn’s pancakes before they get dropped off with Jasmine so Ella can get to college.

“Ella, you got plans tonight?” An idea comes to mind.

“What do you think?” She raises her eyebrows and smiles at me.

“I was just wonderin’ if maybe Charlie could come over to yours for a few hours. He likes Dyl, and well... I was thinkin’ about maybe taking Addison out for a drink.” I slide my hands in my pockets, feeling a little awkward, especially when I see a tiny smile twitch on her lips.

“Of course, Dylan will love that.” Ella tries to contain her excitement with an eager nod.

“Cool, we’ll drop him to yours at about six.”

“Will you be taking the bike?” she asks in a voice that’s practically bursting with enthusiasm.

“Yeah. I’ll be takin’ the bike.” I own my shit with a smile, ain’t nothing wrong with a man admitting he got some feelings.

I made myself a promise this morning, and if I’m gonna stick with it, this club is gonna have to get used to the changes I intend to make.

“See ya round six.” She gets behind the wheel with a satisfied smile on her face as she starts the engine

I’m smirking to myself as I head over to the garage ready to start work.

The sight of Rogue, ass up on the workbench, with Grimm standing between her legs, eating her face, is what I’m greeted with.

“Do you guys ever let up?” I shake my head and laugh as I pass them to hang up my cut and step into my overalls.

“Never.” Rogue smiles at me unapologetically while Grimm just stares at her in that freaky tranced state she puts him into.

“Ain’t you got a body to bury or some shit?” I ask him, waving my hand in front of his face. He shakes his head, still captivated by Rogue.

“No bodies today,” he tells me in a flat tone.

“But it’s still early.” Rogue wiggles her eyebrows at him before grabbing him by the lapels of his cut and dragging his lips back onto hers. His hand clasps under her jaw as he attacks her with his tongue and I leave ‘em to it, getting on with the gearbox change I’ve been putting off.

Once Grimm has torn himself away, Rogue cranks up the radio, singing at the top of her lungs like a cat that’s being strangled, while she gives Brax’s truck a full service. It dawns on me among the chaos that today feels different to yesterday and the day before that. I’ve got a sense of hope that I haven’t had in a real long time, and with the comfort of that settled deep in my chest, I smile and get back to work.

“You want me to head over to the clubhouse and see what Marilyn’s puttin’ out for lunch?” Rogue asks a few hours later. She’s got a huge grease mark on her cheek, and filthy hands which she’s attempting to clean with an equally filthy rag.

“Sounds good.” I nod back at her, heaving myself up onto the worktop and lighting myself a smoke while she studies me.

“You had sex, didn’t you?” her eyes narrow and dare me to lie.

“That is none of your business.” I feel the smirk pull at my lips.

“Oh, come on, I share all my sexcapades with you.” She frowns at me like I’ve disappointed her.

“Firstly, that ain’t my choice, and secondly, you should be aware that you’re becomin’ more and more like those old ladies you moan about by the day.”

Rogue gasps loudly, her eyes boring into me like red-hot flames.

“I am not. *Please* forgive me for caring about my *dear* friend and wanting to know if he got his dick wet last night.” She rolls her eyes, pretending to be pissed with me as she picks up her phone from beside me to check it. Something must have piqued her interest, I can tell by the way she focuses a little more intently on the screen and when her eyes lift up at me, I know immediately that whatever it is must concern me.

“A date, huh? On the bike.” Her head tilts while she waits for my confirmation.

“How did ya... what the hell?”

“Group chat. I’m a lurker,” she tries to defend herself before slipping the phone into her pocket and folding her arms.

“What? I thought it would be nice to take Addison out for a drink. She’s got a lot on her mind and bein’ stuck here ain’t good for her.”

I wait for Rogue to say something clever, or at least get defensive, but she doesn’t. Instead, she comes closer and places a kiss on my beard.

“It’s about time.” She smiles before heading out across the yard to get us some lunch.

It’s early afternoon when I finish up my job and Rogue insists I knock off. Since she makes it very clear I ain’t to argue with her, I do as I’m told and head back to my cabin.

I can’t help smiling to myself when I walk in on Charlie and Addison making cookies in the kitchen. The place smells and feels like a home for the first time in years, and instead of feeling guilt, I get a sense that it’s exactly what Carly would want.

“Shaniya popped over with some ingredients, she thought it might keep us busy this afternoon,” Addison explains, wiping the back of her hand over her brow and trying not to get flour in her hair. “We went a little overboard.” She looks down at the dozens of already baked cookies and the huge ball of dough that Charlie is focusing hard on rolling out.

“Looks like you’re havin’ fun.” I head on over and take one from the plate. “You got enough here to feed the whole club.” I shake Charlie’s floppy blonde hair, and he takes his eyes off his task to look up to me and smile. “How about you take some over to Dylan’s? I thought you might like to hang out with him for a few hours?” I put the idea to him.

“Really?” His little face lights up.

“If it’s okay with your mom.” I watch him look up at his mom desperately, then celebrate when she nods by fist-pumping me.

“I’m gonna go pack up some toys. I wanna show him my crane.” Charlie rushes off to his room and the way Addison looks at me makes me panic that I’ve done something wrong.

“Sorry, was I not supposed to do that? I should’ve asked you first, right?”

“It’s fine, honestly. I just feel bad putting on all your friends like this. I’m not used to it. I mean I get help from Nora but...”

“Get used to it. It’s how it works around here.” I take the opportunity of us being alone to take her in my arms, realizing how much I’ve missed being away from her. “I was kinda hopin’ that me and you could go out for a drink together or somethin’.” Why am I suddenly feeling nervous?

“I’d really like that.” She bites her bottom lip to try and tamp down the huge smile her lips want to make, and it’s so fuckin’ cute I can’t help kissing them.

She tastes of cookie dough, and when her arms wrap around my neck, keeping her hands stretched out to try and avoid getting the flour from them in my hair, I know the choice I made this morning was the right one.

“You sure it will be safe if Abraham is still—” I silence her by placing my finger over her lips.

“You’re safe with me. Charlie is safe at Nyx and Ella’s place. We’re gonna go out and we’re gonna have a good time.”

“Then I better try and make myself a little more presentable.” She looks down at her shirt that’s covered in flour and when she goes to walk away, I pull her back and lift her onto the kitchen counter.

“I could get used to havin’ you in my kitchen like this,” I confess, sliding my hand behind her ear and brushing the flour from her cheek away with my thumb.

“I could get used to being in this kitchen like this.” She smiles back at me like she’s happy, and knowing I’m part of the cause of it makes me feel real fuckin’ good inside.

“Ready!” Both our heads turn when we hear the little voice come from behind me and I quickly pull away while Addison slides herself off the counter.

“Me and Skid were just...” She blushes as she dusts off her shirt, and Charlie shakes his head and laughs at her as he drags his backpack over to the table.

“You got something to put these cookies in?” he asks her, seeming completely unfazed.

“I’m gonna grab a shower.” I laugh as I pass him and shake up his hair in my hand again.

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“You okay with me walkin’ you up to Dylan’s place while your mom gets ready?” I ask Charlie. I want him to feel comfortable around me, and since I don’t know much about kids, I figure this is a good time to start.

“Yeah.” He nods enthusiastically, pulling his rucksack off the table and fixing it on his shoulders.

“Skid’s gonna walk me up to Dylan’s,” he calls through to the bedroom where Addison’s blow drying her hair.

“Come give me a kiss,” she calls back, and after rolling his eyes at me he rushes off to say goodbye to his mom properly.

When he comes out, I open the door and lead the way up to Nyx’s place at a much slower pace than usual so he can keep up with me.

“You really like my mom, don’t you?” he asks when we get out of the yard and start making our way up the track toward the lodges.

“I like your mom,” I confirm.

“She likes you. I can tell from the way you make her smile,” he tells me, letting his fingers brush through the overgrown grass that lines the track. “Mom doesn’t have many friends, ‘cept for Mrs. Taylor next door. She comes to tea on a Tuesday.”

“You got many friends, kid?” I ask, curious to what kinda life this little boy has, and what he thinks about all of this.

“Not really. Mom says I shouldn’t let people know our business.”

“You can make friends without people knowin’ your business.” I chuckle back at him.

“It’s not just that, I know Mom gets scared. She keeps a suitcase under her bed in case we have to run from the bad man. No point me making friends if we’re gonna run.” He shrugs.

“And what do you know about the bad man?” I stop walking and crouch down to his level.

“I know he makes Mom cry in her sleep. I know she’s scared of him. And that’s why I can’t be,” he tells me, his eyes focusing on his hands as they fiddle with the strap of his backpack.

“You listen to me.” I lift his chin with the crook of my finger.

“I’m gonna tell you this, man to man.” Charlie focuses his eyes on me curiously.

“Everyone is allowed to be afraid. It’s what makes us human. But you’re here now, and I’m your friend. Around here, friends take real good care of each other and I would never let anyone hurt you or your mom, not ever. D’ya hear me?”

“I hear ya.” He smiles at me proudly before I straighten myself up and continue our journey.

“What are you afraid of?” He looks up at me thoughtfully.

“Not learnin’ from my mistakes,” I answer honestly as I take his little hand in mine and guide him up the hill.



“You look incredible.” Skid has his shoulder propped against the bedroom door when I look in the reflection of the mirror. He pushes himself off the frame and comes at me when I turn around. Kissing me as if this has become our normal.

“How about we skip drinks and take advantage of an empty house?” I suggest when the little tingle his lip causes turns into a needy throb.

“Not a chance. I wanna get ya outta here. I want you to drink some wine and laugh like you ain’t got a care in the world,” he tells me in between kisses.

“And then?” I pull back and look at him expectantly.

“And then I’m gonna bring you home and let you scream as loud as you want to.” He kisses me one more time, before grabbing my jacket off the bed and taking my hand so he can drag me through the living room and out the door.

“We’re taking the bike?” I halt completely when I see him heading right for it.

“Yeah, darlin’.” He laughs at me.

“I don’t know, it seems kinda dangerous, and I—”

“It ain’t dangerous the way I ride,” I cut her off, pulling her close to me and soothing her cheek. “You can’t be an old lady and not ride the saddle.”

“So, that’s what I am now?” I check, wondering what has happened to change him so suddenly. He’s gone from pushing me away to giving me everything and I’m scared realization is

gonna hit real soon like it did before. I can't be a replacement for the wife he lost.

"I want ya to be," he tells me, his tone turning softer and his expression suddenly serious.

"And you don't think all this is a bit fast?" I bite my lip, hoping that testing the waters isn't gonna break him.

"Maybe, but it feels right, don't it?" The way he searches my face for an answer seems almost vulnerable.

"Yeah, it feels right." I nod. Things always feel right when I'm with him.

"I'm trusting my instinct here, Ads, and it's screamin' at me to let you in and allow myself to be happy. Do you trust me?"

Skid smiles when I nod my head at him, then kissing my forehead he straddles his bike.

I've never ridden a bike before and the ride we take into town is far too exhilarating for me to be nervous. Skid pulls to a stop outside a bar and offers his hand to help me off the back once he's kicked down his stand. The place is busy, with a fun atmosphere that hits the second we walk through the door. It reminds me a little of the bar I worked at when I first arrived in Fountain. As Skid leads me across the floor toward an empty table I feel the eyes of everyone in the place following us. Most of the men in here seem to lower their heads respectfully at him and I'm assuming it's because he's still wearing his cut.

"Is everyone in town afraid of the club?" I ask under my breath as he pulls out a chair for me to sit on.

"Only the ones who got shit to fear," he points out as he takes the seat opposite. "Most people appreciate what we do," he explains.

"And what exactly is it that you do?" I ask, wondering how a group of men who are so feared can be so thoughtful and kind.

“We keep the town safe, we like to protect the place where we live. ‘Specially now the brothers have started makin’ families.”

“So, you’re the good guys?” I check, watching the way Skid’s eyes flit around the room like he’s checking for something.

“I wouldn’t say that. We’ve all done some pretty fucked-up things. The shit we do ain’t legal, but we do it with integrity.”

“I believe you.” I nod my head before a waitress interrupts us to take our order.

“I’ll take a water and...” Skid looks at me for a response.

“I’ll have one of those too.” I smile at the waitress.

“Nah, tonight you’re cuttin’ loose. I’m only drinkin’ water because I’ve gotta ride you back.”

“Skid, I don’t really drink. I don’t know what to order,” I whisper under my breath, blushing at the very patient waitress.

“She’ll take a white wine and soda,” he orders for me, sending the waitress on her way with a nod of his head.

“Well, that was embarrassing.” I hide my face in my hands and Skid instantly forces them back down.

“Ain’t nothin’ to be ashamed of in that. I like it.”

“You like that I’m a complete novice when it comes to having any form of fun?” I question him with a raised eyebrow.

“I like that I get to be the one who’ll teach ya stuff, and I really like that I’m gonna get a whole lotta your firsts.” He wets his lips as he talks to me, making me crave his mouth on mine again. “I also like the way you blush when you get embarrassed,” he continues, then reaching around the table he takes hold of the chair I’m sitting on and uses it to drag me closer to him. His nose slides over my cheek as his hand travels up my thigh and under the skirt I’m wearing.

“You ever got off in a bar full of people before?” he whispers into my ear, his deep voice speaking right to my core

as his fingertips brush over the cotton panties I'm wearing.

"You can't be serious." I turn my head and swallow thickly.

"Do I look like I'm kiddin'?" He has a real serious look on his face, one that assures me he's not.

"You... we *can't*." I feel my cheeks getting hotter and my panties getting wetter as the pressure of his fingers becomes a little heavier.

"You just tell me when to stop." He looks at me with a cocky smirk on his face, distracting me from the fact that the waitress is at the table carefully lifting our drinks from her tray and placing them in front of us.

Skid doesn't take his eyes off mine, and I do my best not to give away what's happening under the table when I smile at her politely.

"You look beautiful," Skid whispers as his finger slips inside the cotton and makes flesh-to-flesh contact with my clit.

"Oh my god." My toes curl inside my boots, and my heart beats a little faster.

"Want me to stop?" His voice remains mellow, and I close my eyes and grip my hands on the table while I shake my head. This is pure insanity, but being with Skid makes me feel empowered enough to let him continue.

"You're soakin' fuckin' wet." His breath touches my cheek as his hand continues to work between my legs.

"I...I..." I don't know what I want to say. I just know that I don't want him to stop, and when I feel the tip of his finger slip inside me, I let out a moan that, thankfully, is drowned out by the loud music that's playing.

"Take a sip, tell me if you like it," Skid whispers against my throat as he kisses it, and I do as he says, picking up the glass and bringing it to my lips. My mouth is so dry that the crisp, fruity taste is exactly what I need.

"How is it?" Skid asks, stirring his finger inside me and teasing my clit with his thumb.

“It’s good.” I manage, my hand shaking as I place the glass back down on the table before I spill it.

“You’re close, I can feel it. Don’t hold back. Don’t worry about them. They don’t matter,” he tells me under his breath, using his free hand to grab my thigh and spread my legs open a little wider.

“Come all over my fingers, Addison,” he orders, picking up his pace and making it impossible for me to hold off.

My skin shivers as pleasure overcomes all my inhibitions and I do as he asks. My pussy squeezes his fingers and I grip hold of his thighs through his jeans as my entire body tenses. I feel like I’m floating out of my body, the music now distant, and the fact we’re in a crowded bar irrelevant.

I turn my head and kiss Skid’s lips, sliding my hand through his beard as I muffle my pleasure into his mouth to stop myself from screaming. His breaths are heavy as he holds his fingers still inside me, letting me discreetly ride out the last of my orgasm onto them. My body eventually relaxes, and when I open my eyes he’s staring back at me, almost seeming as shocked as I am.

My chest is rising and falling rapidly as I glance around us to check if anyone’s noticed the mind-shattering orgasm he’s just given me, but no one seems aware. I don’t think anyone would dare to say anything even if they did.

Skid drops his head and laughs, and I throw my face into my hands again, laughing too.

There’s nothing like coming in a room full of people and a few drinks to loosen you up. After two more white wine and sodas I really start to forget all my troubles. Skid seems to be having a good time too; we laugh at a couple who are too drunk to even stand while they attempt to dance, and we kiss whenever we like, which seems to be a lot.

“I need the bathroom.” I stand up from the table, feeling a little giddy myself as I find my feet.

“Just over there.” Skid points to the back of the room and I salute him before I head toward the big, pink neon light that

says *Ladies*.

The music thuds through the walls as I relieve myself, and I can't help feeling the buzz of excitement that white wine and soda mixed with Skid's company brings. I pull up my panties and straighten myself out before I flush and when I wash my hands, I smile at my reflection.

I've been right to question Skid's change of heart, I vowed after he left us that I'd never let myself get hurt again. But his reasons are understandable, the man has suffered greatly. If Skid is gonna trust his instincts, I have to trust mine too. We could be really happy.

I dry off my hands and head back out to join him, hoping he's up for getting out of here and going back to his cabin for some alone time before we pick up Charlie. I'm crossing the bar room floor toward where he's sitting when something outside of the window catches my eye. Something that has my feet stopping and my heart thumping.

A chill drips into my stomach when I see Abraham standing under the street light across the road. He's staring right at me, his pointy features sharper and more haunting than ever as his lips raise into a wicked smile.

I'm frozen to the spot, and when I feel my legs start to give in and the room around me begins to spin, thankfully, the weight of my body gets caught. Skid's strong arms hold me, his scent surrounds me, and I cling to him while I tremble.

"Addy... what is it?" He searches my face, looking worried.

"Abraham." I force his name past my lips and look back outside, there's no sign of him there now. He's vanished.

Skid holds me tight to him as he follows my eyes and looks outside.

"Ads, there's no one there," he tells me, but I know what I saw. I shake my head and stare out at the empty space where he was standing.

"Ads, listen to me." Skid grabs my face and forces me to look at him.

“I got you. He can’t hurt you.” I nod my head back, feeling numb inside.

The thumping in my head has drowned the upbeat music out now. I sure as hell don’t feel that carefree hum through my body the way I did a few seconds ago.

“He was right there,” I whisper, still staring at the beam coming from the street light.

“Come on, let’s get ya home.” Skid takes me under his arm, holding his hand up to the barkeeper before he guides me out the door toward his bike.

The chill in the air feels much nippier knowing that Abraham is somewhere out here, and I cling to Skid’s waist and rest my cheek on his back as he rides us back toward the compound. My tears drip onto his leather cut when the reality that I’ll never be free of Abraham settles.



The rage inside me feels ready to unleash as I pour Addison and myself something strong. I take both glasses over to the couch so I can join her, and she looks so different to how she did when we left here earlier. She's not smiling, there's mascara streaked under her eyes from where she's been crying, and as I pass her the glass, her hand trembles as she takes it.

"I texted Nyx, Charlie's fine. He's asleep in Dylan's room. Nyx says he can stay there if you're happy about that."

"I want him here with me." She looks up at me with scared, skittish eyes that makes me want to find the man who did this and tear his guts through his asshole.

"Whatever you want." I sit down beside her and take her hand to stop it from shaking.

"He's always gonna be there, isn't he? Lurking around every corner waiting for his moment to strike."

"He won't ever get the chance," I promise her, but she doesn't seem to take in what I'm saying. She's too distracted by her fear and has cut off from me now. I fuckin' hate it.

"You can't let him get in your head, Addy. Tripp leaves tomorrow morning, he's gonna find us a way into that village. Storm and Hayden are out doing a sweep of the streets and checking out some of the local hotels. If he's still around, we'll find him."

"White wine and soda, was that what Carly used to drink?" Addison's eyes are dead when she raises them up to me.

“What?” I stare back at her, confused.

“Your wife, was that her drink?” she repeats.

“What? No. Addison, what are you talkin’ about?”

“I’m talking about this... what we’re trying to do here.” She looks at the space around us.

“We have way too much in our past for this to work. I’m never gonna be her.”

“I don’t want you to be her, where the hell is all this comin’ from?” I try to tamp down my frustration. Now ain’t the time for me to be mad at her, despite that what she’s sayin’ is hurting.

“But you did when we first met. You wanted me to be her then, you put me in the house that was supposed to be hers, you treated me the way you would have treated her while she was pregnant. And then when you realized I wasn’t her, you left us.” Her words cut like a knife, a blunt rusty one that drags through my flesh.

“I don’t know where all this is comin’ from, but—”

“But what, Skid? Tell me I’m wrong. I’ll never be her, and as much as I want to believe that you can protect me from them, we both have to be realistic.” Addison stands up and starts making her way to the bedroom, but I ain’t done. I grab her waist and spin her back around, forcing her up against the wall between our bedroom door.

“I don’t want you to be her. Because I’m in love with *you*.”

She looks just as shocked by my words as I am.

“You don’t mean that.” She shakes her head like she’s in some kind of denial.

“Yes, I do.” I grab her face when she tries to look away from me.

“I love you. I loved you back then but I was too afraid and I felt guilty for it. But I’m not scared anymore, and you can’t be either. Don’t push me away, don’t let that sick fuck back inside your head.” I feel the tension in my fingers as I grip her

cheeks. “Don’t be afraid of this.” I hear the desperation in my voice, *feel* it in my chest, scraping me fuckin’ hollow.

“I am afraid. I’m so *fucking* afraid, Skid.”

Fresh tears spill from her eyes and fall through my fingers and when I have no idea how to make them stop, I slam my mouth over hers and kiss her instead. Her arms wrap around my neck and make it a little easier for me to breathe. I kiss her deeper, dropping my hands from her face and using them to force her skirt up over her hips.

Pushing down my jeans, I lift Addison off her feet and hook her legs around my waist. My hand reaches under her skirt and I hook her panties to one side so I can line myself up with her entrance. Then bracing my hand against the wall behind her, I enter her in one long thrust that makes us both sigh in relief.

I love how her nails scratch into my neck as I give her every fuckin’ piece of me. We can’t let our pasts ruin what we could have, I won’t let it. I made a decision and now I’m all in. There’s no going back now. I will prove to this woman that she ain’t no replacement. She’s my hope for the future, she’s the end of my suffering, and I will protect her at every cost.

“Say it again,” she whispers against my ear as her pussy tightens around my cock.

“I love you,” I growl, thrusting harder and faster inside her.

“I love you too.” This time, it’s her who grabs *my* face, making sure I see the vulnerability in her eyes as she stares right into my broken soul.

“You have the ability to destroy me,” she tells me, her bottom lip trembling.

“I won’t hurt you, Ads. This is for keeps,” I assure her, dragging us away from the wall and carefully carrying her over to the couch with my jeans still gathered around my ankles.

I sit back and keep her straddled on my lap, watching as she rests her palms on my chest to support herself while she rides my cock. I guide her hips with my hands, digging my

fingertips into her skin and savoring every second of how good it feels to be inside her.

Her body turns a little rigid and her head falls back when she comes for the second time tonight. Reaching up my hand, I rest it around her pretty, little neck as she falls apart. I squeeze her as I come myself, maybe a little tighter than I should, but she doesn't seem to mind. In fact, the way she moans suggests that she likes it. When we're both finished, her body flops on top of mine and I wrap my arms around her so tight I feel her heartbeat thump against my chest.

“You ain't ever gonna live in anyone's shadow. Every day I'm with you, you guide me a little more outta the dark.” I scrunch her hair in my hands as I kiss the top of her head that's buried into my neck, and the contented little sigh she makes lets me know she believes that everything's gonna be okay.

Now all I gotta do is make sure that it is.



Escaping the hospital wasn't hard, not many of the care providers who work there are as tentative as Jenna. Getting out of there without being noticed was far too easy. Getting here to 23 Blossom Avenue was *not*.

I didn't anticipate Jenna's house being so far away from the hospital, and traveling here on foot was a tough reminder of how weak I still am. The sweat is pouring outta me, soaking through the blood-stained tee that I found in the plastic bag of my personal belongings they had stored in the cabinet beside my bed. I can feel the wound on my side weeping and when I press my hand over it, I see that the blood has soaked through the fabric.

Each step I take makes me a little more breathless. It's a good thing determination has always been my strong point. I manage to make it to Nurse Jenna's address a little before sunrise. Now, all I have to do is make sure she takes pity on me.

I hobble up to her front door, leaning on its frame when I start to feel dizzy. My finger leaves a bloody print on the doorbell when I press it, and the hard thump I make against the door with my fist makes my head pound even more. Jenna doesn't answer straight away. Why would she? It's the ass-crack of fuckin' dawn. But for each second she keeps me waiting, I feel the strength drain outta me a little more.

Jenna is still wiping the sleep from her eyes when she answers the door. I'm not in too much pain to appreciate how hot she looks in just a vest and a pair of shorts that ride real high up her thighs. When her senses finally come to her and

she realizes that I'm here, standing on her fuckin' doorstep, she suddenly looks unnerved.

"Michael?" She shakes her head in confusion and I quickly slam my sticky, blood-stained hand over her mouth, forcing her back inside before she can cause a scene. It may be early, but this is still a busy neighborhood and I've exposed myself enough already.

"Michael," she muffles the fake name I gave her against my palm as I kick the door shut behind me and force her up against her pristine white walls.

The place is much bigger than I expected, the hall is huge, and Jenna clearly has expensive taste.

"I'm not gonna hurt ya. Please don't think I would." I find acting so much easier when I'm desperate. "I'm here because I need your help," I plead. "I'll let you go, just promise me you won't scream."

I wait for her to nod her head at me before I slide my hand away from her mouth and take a step back. My bloody fingerstains look good on her skin. It makes her look tainted and dirty standing against those pristine walls.

"Michael, what happened? Why aren't you at the hospital? How did you even know where to find me?"

"I'll explain all that. I promise. I just need to know that I can trust you. I'm not safe at the hospital. I can't let the police find me."

Now Jenna *really* looks worried, and terror looks so pretty in her eyes that it distracts me from the pain I'm in.

"Why?" Her voice quivers.

"Because there are some people who are tryin' to kill me. People who have connections *everywhere*."

"Why me? Why are you here?" She looks up at me and I can already see her fear transforming into sympathy, maybe even a little desire.

"Do you not feel it, Jenna?" I take her hand in mine and hold it tight. "We have a connection." She takes her time

responding but when she nods her head at me and smiles, I know that not only have I got her, but I've got a real nice place to lay low while I heal.



Four Weeks Later

“Hey, Mom.” I leave Rogue in the workshop and head into the office so I can speak to her without Rogue judging me.

“How are you?” she asks cheerily.

“I’m good, real good in fact,” I answer honestly, thinking about how amazing the past few weeks have been. I’ve gotten used to having Addison and Charlie around. I like sharing my cabin with them, and although Tripp is taking his time in getting close enough to the village to come up with a plan of action, having them here and keeping them safe has become a comfort to me in itself.

“And how’s Carly?” Mom douses all my enthusiasm with just one sentence. I close my eyes and take a deep breath.

“She’s great. Did ya get the letter she sent you a few months ago?” I look at Rogue through the glass window. She’s shaking her head at me because she knows what I’ll be saying, and all I can do is shrug my shoulders helplessly. Rogue’s the only person that knows I haven’t told my mom what happened. She’s the only person that needs to. It’s her who helps me keep up the facade by writing the letters and speaking down the phone when I need her to. She hates having to do it, but she loves me, which is why she never says no.

“I did, it was lovely. And how about your brother, have you heard from him?”

“Tobias is good. He’s got a fishin’ job in Alaska. I’m sure he’ll be in touch soon.” I think about the fucker and the fact he could only be a few hours away. Mads found out there was a John Doe that discharged himself from St Michael’s Hospital who matched his description last month and ever since I’ve had the urge to jump on my bike and go looking for him there myself. But I can’t leave Addison right now, she’s too vulnerable, and she needs me here.

“This is your brother, I doubt it. I haven’t heard from him in years. I don’t think he even knows how to get hold of me.” Mom laughs, though I can picture the sad smile on her face.

When me and Chop joined the club we both decided to keep it a secret. Dad wasn’t a well man and Mom was his carer, the last thing we wanted was for her to be worrying about us too. Dad died two years after we moved out here, and we both encouraged Mom to move to Australia to be closer to her sister when she suggested it.

The whole club got shook up when Mary-Ann died. It made everyone a little more cautious about their families and the backlash being a member of the club could cause. I suggested moving Carly away too, but she wouldn’t hear of it. She was never gonna be driven out of her hometown outta fear.

I sensed even back then that Chop had done unthinkable things before we came here. It broke my heart the thought of Mom being so far away, but it kept her safe and I knew lying to her about who we had become would be so much easier.

I don’t need Rogue to tell me that it ain’t right how I’ve kept what happened to Carly from her too. But I also know that finding out her son is a monster will crush her. After years of taking care of Dad and being selfless, she doesn’t need to be burdened with that.

“You know what he’s like, can’t stay still too long.” I try and sound casual, though it’s hard to do when the words come out through my teeth.

“Did he take Tommy with him?” Mom asks.

“No, Tommy’s still with me. He’s doin’ real good,” I assure her.

“I miss you. You and Carly should visit here sometime. I think she’d really like it.”

“Sounds great, Mom, I’ll talk to her about it.” I feel that sting in my chest when I pass her off with the same old line. Carly would have loved to go to Australia, she only ever met Mom once and that was on our wedding day. Mom spent the

entire day telling her how beautiful she was. It's not fair that Carly will never get to go to Australia.

"Tristan?"

Mom calling me by my real name shakes me out of my thoughts. It seems like so long ago I heard it.

"Yeah?" I scrub my hand over my face and focus back on our conversation,

"Tobias is okay, isn't he? You'd tell me if he was in any kind of trouble."

"He's fine, Mom, you don't have to worry," I lie all over again, reminding myself that my untruths are told out of kindness. "Look, I gotta go, the garage is busy and we're not supposed to take personal calls durin' business hours. I'll speak to ya soon, yeah?"

"Yes, sweetheart, speak soon. I love you."

I picture her kind, warm face.

"I love you too, Mom."

Hanging up the phone, I toss it at the desk and slouch back in my chair, staring at the damn thing while I slide a finger over my lips. Rogue lets herself in, standing in front of me with her arms crossed over her chest like she's got something to get off it.

"Don't look at me like that." I shake my head and reach for my smokes.

"Don't you think it's about time that you told Mama Hellraiser that her son killed your wife?"

"No, Rogue, I don't think there's ever a good fuckin' time to tell someone that. You know why I do this. I'm protectin' her. If she thought her own son was capable of something like that it would destroy her."

"Protecting her or protecting *him*?" Rogue questions, tilting her head.

"What you're suggestin' is pathetic." I swivel round in the chair to avoid eye contact with her, and she steps around the

desk and grabs both its arms, leaning over me so I can't get away from her.

“Almost as pathetic as what *you're* doing.” She makes it real impossible for me to avoid her when she gets nose-to-nose with me.

“Rogue, drop it,” I warn. “We need to get back to work.” I move to stand up, surprised when she actually takes a step back to allow me some room. I make my way back into the workshop and get another shock when Brax rushes in and shoulder barges past me.

“Quick, she's comin'!. Don't just stand there, throw me some fuckin' overalls.” He looks around desperately until Rogue tosses him some spares from the back room.

“What the fuck's goin' on?” I watch him fumbling to get his legs in them before he shoves his hand inside the hood of the Chevrolet I've been working on, getting his hands dirty with grease and then smearing his finger over his face like he's some kinda football player.

“What the...?”

“If Grace asks, I've been here all mornin'.” He points his finger between us both.

“Why?”

“I just needed some time out from all the hormones. Pregnant women are crazy. Overdue pregnant women are another lev... Hey honey, what ya doin' here? You should be restin'.” He fakes a smile as he pushes me out the way and heads to the front of the garage where Grace is now standing with Addison and Charlie.

“I don't want to rest, Brax, I want this baby to come.” Grace looks ready to commit murder, so I hang back.

“We just did a lap of the compound. I heard walkin' helps,” Addison adds enthusiastically, though the smile drops from her face when she looks at me.

“You've got that ball thingy Riley gave you,” Brax reminds her, rubbing the bottom of her back with the hand that

isn't covered in oil.

"I've bounced on that thing for two days straight, nothing's working." Grace is tearful and clearly uncomfortable, and Addison shows she sympathizes with her with a sad smile.

"You're bouncing on the wrong thing if you want to get that baby evicted."

"Jesus Christ," Brax utters under his breath when Rogue steps outta the office to join us.

"What you really need to be doing is bouncing on his di—"

"Okay." I slam my hand over Rogue's mouth at the same time as Addison covers Charlie's ears, and when the feisty little bitch bites me, it fuckin' hurts.

"I'm just tryin' to help a girl out." Rogue looks at me and shrugs.

"Since when did you become a gyno?" Brax shakes his head and laughs at her.

"Everyone knows it's what you do. It's scientifically proven. There's something in the jizz that makes you..." Rogue puts her finger inside her cheek and flicks it to make a popping sound.

"Fuckin' hell, Rogue, do you have an off switch?" Brax scowls at her.

"Come on, Charlie, let's go see what Marilyn's got left over from breakfast." Addison quickly steers Charlie away from the conversation and heads across the yard.

"Actually, we already tried that," Grace confesses, her cheeks turning red.

"Well, clearly you're doing it wrong. Maybe Braxy here needs to be a little more *forceful*." Rogue wiggles her eyebrows at him, making the vein in his neck stick out like a tunnel.

"You know, she may have a point," Grace says thoughtfully, causing Brax's head to slowly turn toward her.

“You’re not seriously considering takin’ advice from Rogue?” He stares at his old lady as if she’s crazy while I try to hide my smirk behind my hand.

“Well, nothing else is working, and you have been very considerate of my condition lately.” Grace clears her throat awkwardly.

Rogue’s lips immediately pull up into a smile when Grace loads her cannon with ammunition.

“Who’d have thought it? Brax Marshall a *gentle* lover,” Rogue rests her hands on his shoulder and whispers in his ear, getting him even more frustrated.

“I am *not* a gentle fuckin’ lover,” he growls through his teeth.

“I think it’s cute.” Rogue squeezes his cheek between her thumb and finger before he shoos her away and grabs Grace’s hand.

“Come on, we’re goin’ home.” He marches his old lady out the garage at a pace that’s far too fast for her to keep up with.

“Don’t forget to jizz, Casanova,” Rogue calls after them, making that popping noise with her finger again before she snorts with laughter.

“You’re somethin’ else, you know that?” I shake my head and laugh too.

“That’s why I’m your best friend.” She tugs at my beard as she passes me and gets back to work.

“I guess it probably is.” I chuckle some more.



“Are we ever goin’ home, Mama?” Charlie asks when I’ve finished reading him his bedtime story.

“I don’t know, hunny.” I kiss the top of his head, wishing I had more answers for him.

“I like it here.” He smiles up at me with such a bright beam on his face that I can’t help smiling a little myself. “I like Skid too,” he adds.

“Skid’s a nice guy.” I nod my head and agree.

During the time we’ve been here, Skid’s been great with Charlie. I’ve let them bond because I trust everything Skid’s told me, but what I heard today when me and Grace walked past the garage window unnerved me. Skid hasn’t even told his mom that Carly’s dead. It’s been five years, I can’t even imagine how he’s kept that pretense going for that long.

“Is Skid gonna be my dad?” Charlie’s question quickly shakes me out of my thoughts.

Charlie’s never asked questions about his father before. I’ve often wondered why since he’s a naturally intuitive kid. I figured maybe he sensed it was bad and didn’t want to hurt my feelings. If I’m honest I’ve always been happy to avoid the conversation, but right now, with his curious little face looking up at me, I can’t avoid it any longer.

“I think he’d be a real cool one,” he points out with a hopeful smile.

“Not all kids need to have a dad, sweetheart.” I feel my eyes start to sting with tears when I think about the monster

who I need to protect him from.

“I guess not.” Charlie looks a little disappointed as he rests his head on the pillow.

“Get some sleep, little man.” I kiss him one more time before I get up off the mattress, flick off the lamp, and turn on his night light, before heading back into the living room where Skid is resting on the couch.

“Green eggs and ham again?” Skid holds out a beer for me.

“You got it.” I manage to forge a smile as I take it and immediately place it back on the coffee table.

“What’s up?” Skid must sense something’s off when I sit down beside him, he frowns as he reaches forward and places his own bottle on the table.

I could lie and say nothing, but there’s so much stuff going on in my head I need to at least let some of it out.

“I think you’re hiding something from me.” I stare back at him. Skid’s a shit liar, his eyes give him away and right now I really need some honesty.

“It’s been a month since Tripp left to scope out the village and no one’s said a damn thing. What happened?” Skid’s avoided this subject every time I’ve tried to bring it up. I won’t let him do that tonight.

He closes his eyes, and the long, heavy sigh he makes confirms that what he’s about to tell me isn’t good.

“Tripp has been checkin’ the place out, he can’t just do his thing whenever we need him to. He can deactivate whatever it is that’s keepin’ us out but he needs to know when the safest time to do it is.”

“But...” That sounds like good news and the look on Skid’s face is far from good.

“*But...*we have no idea where Abraham is. No one knows what he looks like. Maddy can’t find any background on him or any of the names you gave us. The description you gave us ain’t specific enough. We got eyes on the place from a distance

so they don't suspect, but I don't know if he's at the village or if he's..."

"Still here... Waiting." I finish the sentence for him while that sick feeling in my stomach lays heavier. I can picture the man's smile, how his bony fingers clutched at my skin and his breath whispered in my ear.

"I just want things to go back to normal for the two of you. We're doin' everythin' we can, Ads. But right now it just don't feel like it's enough." I can see how frustrated he is. For the first time in weeks, he's letting that mask of confidence he's been wearing slip.

"And what is normal, Skid? What happens when all this is over?" I ask, thinking about what Charlie just asked me.

"What kinda question is that?" Skid shakes his head at me like I've confused him.

"The kind that feels really important right now," I snap back. "Do we stay here? Do we go home? Are we dating? Are we living together now? Charlie just asked me if you're gonna be his fuckin' father for Christ's sake!" I blurt out, and I can see from Skid's face that I've shocked him as I massage my temple and try to relax.

"Whoa, calm down. Where's all this comin' from, Ads?" Skid stares at me, confused.

"Don't you think about this stuff, Skid?" I question him, suddenly feeling like I have the weight of the world on my shoulders.

"Addy, I'll be honest, right now all I'm thinkin' about is keepin' the two of you safe. I know that everythin' else is gonna figure itself out. We're together, that's all that matters," he tells me in that deep, gravelly tone that usually soothes me.

Tonight, it doesn't seem to work.

"Figure itself out?" The laugh I make sounds bitter, and it causes Skid to frown.

"For the first time in so long, I'm happy, Ads. I'm allowin' myself to just be *fuckin'* happy. I'm sorry that I haven't

thought about that shit. I've been more focused on how to get to that psycho bastard who's tryin' to take you and your son back to hell."

"Well, it seems you're not happy enough to tell your mom the truth. Today, me and Grace walked from round the back of the garage, the window was open and I heard that argument you had with Rogue before we came inside."

Skid closes his eyes and looks guilty when I let him know what this is really about.

"I don't see much of a future for us if you can't even tell your own mom that your wife is dead." I hate how harsh my words sound, I hate even more that he has none to throw back at me. Suddenly, the walls of this cabin feel like they are crushing me. I need some time out, and I quickly jump up on my feet and head for the front door so I can escape it.

"Wait, where are you goin'?" Skid looks as though I've just punched him in the guts.

"I need some space. Watch Charlie, okay?" I manage before opening the door and rushing outside.

"Ads, come back. I don't want to fight."

I cut him off by slamming the door. Then marching across the yard, I act on impulse and head toward the cabin of the only person who can give me the answers I need.

I pound on the wooden door as loud as I can and when Rogue answers, I can't make out if she's surprised to see me or pissed that I've interrupted her.

"Can I come in?" I check over my shoulder to see if Skid's followed me out. I don't want to cause a scene out here in the yard. I've made a big enough fool of myself in front of him tonight, all my overthinking caused that huge emotional dump that he clearly wasn't ready for.

"Ummm, sure." Rogue opens the door a little wider to let me inside.

Seeing all the knives she has laid out on the table makes me feel a little unnerved and when I glance back at her, the

smile she's wearing scares me even more.

"Once a month I like to get 'em out and sharpen 'em up." She takes a seat at the table and picks up the one with the jagged blade.

"I was kinda hoping we could talk in private." I search around looking for Grimm.

"The floor's yours. Grimm's at the club doing an itinerary check of his basement."

"Okay... I know this may seem a little weird that I've come to you, but you know Skid better than anyone and you're obnoxiously straight with people. Right now, I need someone to be real straight with me because I don't know if I'm coming or going here."

"Oh no..." Rogue raises her hand up to stop me. "I've been in this situation before, too many times. You come to me because you *think* you want the truth. I give it, and then it all ends in tears. I haven't got the—"

"I'm late." The words that come out aren't the ones I came over here to say, but I guess they're the ones that have been most on my mind. Stroking my clammy palm against my jeans, I watch the huge smirk lift on Rogue's face.

"Of course you are." She shakes her head and laughs at me. "Hell, girl, that's gotta be a Dirty Soul record, you ain't even been here five minutes."

"This isn't funny, Rogue, this is really serious. What do I do?" I rub my hand across my forehead and curse myself for telling her.

"Well, since going back in time to play it safe ain't an option, I guess you're gonna have to go with that good old tradition of pissing on a stick and praying for a miracle."

"I can't leave the compound," I remind her, already regretting this. I came here to talk about Skid and his mom. This, I should have taken to Ella or Maddy. I was with Grace all morning, I could have spoken to her, she would have been far more understanding.

“Just get Skid to grab you one.” Rogue shrugs back like it’s no big deal.

“I can’t. I haven’t told him,” I confess

Rogue opens her mouth as if she’s about to say something and I quickly interrupt.

“He’s only just accepted the idea of us, it’s been hard for him to move on and I get that. Trust me, I do. This is too much too fast. It’s gonna freak him out, and I don’t want to do that over nothing.” I chew on my thumbnail while the nerves in my stomach knot tighter.

“How late we talking?” Rogues studies me.

“Over a week, and—”

“And what?” She rolls her eyes impatiently.

“I heard you and him talking today. I know that he hasn’t told his mom about Carly yet. It makes me sure that he’s not ready for this. It’s a pretty big thing to dump on a guy that you’ve just started dating.”

“You and Skid are doing more than dating.” Rogue looks at me like I’m stupid. “Addison, you’re fixing him. Every single day since you’ve been here, I’ve gotten a little more of the Skid I used to know back. You’re talking to the wrong person about this, you should be speaking to him.”

“I don’t know how to. I’m so scared he’s gonna freak out. I love him. I don’t want to lose him again.” I hear the desperation in my voice and when all the emotions of the day build back up, I burst into tears.

“You’re not gonna lose him.” Rogue sighs, shocking me when the expression on her face changes to something that resembles sympathy. “And trust me, it’s gonna take a lot more than this to freak him out,” she assures me.

“He’s got so much on his mind, Rogue. He’s so frustrated that he can’t get to Abraham. I’m the one that’s put all that on him and now this. I can’t give him more to worry about unless I’m sure.”

“Okay, guess I’m gonna have to handle this.” Rogue picks up her phone and presses it to her ear.

“Wait, what are you doing...?” I suddenly panic that she’s calling him. Rogue is unpredictable. I should never have let this slip.

She holds up her finger to silence me when whoever it is she’s calling answers.

“I need you to go to the drugstore for me.” She grins at me as she gives them her instructions.

“Not that drugstore, silly.” She giggles playfully as she studies the blade of the huge dagger in her hand. “I need a pregnancy test, and make it quick.” She hangs up the phone and picks up a different knife, this one much smaller but equally as sharp.

“Grimm’s on it,” she assures me testing the tip of it with her finger.

“You can’t send him, what if he tells Skid.”

“Grimm ain’t gonna say shit, and if this test comes back positive, you’re gonna have to tell Skid anyway,” she points out, reminding me how scary the thought of that is.

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I watch the minutes tick by on the clock that’s hanging on the wall behind Rogue’s head. She doesn’t say much to me, just keeps on sharpening her blades and smiling at me when I look up at her. I can’t stop thinking about Skid and how I just treated him. It was uncalled for, and I hate that right now he’ll be confused and probably worried about where I am.

“I should let Skid know I’m okay.” I stand up.

Suddenly I feel like I don’t want to know the answer myself. If I don’t know I won’t be keeping anything from him.

“Sit back down. I already did.” Rogue gestures her eyes to the chair I was just in. “I told him you had cabin fever and needed a change of space. He thinks we’re *hanging* out.”

“We are hanging out,” I point out.

“That’s not what this is.” She laughs before her face turns very serious. “And not the kind of rumors I want spreading around, Addison.” Her head shakes back at me disappointedly before the door bursts open and Grimm marches inside. It surprises me that he has such a different expression on his face. I thought the guy only had one look, but what I’m seeing now is nothing like the cold, sinister scowl I’ve gotten used to.

“I didn’t know what kinda one you wanted so I got all five that were there,” he tells her, frantically tipping out the brown paper bag onto the table so all five boxes spill out on top of Rogue’s knife collection. I watch him line them all up with precision in front of her before taking a step back and watching her like a hawk as she rolls her eyes over them. He’s so focused on her that he doesn’t even seem to notice that I’m here.

“Did I get it wrong? I...I can go to Colorado Springs if I did. They have bigger stores.” I notice his fingers twitching. “We’re gonna keep it, right? I mean if you are.” He tracks his hand through the jet-black hair that’s fallen on his face while Rogue lifts her head up from the tests and looks a little unnerved herself.

“Grimm, these aren’t for me. They’re for Addison,” she informs him, her voice calm but her eyes frantic.

“Oh.” Grimm drops his shoulders, and that frosty look returns to his face. “Okay then.” He acknowledges the fact I’m here with a nod of his head before he marches back out the door with slightly more color on his cheeks than when he entered.

Rogue still has that look of concern on her face as she watches him leave and as soon as he’s slammed the door, she picks up her jaw and quickly shakes off her unease.

“Guess it’s the moment of truth.” She picks up one of the boxes and passes it across the table to me.



“You sure you’re okay?” I ask Gracie for the tenth time since we finished having sex.

“I’m fine,” she snaps as she waddles out of the bathroom. Gracie is tired, she’s irritated and real uncomfortable, but she still looks hot as fuck as she carefully lowers herself onto the mattress and gets back into bed.

“Well, Rogue’s theory did *not* work.” She sighs, tapping her fingers on her huge stomach and blowing out a breath.

“Gentle lover.” I shake my head and growl. Fuck Rogue and her ability to get under peoples’ skin.

“Well, we haven’t fucked like we did last night since before you knocked me up.” Gracie’s pouty lips pick up into a satisfied little smirk. “You understood the assignment, *Casanova*.” She winks and since it’s nice to see her smiling, I let her get away with it.

“Yet our boy did *not*.” I stroke my hand over her tummy and feel it go rigid under my palm.

“That’s new.” I stare at it curiously.

“It’s been doing that for a while, it doesn’t hurt so I guess it’s just another one of those practice contractions. You haven’t got another shift at the garage today, have you? I’ve got an appointment with the obstetrician, he wants to talk about induction.”

“No more shifts.” I reach across and kiss her lips, pressing one on her stomach too before I drag myself outta bed.

“Where are you going? I was hoping we could spend the day chilling out, maybe we could try the Rogue theory again.” She dances her eyebrows at me seductively.

“Only if you stop callin’ it that.” I point my finger at her before putting on a shirt. “First, I’m headin’ downstairs to make you some breakfast. You need to eat good. Today’s gonna be the day, I can tell.”

“I hope you’re right because I do not want to wake up tomorrow morning and still look like this.” She looks down at her body and rolls her eyes. I must have told her a thousand times that I fuckin’ love the way she looks but I swear she thinks I’m lying.

“Well, I love the way you look,” I tell her again before I open the bedroom door and Duke barges past me. He leaps straight on the bed and snuggles himself into my spot, resting his head on Gracie’s round stomach.

When she strokes his head and looks up at me with that adorable smile, I try to remember a time in my life when I’ve ever felt happier. Our lives are about to change in a way we could never be fully prepared for, and yet I ain’t scared. I’m real fuckin’ excited.

I head down to the kitchen and get straight to work, whisking up some eggs and flicking on the coffee machine. I reply to Nyx’s message, telling him there’s nothing to report. Then I hear the floorboards on the stairs creak and I shake my head when I look up and see Gracie slowly making her way down them.

“You are the most impatient person in the world. I was gonna bring this up when I’m done,” I tell her.

“I can’t stay in bed. I should keep moving.” She presses her palm into the base of her spine as she shuffles toward me.

“Did I mention that being pregnant really sucks?” She smiles as her hand rubs affectionately over her tummy.

“Once or twice.” I chuckle to myself as I pour the eggs into the pan that’s on the stove.

“I was thinkin’, after your appointment, we could drive up to Pines Peak and take a walk. I’ll even shout ya an ice cream.” I’m surprised when she doesn’t answer, Gracie can’t get enough of ice cream these days. Glancing over my shoulder I worry when I see her hand resting on the table and her face all screwed up.

“What’s wro...”

A trickle that comes from between her legs pools at her feet, putting a huge lump in my throat.

Her big, blue eyes lift up from where we’re both staring at the same spot and a surge of panic rushes through me.

“Holy fuck!” I drop the spatula from my hand and as I rush toward her, I have to shoo Duke outta the way when he starts trying to lick up the mess she’s made on the floor.

“I think that was my—”

“It definitely was.” I nod my head, suddenly feeling sick. This is actually happening. It’s happening right now and I need to pull myself together.

“Does it hurt?” I stroke her back when she leans over the table and tenses up her body.

“What do you think?” Her eyes are wild when she flicks her head back to look at me.

“I’m sorry. I’ll get the bag.” I scoot across the floor to grab the bag that Gracie has packed, repacked, and then packed again, all while trying to remember what we got taught in those stupid fuckin’ classes she made us take.

“Duke, get out the way.” I drag him over to the couch to give her some space when he starts whining. He knows something’s up and he don’t like it.

“Just breathe, darlin’. We got this. I got the route to the hospital all planned out. We’ll be there in no time,” I promise, hating how scared she looks as she nods back at me. “Come on then.” I slide the bag onto my shoulder and guide her out the door toward the car, slamming the front door behind me and

feeling really overwhelmed when I consider that the next time I step through it, I'll be someone's dad.

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“Oh my god!” Gracie presses her hands on the dash as another contraction hits her. I've been timing them in my head and they're gettin' real close together now. I'm slightly panicked by the fact that we're still a good twenty minutes from the fuckin' hospital.

“You're gonna be alright, Gracie.” I take one arm off the wheel so I can stroke her thigh.

“I'm scared, what if we don't make it? Brax, these contractions are really fuckin' strong.”

“We're gonna make it, don't panic. Okay...? You've gotta stay calm and do all that breathin' shit you learned.”

“Breathing is not gonna make the pain stop,” she growls at me in between her heavy breaths and moans. I try not to get more panicked myself and focus on the road. Which is when I see what's in front of us, and have to try a whole lot harder to rein that panic in.

“What the fuck is *that*, Brax?” Gracie sounds alarmed as she stares at the same thing I am and confirms I ain't imagining it.

“That's a tree, darlin'.” I pull the car to a stop in the middle of the road.

“I see that it's a fuckin' tree, but what's it doing blocking the ro...*aaahhh!*” She gets cut off by another pain and while she suffers through it, I try and figure out what the fuck I'm gonna do about this.

“Okay, I'm gonna fix this,” I assure her, kneading her shoulder while she crouches forward and rests her forehead on the dash. “Just stay calm for me.” I get out the car and head for the huge, thick trunk that's fallen all the way across the road.

I can't get my head straight. I can feel the frustration inside me about to erupt and I can't let it, not here, not while Gracie needs me. I could turn around and take the other route to the hospital but that's gonna take over an hour. I don't think we've got a fuckin' hour. What I need right now is fuckin' Jesus.

The sound of an engine comes from behind me, and when I turn around, it ain't Jesus I see. It ain't even fuckin' close.

"What you folks doin' out here so early?" Squealer cuts his engine and slides off his saddle.

"*Brax!*" Gracie screams at me from the car where she's somehow got herself out and is leaning over the hood.

"Shit!" Squealer must realize the situation we're in because he turns a little white.

"I'm sure Alex can do without that cream cheese bagel from Sam's Diner. And the twins don't need diapers. I'll be heading right back." He goes to turn around and I rush after him, grip his shoulder, and spin him back round.

"*Don't you fuckin' leave me,*" I whisper-growl at him.

"*Brax!*" Gracie screams out my name again, this time even more desperately.

"It's okay, darlin', Squeal's gonna help me lift this tree then we'll get goin' again." I put on a brave smile as I glance over to her, then shove Squealer toward the huge trunk that's blocking us from getting to the hospital.

"You know we ain't movin' this tree, right?" Squealer tells me under his breath as he crouches down beside me.

"We *have* to move it," I tell him sternly because failure ain't a fuckin' option here. Both of us strain to try and shift it, but it won't budge, not even an inch.

"Brax, I think I need to push!" Gracie screams at me and I stand back up and dust off my hands.

I can't look back at her, I can't face the reality of this. It feels like the weight of this fuckin' tree is crushing me under it.

“What the fuck am I gonna do, Squeal? We ain’t gonna make the hospital.” I kick my boot at the trunk in pure frustration. How can I be fuckin’ failing at this already?

“It always has to be me, don’t it?” Squealer looks up at the sky, shaking his head before he takes a deep breath and spins back around. He marches back towards my car with a strange kinda authority, before ripping open the back passenger door.

“Get in,” he tells me.

“What do you mean get in?” I follow after him, wondering what the fuck he’s doin’.

“From here on out. *I’m* the voice of fuckin’ reason, so you’re gonna have to listen to me, okay? Get in the fuckin’ car!”

When I don’t move fast enough he grips hold of the front of my shirt and forces me through the damn thing. I wanna rip his head off for it and when I go to react he leans inside the car and points his finger in my face.

“I’ve been in this situation enough times now to know that, that sound she’s making out there, means things are about to get real fuckin’ messy. *We’re* gonna be the ones that deliver your baby, Brax, and *we’re* gonna have to do it here. Now, call a fuckin’ ambulance.” He pulls back, rushing around the car to get Gracie while I reach forward to the front console and grab my phone, trying to calm my hands from shaking as I tap 911 into the keypad.

Squealer is eerily calm and almost chivalrous as he aids Gracie into the car and settles her lying down across the back seat in the space I make between my legs.

“There ya go, darlin’, you just make yourself comfortable and take his hands so you can squeeze ‘em. I know it ain’t a private room but it’ll have to do.” He takes the phone from my hand when he hears the person on the other end talking at me through the speaker and realizes that I’m good for fuckin’ nothin’ right now. Standing back up, he rests his elbows coolly on the roof of the car while he explains our situation and the location we’re at.

“Please tell me Squealer isn’t going to deliver our baby,” Gracie whimpers before resting her head back on my shoulder.

“I could lie to ya, but I don’t think that’s gonna help.” I take both her hands in mine and squeeze them tight.

I don’t want her to know how scared I am. I need to be strong. She’s been planning this for months, everything down to the last detail, and I’m sure as I can be that doing this on the side of the road in the back of our car was not part of that plan.

“It hurts and I need to push real bad,” she pants through her pain.

“It’s gonna be okay. The ambulance is on its way,” I promise her.

“Ambulance *is* on its way,” Squealer confirms my words, popping his head back through the door. “In the meantime, I’ll be your doctor. I have plenty of experience in female anatomy and a charming bedside manner.”

“The baby’s coming, I can feel it,” Gracie forces the words out of her mouth as her grip on my hand gets tighter.

“Okay, let’s just slip you out of these and we’ll deal with it.” Squealer starts tugging at her panties and while the thought of ripping his hands right off him crosses my mind, Gracie lifts her ass up to assist him.

“Whoa... this baby is really comin!” His eyes go wide as he tilts his head and he studies between her legs.

“Squealer, I swear to god when this is over I’m gonna—”

“Trust me, Brax, this ain’t somethin’ I will wanna be rememberin’,” he assures me through the smile he’s faking for Gracie’s benefit.

“I have to push. I can’t hold it,” Gracie tells us both. Tensing her body and sounding petrified.

“Okay, that’s just fine. Go.” Squealer nods his head while Gracie bears down, her whole body trembling from the effort she puts in.

“That’s good,” Squeal encourages her, resting his hand on her knee and trying hard not to pull a face.

“Is he comin’?” I ask, feeling beyond fuckin’ useless in all this.

“Oh, he’s comin’, I can see the top of his head.”

“I was supposed to have drugs for this.” Gracie relaxes in between contractions, catching her breath only for a few seconds before her body tenses back up again.

“*It huuurts.*” She grimaces, straining with everything she’s got.

“That’s real good, Grace, you got his whole head out now,” Squeal encourages her.

I lean forward to try and see but Gracie’s stomach blocks me.

“He’s got dark hair, just like his daddy,” Squealer looks up to tell her. “Now, let’s see the rest of him. Push really hard for the next one.”

“You got this, you’re doing amazin’.” I grip her sweat-soaked palms tighter and hold my own breath while she growls like some kinda feral animal and pushes at the same time.

“That’s right, you got it. He’s... he’s...” The sound of wailing rattles through the car and Gracie’s body collapses back against mine with exhaustion.

“He’s what? Squeal... Is he okay?” Squealer holds the tiny little thing up from between her legs.

“He’s a she.” He smirks at me as he gently places our baby on Gracie’s chest.

“He’s a what now?” I check I heard him right. Carefully lifting up the little leg to check for myself.

“You got yourself a baby girl.” Squealer winks.

“She’s perfect.” Gracie’s shaking hand strokes over her head as she looks up at me with tears of joy in her eyes, and I

look at the tiny little person in her arms, my heart turning to liquid.

Gracie's right, she is perfect and she's not cryin' anymore. She's looking right at me with big stunned eyes that are seeing the world for the first time. A world that she's relying on me to make safe for her.

"Well, don't let her go cold." I wipe the tears from my eyes, struggling to get my shirt off my back so I can wrap it around her delicate, little body. I cover her over and place my arm under Gracie's so I'm holding them both. My own hands shake as I cradle her hand and my thumb slides gently over her temple.

The sound of sirens is coming from the distance but it doesn't distract me from staring into my little girl's big, beautiful eyes. She's looking at me as if I got all the answers, and despite the fact I got fuckin' none, I decide she'll never know it.

"I'll let the professionals come and finish the job." Squealer pats Gracie's knee and when he goes to pull away, she grabs his wrist.

"Thank you. Squealer, you were incredible," she tells him gratefully.

"You're not the first woman to say that you know." He winks at her.

"Hey." I hold my hand out for him before he disappears. "I owe ya."

"You don't owe me a damn thing, brother. Watchin' you attempt to raise a daughter with eyes like her mama's is gonna be all the reward I need... Good luck with that." He smacks his palm into mine and tips his chin before walking away.

"You really wanted a boy." Gracie drags her eyes off our little girl to remind me.

"I thought I did, but this..." I squeeze them both a little tighter in my arms. "...This is perfect."



“Be careful, I could get used to this.” I can’t hide the smile on my face when I walk into the kitchen and see Michael cooking dinner.

“How was your shift?” He looks up from the pot he’s stirring, hitting me with those dark brown eyes that make my stomach flip and my pussy throb.

“Long and very tiring.” I slump down onto the chair and kick off my shoes. “Well, this ain’t gonna be ready for another half an hour. Why don’t you soak in the bath for a while? I could open some wine?” he suggests.

“That sounds like a very good plan.” I drag myself back onto my feet and head for the stairs.

“Jenna?” he calls after me, and when I turn around and see him walking toward me I can’t help imagining what it would feel like to have those rough hands of his touching me.

“I fixed the door on your wardrobe,” he tells me, looking at my lips and rubbing his together like he’s thinking about kissing them. “I hope you don’t mind me goin’ into your room. I didn’t want to overstep, but since you told me that asshole tore it off while he was packin’ up his shit, I figured you could do without the reminder.”

“That’s really thoughtful. I don’t mind at all.” I smile at him and feel my eyelashes flutter before I head up the stairs and keep that smile fixed on my face.

Truth is, I haven’t thought about Paul at all since Michael came to my door four weeks ago asking for help. Taking him in went completely against my nature, but for the first time in

so long, I actually feel like I'm living. Michael isn't only handsome, I've come to learn that he's intelligent too. His story is heartbreaking and the fact he shared it with me proves what he said about us having a connection is true. I'm not completely sure that he's over the wife that he lost a few years ago, but I'm a strong believer that time is a healer, and I don't mind taking things slow.

I've been hurt too. But what Paul did to me could never compare with what Michael's own brother took from him. The betrayal of that is something I doubt he'll ever get over. I saw the hurt and anger in his eyes when he told me the story, and that's when I knew that I had to help him. He can stay here, in our safe little haven, for as long as he needs to. I will not turn my back on him like everyone else in his life has.

We sit and eat dinner at the kitchen table together, Michael tops up my glass with more wine and watches me intently as I take each bite from my fork.

"You ever thought about cuttin' your hair a little shorter?" He reaches across the table so he can slip a few strands through his fingers. "I think it would really show off your features."

"Are you a stylist now as well as a chef?" I smart back at him, making him chuckle.

"Just a suggestion." He holds up his hands, showing that he meant no offense.

"It's sweet that you notice my *features*." I blush as I take a sip of wine.

"I think we both know that I've been noticin' your features ever since I woke up in that hospital bed." He clears his throat as he wipes his mouth with his napkin and lifts both our empty plates from the table.

"You think your brother will find you here?" I take a risk, knowing how touchy he gets whenever I mention him. Michael pauses on his journey to the sink and slowly turns back around.

“Skid’s never gonna find me,” he tells me, almost hauntingly, as he continues to place the plates in the basin.

“Have you ever thought about going to the police? Not all of them are corrupt.” I stand up and move toward him, wishing there was a way for him to live a normal life again. Perhaps one that could include me in it.

“Everyone’s corrupt, Jenna. That’s why you’re so special.” He spins around and takes my face in his hands, his rough, calloused palms scratchy against my cheek as his thumb strokes over my bottom lip.

“Michael,” I whisper his name, prepared to make the leap and move things further. There’s a desperation inside me that begs for more contact like this.

“Yes, Jenna?” He frowns, almost like he’s trying to read what’s going on in my head.

“Your injuries are healed now. Do you feel strong?”

“Stronger than ever,” he assures me, the soft touch of his hand turning a little more intense.

“Do you think, maybe we could...?” I close my eyes and feel myself start to tremble. I don’t want to push him, not after all he’s been through, and I’m overwhelmed with relief when he answers my question by sweeping me off my feet, slamming my body up against the refrigerator. His mouth attacks mine fiercely and I feel as though I might combust as his hands slide over my body, exploring me exactly how I’ve imagined.

He holds my throat in his hand as he kisses me, in a way I’ve never been kissed before. It’s passionate, almost violent like he’s been suffering the same torment I have.

Dragging me away from the refrigerator, he carries me over to the table where he tugs hard at my yoga pants and fumbles with his belt, then in one smooth motion, he thrusts his cock deep inside me. I rest back against the surface of the table and savor everything he gives me, never have I ever felt so fulfilled. I can’t remember it ever being like this with Paul.

We somehow end up in the living room, the cashmere throw Paul's mother gifted us for our tenth anniversary tangled between our sweat-drenched bodies.

"I think it's safe to say you're definitely healed." I laugh to myself.

"You're just what the doctor ordered." He circles my nipple with his finger makes me shiver in all the right places.

"In fact, I think you should call in sick tomorrow and spend the whole day with me." He kisses my neck and lowers his mouth over my chest, slowly disappearing beneath the throw and making my skin tingle with pleasure.

"I've never skipped work," I confess, fully aware of how square that sounds. I was never an adventurous person until I met him.

"Well, then you're long overdue a sick day."

"You're a bad influence," I tell him when he suddenly stands up in front of me, reaching his hand out to help me back onto my feet.

"Are you complainin'?" he asks as I head into the kitchen so I can locate my panties. They're still tangled up inside my yoga pants on the kitchen floor and as I step inside them, he picks up my phone from the counter and holds it out for me.

"You ain't gonna make me beg, are ya?" The puppy dog eyes he gives me has me snatching my phone out of his hand, then texting my ward manager with the same lame excuse about having an upset stomach that everyone else seems to use when they decide to take a day off. It feels rebellious and after placing my phone back on the counter, I stretch up onto my toes and kiss his lips.

"Why don't you go upstairs, get into my bed, and I'll bring us up some more wine?" I tell him, trying to sound seductive.

"We're all out." He shrugs.

"I have more in the garage, perhaps we could open something from Paul's special collection." I draw a circle in

the hair that layers his strong, masculine chest with my finger before I leave him in the kitchen and head off to pick out something expensive.

I'm in too much of a rush to even bother turning on the light when I open the garage door, and it's something I curse myself for when my foot lands in something wet and sticky.

"Damn engine oil." I tap the wall to try and locate the light switch, Paul has a collection of road bikes and he was always tinkering in here with them. It's time that asshole came and got them out of my way.

I finally locate the switch and when the light flickers on and brightens up the room, what I see in front of me sucks all the breath out of my body. The floor is covered with thick, dark blood that squelches between my toes, and when my eyes follow its trail and I see where it's coming from, my first instinct is to run.

I make a dash for the door but slip in the sticky, red syrup beneath my feet, catching my fall on my hands and feeling it soak into my palms. I hold them up in front of me and watch them shake before I look up and see the tower of a man who has been living in my home for the past four weeks leaning casually against the door frame. The adoration I've seen in his eyes isn't there anymore, it's been replaced with a malice that matches the sick, satisfied smile on his face.

"I forgot to mention... Paul stopped by." He comes at me roughly, forcing my helpless body off the ground and back onto my feet.

"Now, it's time for some real fun, darlin'."



“Hey.” Jessie nods over at me when he steps out onto his back deck in just his boxers and scratches the back of his head sleepily.

“Hey, yourself,” I growl back at him groggily.

I ain’t slept a wink all night. I heard Addison come home sometime after ten. And since she headed straight for her and Charlie’s room I figured I’d stay out here and give her space. I’ve been blindsided, too focused on putting an end to all this cult shit to realize that she needs some stability from me. Everything she said last night was right. I can’t keep lying to Mom, especially not now that her and Charlie are in my life.

I’m ready to go into the next phase, I’m ready to make changes. I just need to show her that. I’ve been so worried about keeping them safe that I haven’t been focusing on the *us* part. Of course, she’s gonna want reassurance, it’s not just her she has to think about in all of this. The decisions we make affect Charlie and he has to come first. I should have told her all this before she left last night. I *should* have told her that I don’t care where we end up living, just so long as we end up living together. And I *should* have told her that I want, more than anything, to be Charlie’s father. I loved him before he was born.

“Ya hear the news about Grace and Brax?” Jessie calls over and when I shake my head back at him, he grins. “Squeal delivered their little girl at the side of the road about an hour ago,” he informs me, and I nod my head back at him, too busy trying to think about what I’m gonna say to Addison when she wakes up to ask how the hell that happened.

“They’re both okay, got taken to hospital to be checked over, but they should be out later on today.” He lights himself up a smoke.

“You okay, Skid?” he asks when he notices I ain’t exactly with it.

“Just got a lot on my mind.” I shake my head and act as if it’s nothing.

“You speak to Tommy lately?” Jess leans over his divide and crosses his arms.

“No, why?”

“He came to me yesterday and asked if he could take some shifts on at the garage. I thought maybe it would be good for him.” He shrugs casually, and I know Jessie too well not to think there’s something behind the conversation he’s pushing.

“He asked ya if he could prospect, didn’t he?” I cut him short on his bullshit.

“He asked me to speak to ya, figures he stands a chance if you offer to be his sponsor.”

“And does he?” I ask, knowing that being on a probation period is a tough stint for anyone, for Tommy it would be hell. He’d be tested to the fuckin’ limit before anyone here even considered trusting him.

“Stranger things have happened.” Jessie lifts his head and strains his neck to blow a thick cloud of smoke into the air. “I don’t know what else we expect him to do, he can’t live down at the Sanctuary all his life.”

“Says the man who I had to beg to spare his life.” I huff a sarcastic laugh when I remember the day I fell apart in Jessie’s basement. He’d called me to say the club had found Tommy after he’d ran away. He’d felt like he had to run soon as he found out what his dad did to Carly. Everyone here was convinced that it was the sign of a guilty conscience and that my nephew knew where to find his cunt of father.

“A lot’s changed since then, Skid. *We’ve* changed. Ya want my opinion, I think he deserves a chance, but it ain’t gonna be

easy. If Tommy wants it, he's gonna have to find the balls to go to the boss. You steppin' up and bein' responsible for him could favor Jimmer's decision."

"I'll talk to him." I haul myself up and nod at my VP, I can worry about that later. Right now, I've got to try and fix things with Addison.

I've spent all night hating the idea of her being upset. I hate even more that she never came to find me when she came back from seeing Rogue.

When I step into the kitchen, Charlie's sitting at the table with a clueless smile on his face.

"Morning, Skid," he chimes.

"Mornin'." I ruffle up his hair as I pass him and grab him a bowl so I can fix him some breakfast. "Your mom okay?" I check.

"Yeah, she's sleeping. I was quiet so I didn't wake her. She doesn't sleep too good. Gotta let her have it while she can," he tells me in a voice that seems way beyond his years.

"You're a good boy, you know that?" I cover the cereal he's tipped into his bowl by himself with milk.

"D'ya like it here, Charlie?" I take a seat opposite him and study him while he eats. Kids never fail to surprise me by how resilient they can be. This little boy's whole life has been disrupted and as long as he gets fed and has some toys to play with, he don't seem affected by it.

"Yeah, I like it here." He nods. "The people are nice and it's fun here but..." He drops his head.

"But what? You ain't ever gonna get in trouble for speakin' your mind with me, Charlie," I assure him.

"I miss my room and I like Mrs. Taylor next door, even if she can be a bit grouchy at times."

"I hear ya." I nod as I take in what he's telling me.

"But I don't wanna go home, not if it means I won't see you anymore... I'd miss Dylan too of course, and the nice lady

from the clubhouse who feeds me.” He looks up and grins cheekily.

“Well, you don’t have to worry about missin’ any of us, you’re an honorary member of the club now.” I hold out my fist for him to pump and when he does, we both laugh.

“What’s going on out here?” Addison yawns as she steps outta her room. She’s wearing my AC/DC tee, which I’m taking as a good sign that she ain’t mad at me anymore.

“Skid says I can be a Dirty Soul.” Charlie rats me out, but Addison doesn’t seem to mind. In fact, she smiles at me as she leans over his shoulder and places a good morning kiss on his cheek.

“You good?” I reach out for her hand.

“Yeah, I’m good.” She smiles back at me as she takes it.

“Are *we* good?” I check, giving it a gentle squeeze.

“Yeah.” She nods her head, though I can tell from her expression that she’s holding something back from me. “Come on, eat and get dressed, we need to get to the clubhouse. The girls are planning a little welcome home celebration for Grace and Brax’s baby.”

“You heard about that, huh?”

“I’m in the group chat.” She smiles, sliding her hand across my arm as she heads towards the cupboard to grab herself a bowl. “Not that I’m very good with that phone you’ve got me. It takes me ages to respond.”

I get up from the chair to join her, blocking her against the counter by placing my arms on each side of her waist.

“We need to talk. You stormed out on me before I got to finish what I wanted to say,” I whisper inside her ear.

“We do need to talk.” She turns around and slides her fingers through my beard, and if her adorable son wasn’t so cheerily eating his cereals behind me I’d have to take her right here, right now, on this kitchen fuckin’ counter.

“Tonight, when Charlie’s in bed, okay?” She places a kiss on my lips before she slips away from me and moves to the table to join him.



“**S** top fuckin’ cryin’!” I yell at the pathetic bitch in front of me. She’s been sobbin’ all fuckin’ night. Even when I taped her mouth up it was impossible for me to get any sleep on the couch.

I rip the tape off her mouth harshly and drag her back into the kitchen. Looking at her now, I can kinda see why Paul cheated on her. Yeah, she’s got a pretty face and she’s got a hot enough body, but fuck is she needy. She was so desperate to be adored that she ate up every single one of my lies, and feasted on the endless compliments I gave her.

“Michael, just untie me and we can talk about this,” she cries after the back of my hand impacts with her jaw. She’s looking at me like *I’m* the one who fuckin’ cheated on her after twelve years of fuckin’ marriage. The same marriage that I’m fed up of fuckin’ hearing about.

“My name’s not Michael, you dumb fuckin’ bitch.” I shake my head at her and laugh, even seeing her half-naked body smothered in the blood of her dead husband ain’t reprising her appeal. Jenna is now surplus to requirement, which means we can have some real fun. No more playing Mr. Charming, no more keeping her sweet so I can lay low. Jenna is about to meet the real monster who she’s been living with.

I go to the kitchen drawer and take out the scissors, slipping their cool blades over her cheek and watching her tits rise and fall to the rhythm of her scared little breaths.

“You are gonna do as I say now, okay?” I slide my hand into the front of her black, lacy panties and grip her clit tightly between my thumb and finger.

“You look so much like her.” I use my other hand to snip at her hair, cutting it roughly to the length required while Jenna cries helplessly like some kinda damsel in distress.

“I get that you miss your wife. I can... I can be her if you need me to be,” she tells me weakly. Jenna’s clearly a True Crime channel fan, she thinks she’s got me all figured out. Poor, pathetic Jenna.

“You could never be her. Carly was special. Too fuckin’ special for him.”

I cut the scissors through the tape that I’ve had wrapped around her body to keep her in the chair, then grip my fingers around her throat and lift her onto her feet.

“What did you see in him, that you didn’t see in me? I was kind to you,” I tell her, imagining that sweet, innocent smile that I fell in love with all those years ago.

“I was gonna save you, Carly. I broke my own heart so I could keep ya safe.” I feel the tension growing in my body when I think of her and him together. The smiles that should have been mine. All those memories and the sound of her laughter that he stole from me.

“Did you ever think of me while he was inside you?” I whisper into her ear as I crush her windpipe. Her eyes are wild and terrified, just like I remember, and I slice the scissors through her panties to give myself better access to her ripe, warm pussy.

“You can think about him now if ya want, and how he wasn’t there to save you.” Her scared little moans make my cock strain harder, and as I release it, I keep hold of her throat and lift her leg over my hip so I can fill her.

“You thought you were too good for me. Skid’s perfect old lady. Go on, scream his name, darlin’. Scream it from the top of your lungs because he ain’t comin’,” I tell her.

She tries to fight against me, but she’s no match for my strength. It only makes what I’m doing more enjoyable.

“Call out his name and I’ll let ya breathe,” I whisper into her ear as I thrust my cock deep inside her.

“Sk-Ski...Skid,” she mumbles, her voice coming out all weak and feeble, and I laugh at her before I spit at her face. My palm spreads my saliva all over her red-hot cheek, mixing it with her petrified tears.

“I said scream it, Carly! Tell him who fuckin’ owns you now. Beg for him to come and save you if you want to live.” I listen to her sputter and choke, closing my eyes and savoring the sound as I fill her with my cock.

“You’re mine, Carly, always have been.” Her pulse stops beating against my fingers and her body gets heavier to hold as I bolt my load into her and remain still. I stay inside her lifeless body and stroke the skin on her cheek as it loses all its color. “He was too weak to save you.” I kiss her lips while they are still warm, before sliding out of her and letting her fall to the ground with a slump.

Taking a step back, I admire how she looks all broken and outta shape. Just like a puppet whose strings have been cut.

*“Dad... Dad!” The voice screaming through the woods stirs me awake. I feel weak, I’m bleeding... a helluva lot. My head is disoriented from all the blows it took from those double-crossing Bastards. I don’t know who this new leader they elected thinks he is, but he will fuckin’ die for this.*

*“Dad.” I can just about make out the figure that crouches in front of me. Jet-black hair just like mine, eyes like his fuckin’ mother’s.*

*“Tommy?” I force his name from my dry lips.*

*“They’re comin’ for you. The Bastard’s new president just met with Jimmer and he gave ‘em your location. I managed to get a head start on ‘em, but they’re on their way. They’re gonna kill you.” I hear the words he’s speaking but all I can focus on is the pain I’m in, and when I feel the ropes that are strained tight around my chest slacken, I take in a huge breath.*

*“Come on.” My son struggles to aid me onto my feet, then placing his shoulder under my arms he somehow gets us moving.*

*I don't know how long he drags me for, but we make it to the car he has waiting on the side of the road. When he drops me down into the passenger seat I roll my head back and let the blankness take over again.*

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*"Dad, wake up." I feel my body jerk and when I open my eyes and see Tommy sitting behind the wheel of the car I'm in, he looks much older than I remember but just as fuckin' sullen.*

*"Where are we?" I ask him groggily. I've lost so much blood I don't even know how I'm still alive, yet the fact I feel so much pain proves I am.*

*"We're outside the hospital."*

*"Are you fuckin' crazy?" The haze in my head suddenly clears. "Tommy, I'm a wanted fuckin' man. Your uncle—"*

*"Relax, we're five hours away from Manitou Springs. This is a small town with a real small hospital. I was smart," he tells me, though he don't look as proud of himself as he should be.*

*I gotta wonder what business the kid's got helping me. I never took the time to say goodbye to him when I left the club the day the feds came looking for me and Skid pretended to be me so I could get a head start in getting away. He will also know, like everyone else does, that I'm the one who killed Carly. Tommy loved his aunt, she always took real good care of him. The fact he wants to help me makes no sense.*

*"What ya doin' here, kid?" I ask, wondering what price I'm gonna have to pay for this.*

*"I'm savin' your life." His jaw tightens like he's mad at himself.*

*"You wanna tell me why?" I huff a laugh.*

*"Because I ain't like you." He turns his head and gives me a real stern look. "Every day since I found out what you did, I've questioned myself. Wondered if evil is in our DNA. I've*

*waited for that evil to overcome me and this is me provin' that it won't. I'm a good person. You lied to me, you rang me that day right after you did it and told me to leave. You told me that Judge Walker killed her, then you had me follow his daughter around and report shit back to you. You knew she was Jimmer's daughter, didn't you? What were you gonna do with her, Dad?" He leans across the console, narrowing his eyes at me.*

*"We could have made a lotta money outta Walker, I had a lot on him. He was working with Clunk on all kindsa dark-assed shit—"*

*"I know what he was workin' with him on, the agency don't exist anymore, and neither does he. Walker didn't give a shit about Ella, he knew she was Jimmer's too. You wanted me to watch her because you wanted leverage over Jimmer."*

*"What do you want me to tell ya, son?" I shrug helplessly. Back then, I was almost as much of a desperate man as I am now. I fell outta favor with Clunk after I lost my position at the club. That fucker showed me no loyalty after all the years I'd put into helping him. I would have killed him myself if I didn't have to keep low and the Souls hadn't beat me to it.*

*"I hate you!" Tommy spits his words out at me with spite.*

*I shake my head back at him because, despite all that, he's still here making sure I fuckin' live.*

*"Yet here you are savin' my life," I remind him.*

*"You know who taught me to be good?" His dark, almost black eyes peer into mine, expelling pure disgust.*

*"You know who would calm me down when I was a kid and got mad at you for never being around? Who always told me that I'd only ever get one dad and that you loved me in your own special way...?"*

*I can probably stab a fuckin' guess.*

*"It was the woman who you raped and fuckin' killed." He curls his lip and narrows his eyes at me viciously.*

*“When the Souls found me and told me about it, I didn’t believe them. I had to watch the tape to believe it. I stole the copy Skid’s got in his cabin and I saw it for myself.”*

*“Ahhh, the tape, Mel told me all about it. I always thought I’d make a good porn star.” I manage a chuckle, despite being in agony, and Tommy reacts by slamming his hand on the dash in anger as his eyes fill with tears.*

*“I saw it, Dad, I saw how you got off on it and it made me fuckin’ sick.”*

*“So, I’ll ask ya again, son, why ya here? If I’m so fuckin’ evil—”*

*“I’m here for him,” he interrupts me, and my brow creases with confusion. “Skid don’t wanna kill ya. As much as he thinks he does, he don’t. You’re his brother, he grew up wantin’ to fuckin’ be you, just like I did.”*

*“That’s not true. Skid’s always been—”*

*“You let him down, you ruined his life. but he doesn’t want ya dead.”*

*“And how can you be so sure?” I question him, tilting my head and studying the weakness on his face.*

*“Because if he really wanted you dead, you would have been dead a long time ago. Skid’s smart, much smarter than you are. He’s holdin’ out because, deep down, he questions if he could do that to his own brother.”*

*“Then I figure you must get your weakness from him.” I shake my head and twist my body so I can open my door.*

*“It’s over, Dad. I came and saved you, I gave you your fuckin’ life because I don’t want Skid to have to make that fuckin’ choice. Even if he didn’t kill you today, I can guarantee there would have been a whole club full of Souls that would have lined up for the pleasure.*

*I never want to see ya again.*

*I never wanna hear your name.*

*Get as far away from here as ya can and never come back. You've caused your damage, you've hurt everyone who ever loved ya, now fuck off and be alone."*

*I sit motionless and look at the man in front of me, my own flesh and blood, and yet a complete stranger.*

*"You're a good kid." I don't know where those words come from, they sure as hell don't sound like mine.*

*"Get out the car, Dad, and if I ever see your face again. I'll kill you myself." He turns his head away from me and stares outta the windshield and as soon as I struggle myself outta the seat and slam the door, he skids off and leaves me.*

I think about what he said as I stare at Jenna's lifeless body. Up to now, I couldn't remember how I got from those woods to the hospital, and the fact my son saved my life should probably strike some kinda chord. Instead, it makes me hate Skid even more. My own son, saving my life for him is as gracious as it is pathetic. It's typical of Skid to have won him over and turned the boy fuckin' soft. That's Skid's way. He gives to everyone else around him, but that fucker only ever sucked from me. Nobody ever admired me the way they did him, not even my own fuckin' son it seems.

I leave Jenna in her kitchen, God knows how long it will take for her to be found. She was too boring to have any friends. I head to the garage and I take the helmet from the peg on the wall before straddling the road bike that Paul took a taxi ride here to claim back yesterday afternoon.

Guess it's time to find out if my brother really does want me dead.



Rogue barges through the clubhouse doors like a freight train, heading right for me. She smiles at Ella sarcastically before dragging me over to the corner of the room out of everyone's earshot.

"You didn't tell him, did ya?" she hisses at me under her breath.

"He's over there at the garage whistling to fuckin' Zeppelin having no idea that he's knocked you up."

"Rogue, I couldn't tell him." I keep my voice low and check no one's listening. "We hadn't spoken since I stormed out, and Charlie was there. We agreed to talk tonight and that's when I'm gonna break the news," I assure her, already feeling nervous about it. I haven't even let it sink in myself yet. In fact, I've been trying all morning not to think about it. I have no idea how you're supposed to just drop a bomb on someone like that.

"They're here!" Alex comes hurtling into the barroom and takes her position at the bar beside Squealer.

Skid's nephew, Tommy, cuts the music and Maddy jumps down from the chair where she's only just finished painting the pink heart on the *Welcome Home Baby Marshall* banner. Charlie looks up at me with a really excited look on his face as I step up behind him and await the new arrival myself.

"Tell him," Rogue snaps in my ear as she walks past me toward the exit, pausing to look inside the car seat that Brax proudly carries inside before she gets to the door.

“Welcome to the club, kid.” She nods at the newborn baby girl before shoving the doors open with both her hands and making her exit.

Grace and Brax get swamped by all the girls, Ella being first in line as Brax helps Grace over to one of the more comfortable chairs in the clubhouse.

“She’s so tiny.” Shaniya coos over the baby when Brax places her car seat on the table so everyone can take a look at her.

“She didn’t feel very tiny when she was coming out.” Grace looks up at Brax and smiles.

“Well, it was a good job I was there.” Squealer stands up from the stool he’s been perched on by the bar as he makes his way over to join the crowd.

“Are we ever gonna hear the end of that?” Alex chases after one of the twin boys who escapes his stroller and is toddling after his dad.

“Credit where it’s due, darlin’, the whole thing would have been a shit show without me.” Squealer scoops his little boy up in his arms and balances him on his hip, angling him over the table so he can take a look at the new edition. “Take a look there, Cohen, that right there could be your future old lady. I wonder how many other men can say they delivered their daughter-in-law?”

Brax takes a step forward and his brother Nyx quickly eases him back.

“Ignore him.” He throws Squealer a warning look, lightening things up when he takes the car seat and turns it around so he can get a good look at his newborn niece. “Don’t worry, baby girl, Uncle Nyx will protect you. You and your cousin ain’t gonna be havin’ no boyfriends until you’re at least thirty.”

“You got me outta the shit earlier, so I’m gonna let you have that one for free, Cody Harrison.” Brax’s eyes remain fixed on Squealer’s. “But if I hear any more suggestions like that, I swear to God I will—”

“Come on, let’s not ruin the moment.” Maddy steps in, taking her turn to fuss over the baby.

“What do you expect to happen, Brax? You can’t keep her locked inside your cabin and never let her date.” Squealer laughs.

“She can date...” Brax eases up a bit, unstrapping his little girl from her car seat and taking her out carefully. “A priest,” he adds, placing a kiss on her head before he passes her to her mom.

“A priest?” Squealer laughs at him.

“Yeah, Squeal, a priest, because I’m tellin’ you now, any guy who thinks he’s gonna lay a finger on my daughter better have a direct link to fuckin’ God that he can rely on,” he warns, and when everyone around him laughs, he remains deadly serious.

“Can I go meet the new baby, Mama?” Charlie looks up at me at the same time that Skid steps through the doors. He’s got his overalls stripped down to his waist and the tight white tee he’s wearing on top is covered in oil.

“Course you can, sweetie.” I smile at Charlie before he rushes off to join everyone.

“Thought I’d come and see what all the fuss was about.” Skid leans in and places a kiss on my cheek. “Is Grace all good?” He looks over to the table where everyone is gathered.

“Seems to be.” I nod back, feeling awful for knowing something so huge and keeping it from him.

“Brax with a daughter.” Skid shakes his head. “He’s gonna have a heart attack before she reaches her sixteenth birthday.” He laughs to himself.

“Skid,” I say his name, having no idea what I’m going to back it up with.

He looks at me, waiting for whatever it is I have to say. I could rip off the Band-Aid and tell him right now. Get it out in the open, but that wouldn’t be right, not here.

“I didn’t say sorry,” I jib. “This morning, back at the house, I didn’t say sorry for storming out on you the way I did.”

“You didn’t need to say sorry, darlin’.” Skid kisses me again before heading over to join his friends. The way he lifts Charlie up onto his shoulders so he can see the baby in Grace’s arms over all the heads makes my stomach flip. And I smile for the first time since I saw those two pink lines in Rogue’s bathroom last night, excited by the idea of having his baby.

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Grace and Brax don’t stay at the club for too long, Grace is clearly exhausted and Brax seems eager to get his new family home. I help Maddy and Ella clear everything away and hang out with them while Dylan and Charlie play.

Over the past few weeks, I’ve come to really like the girls here. They don’t treat me like an outsider, they’ve welcomed me and my son like family, and I can see the positive effect it’s having on him. We could be happy here, this could be the start of something really good for us. But every time I start to see some light, I think about the man who is out there, waiting to drag us back to Hell.

“You okay? You seem distant,” Maddy asks, closing up her laptop and looking at me strangely.

“I’m fine, just tired. I didn’t sleep much last night.”

“Never knew Skid had it in him,” Ella leans over the table and whispers so the boys don’t hear, and I smile back at her.

All I can think about is the weight that’s hanging over me, I need to tell Skid about the situation we’re in and I need to tell him now.

“Could you watch Charlie for me?” I ask Ella as I stand up from my chair.

“Sure.” She looks a little confused when I start backing away from the table but I don’t have time to make up an excuse.

“You stay there with Dylan, do as Ella tells you, okay?” I look down to the floor where Charlie is rummaging through the huge box of Lego. Then spinning around, I rush out of the clubhouse and across the yard to the garage.

“Um, now’s not the time.” Rogue immediately blocks me when I step into the workshop. She’s got a worried look on her face which is alarming in itself.

“What do you mean now’s not the time? You’re the one who’s been insistent that I tell him. That’s what I’m here to do.” We both jump when a loud crash comes from the office and when I look past her shoulder and through the glass, I see Skid attacking everything in sight. I go to stop him but Rogue holds me back.

“Believe me, you do not wanna go in there,” she warns.

“What the hell happened?” I ask, watching him slump into his chair and bury his head in his hands.

“Skid just got a message from his brother.” Her worry is replaced with anger as her lip snarls like a wolf ready to bite.

“What kind of message?”

“You got a strong stomach?” Rogue asks, taking Skid’s phone off the workstation where it’s lying screen down.

“I...” Rogue doesn’t give me a chance to answer before she holds the screen up in front of me. What I see instantly turns me cold, and I can feel the image imprinting on my brain.

“Fuck’s wrong with you, Rogue?” Skid bursts through the office door and barges her out the way, snatching the phone from her hand and slamming it back on the counter. He reaches out to me, dragging me into his chest and holding me tight against him.

“What the hell was that, was it Car...” I can’t even finish my sentence.

“No.” Skid’s heart is beating rapidly against my ear, his grip on me so tight I can barely breathe.

“It looks like her though,” Rogue adds.

“Will you shut the fuck up?” Skid snaps.

“No, Skid, I won’t shut the fuck up. Because if this woman is gonna be with you, you can’t keep shit like this from her.” Rogue looks at me as I tug myself away from him and I realize what she just did wasn’t done out of spite. She’s right, me and Skid can’t keep these things from each other.

“That was a message Chop just sent. The woman in the photo, who I’m pretty certain is fucking dead, looks just like Carly. He’s taunting him,” she explains, looking murderous

“Take the thing to Maddy.” Skid reaches for the phone and shoves it into her hand. “Get her to trace where it was sent from.” He takes a step away from me, rubbing the bridge of his nose like his head is causing him pain.

“She’s right, he’s tauntin’ me.”

I don’t know if he’s talking to me or himself, but I close the distance between us and go to him.

“What do you need me to do?” I look up at him, feeling helpless.

“I need you to stay real fuckin’ close,” he tells me, covering his mouth with his hands and looking tortured.



“Her name’s Jenna Armstrong.” Maddy slides the brown envelope across the table at me. “She worked at the hospital where our John Doe rocked up last month. It was her phone he used to send you the message and the picture is clear enough for me to identify that it’s her when I compared it to her driver’s license photo.” Maddy keeps her head down. I know seeing the picture would have unearthed bad memories for her too, she was the first person to find Carly on the day Chop took her life. “I called the local PD and gave them an anonymous tip, so they’d find the body, pretended to be a concerned neighbor.”

I nod my head back at her gratefully, then notice the look Jessie gives her from across the other side of the barroom. I’ve drunk just enough whiskey to numb my head and calm my rage, so whatever’s left to be said can come right out.

“What ain’t ya telling me?” I look between the pair of them.

“Go on,” Jessie encourages her.

“There was a transaction made from her credit card at 3 p.m. today, just before the text was sent to you.”

“What kind of transaction?” I look up at her.

“One to a cargo plane company on the west coast.” I glance across the room at my nephew, who looks real shaken up. Everyone here would have seen the picture the sick bastard sent me by now. Poor kid’s just got a reminder of what the man who made him is capable of.

“I called them...” Maddy continues. “I convinced the person to tell me where it was going.”

“And...?” I look back at her expectantly.

“Where does every person on the FBI’s wanted list head?” She shrugs, looking sad and fuckin’ helpless.

“Mexico.” I laugh bitterly.

Chop always said it’s where he wanted to end up. He had a poster of a Mexican beach pinned to the back of his bedroom door when we shared a cabin together. His plan for our retirement, before I met Carly, was for us to be sipping back beers and watching pretty women pass our beach hut in thong bikinis.

“If he can charter a plane, we can too.” Jessie steps up, slamming his hand on the table to try and knock me outta the trance I’ve slipped into.

“It’s over, Jess,” I tell him, surprised at how relieved the words feel coming off my tongue.

“What do you mean it’s fuckin’ over? Don’t matter if he’s here or in fuckin’ Mexico, we find him and we kill him.”

“No, we won’t.” I shake my head and stare at the table. “He won.” I scrape back my chair and stand up, ready to leave, but Jessie puts himself in front of me and grabs my cut.

“Don’t let me hear that fuckin’ bullshit outta you!” he yells at me. “He ain’t fuckin’ won nothin’. We’re gonna find him and we’re gonna make him suffer.”

“I’m done, Jessie. I’m tired of it.”

“Listen to me, Skid.”

“No, *you* listen to *me*.” I shove him away. “I’m tryin’ to move on with my life. I’m happy. Killin’ him ain’t what my future’s about no more.” I think about Addison and Charlie and how I need to be here for them now.

Chasing the demons of my past all the way to Mexico is not the way to start a relationship. Maddy places her hand on Jessie’s shoulder, encouraging him to back down and as he

does, he looks real disappointed in me. I can understand why. What my brother did to his old lady really fucked her up. Chop's had an impact on everyone's lives in one way or another. But I'm exhausted from the hate I have for him. I leave the envelope with all Maddy's information about his latest victim on the table, heading out the club and toward my bike.

"I'll drive ya home." Tommy chases after me, and figuring I've drank far too much, I decide I should let him.

I get in the passenger seat of the cage and sit in silence as he drives us up the track toward my cabin. I sent Addison back home earlier, she looked real shaken up from what Rogue showed her and I didn't want her to see me getting any angrier. Tommy respects my need for silence and doesn't speak a word until he pulls up outside my cabin.

"I think what you're doing is right if that stands for anythin'," he tells me as I open the door to get out.

"It stands for somethin'," I assure to him gratefully, before slamming the door and stepping onto my porch.

"Hey." Addison springs up from the chair she's resting on when I get inside. She's jumpy and on edge. I guess that's what seeing a picture of an innocent, dead woman on your boyfriend's phone will do to ya.

"Where's Charlie?" I take a look around and see he ain't here.

"Sleepover at Dylan's. Ella thought we might want to be alone tonight."

"He ain't no trouble." I head over to the cupboard and grab a bottle of Jack from the top shelf.

"I know, but I didn't know where your head would be at, and Charlie really wanted to go anyway." She smiles.

I nod back at her as I unscrew the lid and knock some back, and she stares at me like she's expecting me to say something. Since I ain't got nothing, I hold out the bottle and offer her some.

“No, thanks.” She shakes her head in refusal.

“I’m sorry ‘bout what ya saw today,” I tell her, sitting on the couch and trying not to let the image he sent me get inside my head again. “Rogue can be real insensitive at times and—”

“I’m glad she showed me. I don’t want us to have secrets.” She comes and rests beside me, her body seeming so much tenser than usual.

“It appears Chop’s fucked off to Mexico,” I tell her, lying my head over the back of the couch and looking up at the ceiling.

“And you wanna go after him,” she guesses, and I don’t know if it’s disappointment or concern that I hear in her tone

“No.” I turn my head sideways and look at her. Despite the fact she looks so worried, she manages to smile back at me warmly.

“I’ve gotta leave all that behind me now. Focus on my future. I wanna make this work.” I slip my fingers between hers and take hold of her hand. “I should have told ya that last night instead of letting you storm outta here, but I was tryin’ to give ya some space. Ads, you were right, I’m gonna speak to my mom, tell her the tru—”

“I’m pregnant.” The words come spewing from her mouth and shock me speechless.

“I wasn’t supposed to tell you like that. I wasn’t gonna tell you at all. I mean... of course I was gonna tell you, just not tonight. Not after what happened—”

My finger lifts to press over her lips and stop her from rambling before I take in what she just said.

“What did you just say?” I feel my forehead crease and my pulse quicken.

“Skid, I’m sorry. I couldn’t keep it in anymore it felt like I —” She mumbles against my finger.

“Say it again,” I interrupt her for a second time before releasing her lips.

“I’m pregnant,” she repeats, looking really afraid.

“You sure about that?” I ask, wondering how long she’s known about this.

“I’m sure, I took three tests over at Rogue’s place last night.”

“You spoke to Rogue about this?” I sit up a little straighter and slide a hand through my hair.

“I didn’t want to worry you, not unless there was something to worry about.” She shrugs. “Which it turns out there is...” Her lips pick up into an awkward smile. “I get that the timing is awful and that it’s fast... real fast.” She blows out a breath and when the overwhelming urge I get to kiss her takes over, I slide my arm around her waist and lift her onto my lap. Holding her cheeks between my palms, I pull her lips onto mine and kiss the hell out of ‘em.

“Skid.” She eventually pushes me away, her expression now far more shocked than scared. “We need to talk about this. Aren’t you mad?”

“Yeah, I’m mad... mad ya didn’t tell me sooner.” I move one of my hands around her back and push my fingers under the shirt she’s wearing, so my fingertips can brush up her spine.

“You’re drunk, I should have waited until you were sober.”

“Trust me, darlin’, I’m very fuckin’ sober,” I assure her.

Addison’s right about one thing, this is fast, and it is real bad timing, but that don’t mean I ain’t happy about it. I’ve wanted to be a dad for as long as I can remember. The whole time I was watching Addison grow Charlie inside her, I was too grief-stricken and too ashamed to admit to myself that I wished he was mine. But now, the thought of her carrying my kid makes all the shit going on around us seem irrelevant, it also makes me feel a little feral.

“I’m scared,” she admits, her lips trembling like she’s about to burst into tears. “I’m scared you’re gonna freak out again, and this time I can’t have you do that.” I hate that all her apprehension stems from my actions.

“Hey, listen to me. That ain’t gonna happen. This is different. I’m a different person to who I was back then. I was confused, I found you, and I felt what we have right now, but it was too soon for me.”

“And now?” She looks so vulnerable.

“Now, I’m ready, Addison. I ain’t ever gonna freak out on ya ever again.” I trail my finger along the waistband of her jeans before popping open the top button and slipping my hand inside them so I can frame her stomach with the arch of my hand. It’s crazy to think there’s a little part of me inside her. It makes me wanna wrap her up in cotton wool and keep her hidden. It also gets my cock fuckin’ hard.

“You have to trust me. Trust that I’m gonna take care of ya. All of you,” I promise, looking up from my hand and into her big, tear-filled eyes.

“You’re not scared?” She bites her lip and fidgets nervously.

“Not even a little bit.” I shake my head. “All I’m feelin’ right now is fuckin’ grateful.”

“Don’t you have questions? We’re both adults, Skid, how did we let this happen?”

“There’s only one important question, darlin’.” I lift my hand up to stroke her cheek.

“And what’s that?” She stares down at me with a curious smile on her face.

“Where are we gonna raise our kids? Here, or back at your place?” She lets out a sigh of relief and laughs at the same time.

“Skid, I really don’t care.” She leans forward, resting her head in the crook of my shoulder, and as I wrap my arms around her body, I suddenly become very cautious of crushing her.

“Ya happy?” I ask, stroking her hair and wondering how she feels about all of this.

“I am now,” she whispers.



I stir awake when I feel that buzz in my lower stomach that I'm starting to get familiar with, something warm and wet is lapping between my legs. When I lift up the covers and see the top of Skid's head, the laugh I make sounds so carefree I question how it can belong to me.

"Good morning." I throw the covers back so I have full sight of him.

"Mornin', darlin'." He raises his eyes up my body and breaks contact so he can smile.

"Well, I must admit, I've been woken up in many different ways over the years, this is undoubtedly my faaa..." I lose the ability to finish my sentence when his tongue flicks expertly against my clit. Taking a fistful of his hair, I embrace it, letting my hips rotate to the rhythm of his tongue. I relax in the pleasure of being alone and intimate with the man who it's been impossible for me to forget over the past few years.

It doesn't take Skid's skilled tongue very long to have me coming all over it, and when I start thrusting desperately against his mouth for more, his eyes glare into mine and absorb every ounce of my pleasure. I see his smile reach all the way to his eyes and it makes me feel really special. I keep thinking about what Rogue told me the other night and the more I do, the more I like it. I want to be the person who heals this man. I want to make him happy, and more than anything I want to believe that we can have the life he's promised me.

"Have I told you before how hot you look when you come?" Skid kisses his way back up my body, spending extra time and attention on my flat stomach. He spent the whole

night touching me there last night, almost as if he didn't believe what I told him is real. I can barely believe it myself, that's why I was grateful Grimm bought so many testing kits.

"Is this okay?" he asks, making his way further up my body so his cock presses between my legs. Feeling him there is already starting to build me back up.

"It's fine." I nod back at him, a spike of thrill shooting up my spine when he raises one of my thighs against his side and slowly enters me. I close my eyes and sigh with relief because having him like this always makes me forget the world outside and the dangers lurking there.

"This was meant to be, you know that?" he tells me, sliding the strand of hair that's fallen on my cheek away as he slowly moves inside me.

"I made a real big decision about my future yesterday. I chose to let go of hate and focus on our future, on the same day you tell me you're gonna give me a kid." His eyes are so sincere, it makes me want to cry tears of pure joy.

Ever since I told him, Skid has made me feel so incredibly special. I have no doubt that he means what he said. Skid really is all in. His phone starts buzzing on the nightstand, but he continues to focus on me, sliding his cock steadily in and out of me and bringing me closer to the edge.

"Don't you think you should get that?" I whisper, my fingers tracing down his back when his thrusts become a little harder.

"Nope. Nothin's more important than what I'm doin' right now." He kisses me with one hand resting above my head and the other sliding up to cup around my chin.

"I gotta keep my baby mama happy," he whispers in my ear, his beard tickling my neck and making me smile.

"I like how that sounds," I admit.

Having sex with Skid is nothing like I expected it to be. I spent so long craving his touch, but at the same time wondering if I would ever get over what happened to me in

my past. Each time we're together all those bad times seem more and more distant.

"You're so perfect, Addison. I wish you knew how happy you're makin' me." His grip on my face becomes tighter and his breathing gets heavier. I come for him again. Holding nothing back as my nails dig into his skin and I clench around his thick, solid cock.

"I'm not scared anymore," I admit once his body has relaxed from his climax.

Skid kisses me in that possessive way that I seem to like more and more each time he does it. It makes me feel like I belong to him but in a completely different way from how I was owned before. Skid doesn't want to control me, he wants to protect me, he wants to protect us all, and even while knowing that Abraham is out there looking for me and my son, I can't remember a time in my life when I've ever felt safer.

"So, I take it Rogue knows all about this." Skid rolls onto his back and slides his hands under his head.

"Yep, but I vowed her to secrecy. I thought we should wait a little while before we told anyone else."

"You don't wanna tell people?" Skid turns to face me, propping his head on one hand while the fingers of his other draw a circle around my tummy button.

"Well, I don't know what people are gonna think about it. It's fast work, you gotta admit that."

"Stranger things have happened around here, darlin'." He chuckles to himself.

"I figured we should go see a doctor too. I left it too late with Charlie."

"Good thinkin'." He smiles. "The girls all use the same ob-gyn. The club should get a discount for the amount of business that's been goin' his way lately."

"Here." I suddenly make my choice, smiling while I watch his face crease in confusion.

"What?" He laughs at me.

“Last night, you asked me where I wanted us to raise our kids, and I just decided that it should be here.”

“Really?” He almost seems surprised.

“Skid, the more time I spend around your friends, the more I feel that thing I’ve been missing all my life. I’ve never seen Charlie smile the way he has since we’ve been here. These people are your family and I feel at home here.

I can see my answer pleases him, and the way his huge hand slides around my head and forces me back onto his lips confirms it.

“Here, it is then.”



“She told ya, didn’t she?” Rogue is wearing a creepily happy smile on her face when I stroll into the garage whistling.

“Yeah, she told me, and for now it’s stayin’ between the three of us,” I warn.

“Four.” She chews her lip. “I had to send Grimm on the testing kit mission.”

“Okay, the four of us.” I roll my eyes. “Oh, and Addison needs to see a doctor to get everythin’ confirmed. I was kinda hopin’ you could find a way of gettin’ the name of the doctor all the girls use, without causin’ a news bulletin.”

“Leave it to me.” Rogue winks, picking up the clipboard with today’s job list on. “Oh, and congratulations.” The smile on her face is genuine, and I match it before heading into the office to get in my overalls.

I swear my face is startin’ to ache from all the grinning I’ve been doin’ since Addison told me I’m gonna be a dad. Once I’m in my overalls I try Nora again, I missed a call from her earlier this morning and despite trying to call her back a few times since, I haven’t been able to get through.

“Skid.” Rogue sounds serious when she pops her head around the door.

“What’s up?” I look up at her and feel unnerved by the way she steps inside sheepishly and closes the door behind her.

“Has Grimm ever mentioned anything to you about us having kids?” She sits on the edge of the desk trying to be

casual and failing.

“You two?” I try to keep a serious look on my face, but a laugh just bursts right on out.

“Quit it, this ain’t a fuckin’ joke!” She takes me off guard when instead of a playful slap on the chest that I expect, she slams me hard into the filing cabinet behind me.

“Grimm don’t say much to anyone. You think he’s been thinkin’ about it?” I question her.

“I don’t know, he just seemed different the other night. When I called him and asked him to grab those tests for Addison I didn’t exactly explain myself right, I was focusing on her and trying to be helpful,” she explains, the innocent look on her face almost making me forget what she’s actually capable of.

“When he got home with them, he was...” She looks over her shoulder to check no one’s there to listen. “*Excited*,” she whispers with a terrified look on her face.

“He was excited?” I raise my eyebrows and rest my ass on my desk beside her, doing my best not to show how amusing this is. I’ve known Grimm a lot of years and I’ve never seen him look remotely excited once.

“Exactly.” Rogue nods, chewing nervously on her nail. “He’s dropped hints before now, just stupid stuff that I’ve not paid much attention to, but with all these babies springing up outta thin fuckin’ air, I’m starting to wonder if maybe he... you know.”

“And what if he does?” I fold my arms and start to take her seriously.

I swear for a split second I see a softness in her eyes before she shakes her head.

“Then he’s gonna be disappointed because there ain’t no way I could ever be a mother. I don’t even like kids.”

“Maybe you’d like your own?” I point out.

“It’s not gonna happen, Skid, and you know how much I love him.” That softness is back in her eyes again and it brings

with it the trace of a tear. “I’d give him anything, anything in this world, but I can’t give him that.” She suddenly reminds me of the eight-year-old girl me and my brother caught stealing parts all those years ago.

“Rogue, I don’t know if your man’s gettin’ those kinda ideas or not, no one really knows what goes on inside Grimm’s mind, but let me tell ya somethin’ I do know...” I push myself off the desk and wrap her up in my arms. Rogue always acts like she’s allergic to affection but she doesn’t push me away or protest the way I expect her to, instead, she rests her head against my chest, reminding me of how small she actually is. “You’re enough for him, Rogue. He loves you with every beat of that dark, twisted heart he’s got, and nothin’ is gonna change that.” I stroke her hair in my hand and smile to myself when I feel her arms wrap around me and squeeze. It doesn’t last long before she shoves me away.

“You’re gonna be a real good dad, you know that?” She smiles like she’s trying not to.

“I’m gonna do my best.”

“Well, you did your best for me, and look how I turned out.” She wobbles her head sarcastically, trying to sabotage the moment and distract me from the tear she wipes out of her eye.

“I guess it’s gonna be okay then. ‘Cause I couldn’t be prouder of that.” I nod my head at her and get back to work.

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It’s just past lunchtime when Addison and Charlie call into the garage, it’s strange how all of a sudden Addison looks so different. I don’t know if it’s all in my head, but she has a real healthy glow about her, and I love the cute, little smile she makes at me that suggests we have a secret.

“Hey, darlin.” I move over to kiss her and when my hand automatically slides across her tummy, she grabs it by the wrist and widens her eyes at me.

“I was just taking Charlie here into the clubhouse for some of Marilyn’s meatloaf. You want me to bring you some over?”

I notice Jessie heading my way with a serious look on his face, and know whatever he’s got to say can’t be good news.

“Nah, I’m good,” I tell her. Faking them both a smile, before VP stands beside us.

“Meatloaf? Hell, you better get in there quick. Marilyn’s meatloaf goes fast.” He puts on a front for Charlie.

“Okay, let’s head in before it all goes.” Addison takes Charlie’s hand and heads toward the club while Jessie quickly grabs my arms and marches me into the office, slamming the door behind us.

“What the hell’s happened?”

“We gotta a situation,” he tells me under his breath.

“What kinda situation?”

“Tawk just called from Long Beach.”

“And...”

“And Cliff’s taken it too far this time.”

“Took it too far, how?”

“He killed a seventeen-year-old girl last night. A pregnant seventeen-year-old girl.” VP scrubs both his hands over his face.

“You think he—”

“Of course, he was the fuckin’ father. This ain’t good for the club, Skid. If the feds start lookin’ more closely they’re gonna have a field day with what they find.”

“You spoke to Prez?”

“Yeah, I spoke to him, he told me to do what I think is best.”

“And what *do* you think is best?” I ask.

“I’m considerin’ sending Grimm to fuckin’ L.A. to cover up the fuckin’ murder of an innocent girl, and I’m here so ya

can talk me out of it.” He sits down in my chair and sighs.

“I get your logic.” I take a seat on the edge of the desk, reaching for the drawer where I keep the good shit and pulling it out. “No one can clean up like Grimm can—”

“But what about my fuckin’ morals, Skid? The club has rules, no women and no kids. I send Grimm to clean up and I’m helpin’ that cunt cover for the fact he broke those fuckin’ rules.”

“Which is why you have to. If he gets locked up, he will rat for all he can gain and you know it. We cover this and keep him outta jail, we decide his fate. Prez can come home now, we don’t need those votes anymore, not after he broke the rules.”

“We can’t make this common knowledge yet, not while Tawk is still workin’ undercover. I won’t put him in danger, and we still need to know which of those Long Beach men are worth keepin’ their cut.” Jessie makes a valid point as he lights a cigarette. “Ruckus is workin’ the inside with Tawk, and Cliff has made no secret about what he’s done. The sick bastard’s actin’ like he’s proud of it. If Ruckus can make Cliff think havin’ Grimm intervene is his idea, there will be no suspicion.”

“When’s Prez due back?” I ask, unable to keep track of things these days, my head’s been all over the place.

“It was gonna be a few days, him and Troj still had two Charters left to visit. Prez may wanna make the visit outta respect. The nomads are gonna start arriving here in dribs and drabs over the next few days for that meeting Prez called ‘em in for. He was gonna speak to them all too. This is a big deal. The club has never taken down a President before.”

“Sounds like this shit’s really happenin’.” I think about Addison and Charlie, and how all my focus has to be on protecting them.

“I gotta get this shit with Abraham cleared up before it does.”

“I hear ya, brother. You heard from Tripp?”

“Not in a few days.”

“You know him, he’ll sit on a target as long as he has to, and with this one, we need to be sure.”

“Yeah, well, he has no idea what the target looks like. Addison swears she saw the old fucker a few weeks ago when I took her out. He could be back there, he could be close by. I just don’t know, and I hate that.” I scratch my hand through my beard.

“You were hopin’ he’s headed back home?” Jessie proves he can read me like a book.

“I’m gonna kill him on his territory, not ours. I’m gonna kill every single one of those bastards, includin’ the man who calls himself her father. They’re writin’ rules that suit their agendas and selling it as God’s plan. I need to know that no one who feels entitled to take Addison and her son is left livin’.

Jessie nods his head at me, he knows there ain’t a man in this Charter that wouldn’t do the same if it was their old lady in danger.

“Can you find someone to help Rogue out for an hour? I gotta go make a house call.”

I’ve still not gotten hold of Nora, and since I had three back-to-back missed calls from her I figure whatever it was she had to tell me was important.

“I’ll help her myself, it’s ‘bout time I got my hands dirty.” He winks as I step out of my overalls and hand them over to him. Then I grab my cut and head out to my bike.

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I arrive outside Nora’s house twenty minutes later. She doesn’t answer and when I twist the handle and find that it’s unlocked, I let myself in. There’s no sign of her anywhere, which is strange. Her car’s on the drive and her TV is blasting. The spare key I gave her to Addison’s house all those years ago is

missing from her key rack by the back door, so that's where I head next.

I notice Addison's front door is ajar when I step up onto her porch and it makes a creepy creaking sound when I push it open.

"Nora!" I call her name and still get no response.

"Nor..." The rest of her name gets stuck in my throat when I turn the corner into the kitchen and find her. The table's been pushed up against the wall so her lifeless body could be laid out in a star shape. Her throat's been slit open and what chills me to the fuckin' bone, are the words that have been written in blood on the kitchen cupboard behind her.

SHE'S MINE AND SHE'S NEXT

I stumble back as I take out my phone and dial Jessie.

"Where's Addison?" I ask, my chest feeling like it's being crushed.

"You okay?" he asks.

"*Where the fuck is she, Jess?*" I yell back at him.

"Relax, I just came in for a coffee and she's right here helping Jasmine with the twins and Faith in the clubhouse. What's wrong?"

I breathe a sigh of relief. "Don't let her outta your sight, not even to go back to the cabin."

"Skid, what the fuck's gone down?"

"You didn't send Grimm to L.A. yet, did ya?" I check.

"No, why? Skid, you're worrying me."

"I need ya to send him to Addison's place. Nora's dead. They fuckin' killed her."

"Jesus Christ." Jessie sounds stunned.

"Not a word to Addison, she ain't to know yet."

"I hear ya and I'll get Grimm on his way to ya." I don't respond, just hang up the phone and stare at the body on the

floor, sadness and anger creeping through my veins while I try to stay focused.

That fucker came here, into her home, again, and he took the life of the person I had watching out for her.

I move on autopilot, out the door, and back outside to my bike. I make the journey into town with my head only focused on one thing and when I pull my bike up outside the tattoo studio, I march right on in to find Nyx.

“Could ya draw someone if you’d never seen them,” I interrupt him from the tattoo he’s putting on the girl who works across at the deli.

“Skid, you good?” Nyx places down his tattoo gun.

“You know, like those people who work for the cops and take the witnesses’ descriptions and turn them into a sketch.”

“I could try.” He shrugs, still looking puzzled by my intrusion.

“I need ya to come and talk to Addison right now.” I grab the sketchbook that’s on the desk. “I think you could draw me what I’m lookin’ for.” I head for the girl who’s sitting in the chair with half a lotus inked on her ankle.

“Sorry, darlin’, we’re closed for the day.” I grab her purse and the only jacket that’s on the hook by the door before I start guiding her out.

“Skid, what the fuck?” Nyx stares at me like I’ve lost my mind.

“Come on, we gotta get back to the club. Hayden, be ready to make a move.” I point my finger at him before I coax Nyx out the door with me.



I sit in the van about 300 yards away from the tattoo studio and watch my brother come out with Nyx a few minutes after he entered. Skid seems on edge, maybe he's heard that I got myself a plane to Mexico and really was hell-bent on killing me after all. It was the only thing I used Jenna's card for. I knew that smart little bitch who gets Jessie's balls all in a twist would have tracked the phone that I sent my brother his "parting" gift from. I also knew she would have made it her business to find out every last detail about the woman who it belonged to. That's why I paid for that cargo plane to take me to Mexico. What she won't have known is that the plane left and I didn't.

I stare out the windshield at the town I used to call home and wonder how things might have been if I took another path. If I'd have asked Carly out for a drink that day instead of trying to be decent. Would she have fallen in love with me instead of him? Would that intensity I'd felt for her eventually have died off? Would she have ever become a bore to me? I guess I'll never know.

I wait a few minutes for them to get a head start before I follow them, and I'm glad I do because if I hadn't I would have missed what I'm seeing now.

One of the club cages pulls up outside the hardware store. Grimm gets out, slamming the door before he heads inside and when the white Mercedes screeches to a halt behind him, I see Rogue.

She gets out and chases him with a wallet, that I assume belongs to him, held up in her hand.

I never had Rogue pegged as the settling-down type. Even when me and my brother took her in and gave her a job, she remained closed off... to everyone but Skid of course. Skid was a good teacher, he kept calm, explained things clearly, and took a hella lot of pride when he saw her get something right. While I took more of a tough love approach with her.

I could tell from the day I first saw her that she was gonna be a stunner, the kinda gal who could have any guy she wanted. I took pity on her for that. I'll bet she's forgotten half the shit I taught her, like how to throw a decent punch, and how to hotwire a car. Where Skid put her on a pedestal, I kept her humble by pulling her up on the mistakes she made. I watched that little tomboy grow into a woman, with perfect tits that weren't fake, and a firecracker attitude that would bring any man to his knees. Then on her eighteenth birthday, I taught Rogue a lesson that she never would forget.

*To trust no one.*

I don't think I've ever come the way I did while I was inside her tight, little pussy. There's no better feeling than taking someone's power. Rogue has had a hard exterior since the day she rocked up at the club, but I saw right through it. I held off for a real long time before I gave in to the urge I had to break through that shield. I got fed up with the way she'd look at Skid like he was some kinda God and all the little inside jokes they had together. I wanted to take what he'd worked so hard on and ruin it.

After I fucked Rogue, I never expected to see her again. I assumed she'd run away and take her issues elsewhere. Turns out she was made of stronger stuff than I gave her credit for. She arrived at work that very next day, acting as if nothing ever happened. It was almost as if she was testing me, playing her own game, but I knew I was the real victor. I knew that from the tiny flinches she'd make whenever I got close. Sometimes I'd catch her staring at the spot where I took her, I'd wonder if the twisted little bitch was going over it in her head. I'd smile at her when she came out of those little trances, and that was where I'd find her most beautiful. When she was

lost in her nightmares, a nightmare where I was the monster and Skid couldn't save her.

I was the one she shared a secret with now. One she'd take to the grave with her because she was so repulsed by it.

I watch her and Grimm come back out of the store together. Grimm tosses the brown paper bag on the seat of the truck after he's opened the door and Rogue pulls on the lapels of his cut, kissing him like they're never gonna see each other again. I could make that possible.

Grimm never was good for much other than cleaning up. I could kill him blindfolded with one arm tied behind my back. I'll bet that would really hurt her. I can see from the way her pretty blue eyes sparkle that she's in love with him. It makes me question how much you can take from a person before they snap.

Rogue's destruction would really be one to watch, she wouldn't go quietly, she'd burn down the whole world and take it with her. I chuckle to myself as I restart the engine. Then I drive right past the little bitch. Her eyes follow me, staring through the tinted glass as if she can see right through it. Rogue may think she has some kinda super power but she don't. The night I taught her that lesson she'd looked just like every other helpless victim I've encountered when I was finished with her. But seeing her happy makes me wonder if I really am finished with her. Seems to me there's more for me to take...



“His eyes are a little closer together,” I explain to Nyx, who takes the eraser he has wedged between his fingers and makes the correction to the sketch he’s been very patiently doing for the past forty-five minutes. I don’t know what happened to Skid while he was out, but he’s come back in a completely different mood to how he left. He’s agitated and jumpy, and I can tell from the way the other brothers are acting that something’s not right.

It hasn’t been easy watching a man who terrifies me reform right before my eyes, and when Nyx holds up his final sketch and I see an almost photographic likeness to Abraham, I rush off my chair and head straight to the bathroom. Skid marches in right behind me, his large heavy hands rubbing my shoulders as I spew my guts up into the toilet basin.

“I’m sorry, darlin’, I know this can’t be easy on you.” He helps me back onto my feet when I’m done, then runs some cold water for me to splash on my face.

“You need to tell me what’s going on, where’s all this suddenly come from?”

“I need to know what he looks like,” Skid tells me, wiping under my eyes with the pads of his thumb.

“Tripp needs to know what he looks like so he can look out for him comin’ to and from the village.”

Skid looks so different from how he did this morning. Suddenly he looks tired and under pressure, I wish there was something I could do to calm him.

“I got that appointment,” I tell him with a smile, hoping it will ease him up a little.

“That was quick.” I notice some of the tension drop from his shoulders already.

“Dr. Blowit had a cancellation for tomorrow afternoon. I figured we could ask one of the girls to look after Charlie and go together.” I wipe the corners of my mouth with the paper towel he passes me.

“*Blow it?*” There’s a hint of a smile on his face now, and when I nod my head he chuckles with me.

“You can come, right?” I check.

“I wouldn’t miss it.” Skid takes my hips and pulls me closer, so he can kiss the top of my head.

“You ready to face what’s out there again?” He asks.

“Yeah, I’m ready.” I smile up at him and let him lead me back out to the barroom.

“You okay?” Jasmine is the first person we see and she looks worried. She took Charlie into the ladies’ bar while I worked with Nyx and now that I can’t see him anywhere, I’m starting to feel anxious.

“Yeah, it was just a little overwhelming seeing him again. You’re real good at what you do.” I smile at Nyx.

“I better get back to the studio.” He nods his head sympathetically before he heads out the doors.

“Where’s Charlie?” I ask Jasmine, doing another quick scan of the room and still not seeing him.

“He’s with Lydia, still in the ladies’ bar. And he’s fine,” Jasmine assures me, placing her hand on my arm.

“Come on, I’ll get ya both home,” Skid whispers before he kisses my temple. “Jess, can you get that picture sent to Tripp? See if he’s seen him?” He calls across to Jessie.

“But I thought you were gonna—”

The firm head shake Skid gives him immediately shuts him up.

“Sure thing.” Jessie nods, looking almost as puzzled as I am.

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“What happened?” I wait until we’re alone in Skid’s cabin and Charlie’s in his room before I question him. He’s keeping something from me and I want to know what it is.

“Nothin’ happened, I’m just wantin’ to get things dealt with.” He tugs me toward the kitchen so we’re away from Charlie’s bedroom door.

“He’s gonna be needin’ to get back to normal with school and now with the baby... I don’t want you to have anythin’ to worry about.”

He kisses my forehead before he goes to pull away but I quickly pull him back.

“Skid, if you kill him, you will make sure you’re smart about it, won’t you? I can’t have you ending up in jail.” It’s crossed my mind more than a few times that this could all go wrong. Us being together and being happy all seems too good to be true after all we’ve suffered.

“That ain’t gonna happen.” Skid shakes his head at me.

“I’m taking that as a promise because we’re all gonna really need you.” My hand touches my stomach and I feel a smile lift my cheeks. I’m starting to come around to the idea of us having this baby together. It may not have been planned but it feels kind of perfect.

“I don’t want you to worry about a single thing. We’re gonna be okay,” he promises, placing his hand over mine and kissing me.

Skid doesn’t return to the garage, instead, he hangs out here with me and Charlie. It’s nice to see him and Charlie building a relationship together. Charlie looks at Skid as if he’s

some kind of superhero and Skid has this way of making it seem like he's always been with us. They make each other laugh like old friends. Despite the afternoon we spend together being fun, I can still tell there's something on Skid's mind. Something he's not gonna tell me.

After dinner, I give Charlie a bath and sit in the armchair while Skid reads him a bedtime story on the couch. I think back to the conversation we had this morning about us staying here, and how today has confirmed that it's what I really want. I was a little worried that spending time with Carly's sister would be awkward, but it wasn't at all.

Jasmine was really easy to get along with, she seemed excited about me being here with Skid. Though sitting here now and feeling so content does make me wonder how Carly would feel. Everyone tells me she was the nicest person they ever met, that she would want Skid to be happy, but looking around the walls of her home and seeing Skid cuddled up and laughing with my little boy while our baby grows inside me, makes me feel like I'm stealing something from her.

I feel sad that I never got to meet her. She was such a big part of Skid's life. I understand that he's always gonna love her, and he's always gonna miss her, which is why it feels strange that she will forever be a stranger to me.

"You okay?" Skid pauses from the book he's reading, narrowing his eyes across the room at me.

"I'm fine." I use the sleeve of my sweater to dry the tear that's escaped my eye and is running down my cheek.

"Ya sure?" He frowns.

"I'm just really happy." I smile back, and he nods his head and smiles himself before getting back to the story.

Charlie chooses Skid to tuck him into bed when the story's done, and Skid gets up dutifully, taking him to his room like he's been doing it ever since the day he was born. He comes back out a few minutes later, flopping himself back on the sofa and tapping his knee for me to go to him.

“You look tired.” I get up from the chair and move toward him, sitting on his lap and relaxing in his arms.

“I’m good.” He breathes me in through his nostrils and holds me tighter.

“Do you think Carly would have liked me?” I ask curiously, and when he pulls back his head and stares at me in confusion, I wonder if I’ve overstepped the mark.

“I’m sorry I was just... I just wonder what she would think about all this.” I wish I hadn’t asked, especially now that he looks so sad.

“Carly would have liked you very much.” His voice comes out raspy as his finger draws a soft circle on my thigh that he focuses real hard on.

“I hope so. I... I...”

“Just say what you wanna say, Ads,” Skid whispers when he notices me struggling.

“I feel like I’m stealing the life she should have had.” I force out the words, trying not to tear up again, and the creases in Skid’s forehead furrow deeper as my words sink in.

“You’re not stealin’ anything.” He eventually shakes his head. “Carly was all about bein’ positive. When I was havin’ those real dark days, I used to hate myself for letting her down and not findin’ anything to be positive about. I felt myself sinking, lower and lower, and I’d imagine her screamin’ at me to pull myself back up. I knew she’d be angry at me when I was pushing away all the people who wanted to be there for me. Carly wouldn’t see this as you stealin’ anything away from her. She’d be grateful for everything you’re givin’ me.” He smiles sadly.

“I wanna know more about her. I want you to feel like you can talk about her. It’s always gonna be okay for you to still love her, Skid.”

“That’s exactly the kinda thing she’d have said.” He smiles, tucking my head back into his shoulder and holding me in his arms.



“I ’m tellin’ ya, Skid. It’s him. He arrived back here about eight this morning.” Tripp gives me the news I want to hear.

“So, he’s back at the village?” I can’t help feeling excited. If I know that he’s there it means I can get to him.

“Yep, he’s here alright.”

“And you’re ready to disable those explosives?”

“That’s amateur stuff. What I needed was to know these men’s routine, now I got ‘em figured.”

“Sit tight. I’ll be there tomorrow.” I hang up the phone when Addison comes out of the bedroom. She’s smiling contently to herself as she stretches her arms out above her head, lifting her t-shirt up over her navel.

“I can’t wait for you to get all big and round again.” I go to her and stroke her flat belly as I kiss her.

“Shhhh.” She glances over to Charlie’s bedroom door. “And that’s something I’m not looking forward to.” She rolls her eyes. “That and the feeling that I’m gonna throw up every goddamn second.”

“You ain’t feelin’ sick now, are ya?” I check.

“Not yet. But I’m sure it will come.” She screws up her face before heading toward the kitchen to get herself some breakfast.

“What time is the appointment today?” I check.

“It’s at three. I already asked Jasmine if she could watch Charlie and she’s fine with it. I told her we were going back to my place to get more stuff. Which reminds me, I was hoping we could call in on Nora after, let her know how we’re doing. She’d never admit it but she will be worrying.”

“No!” I snap when I think about Nora lying dead on Addison’s kitchen floor.

*I’m really gonna make this fucker pay when I get to him.*

“I spoke to her a few days ago. Told her you guys were safe.” I recover myself quickly and it seems to do the trick. It’s horrible having to lie, but knowing how scared it will make her leaves me no choice. I don’t want Addison to feel scared right now. I want her to feel secure and excited about having our baby.

“I’ll come pick you up at 2:15.” I kiss her on the cheek before I head for the door

“Can’t wait.” She smiles as I leave her, looking like she hasn’t got a worry in the world. Exactly how it should be.

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“You spoke to Tripp?” Jessie is waiting for me by the garage doors when I pull up.

“Yeah, I’m headin’ out to join him tomorrow mornin’.” I lift up the roller door, wondering where Rogue is. She always gets here before I do.

“You’re leavin’ tomorrow? Skid, who ya gonna take with ya?” he questions.

If there was anyone I’d want beside me it would be him, but I know with Prez away that ain’t gonna be an option.

“Guess I’m kinda limited, Troj is with Prez, you gotta hold down the fort. Ain’t no way we’re gonna be pullin’ Brax away from that baby girl of his for a while. Takin’ the Temper Twins into a cult commune is gonna be a fuckin’ disaster.” I reel all the non-options out first.

“I sent Grimm off to L.A. last night to make sure Cliff covered his tracks properly,” Jessie adds, and I can see from the snarl on his lips that he detests the decision he’s had to make.

“Okay, so I got Thorne, Storm, Nyx, and Hayden.”

“You got Storm,” Jessie corrects me, looking guilty as he lights himself a cigarette.

“What?”

“Burlusconi had a tip-off from his connection in the ATF and he needs his supply shifted pronto, the Nevada boys are making the drop-off tonight and I gotta ship it right on out of here.”

“Okay, me and Storm it is.” I shrug. I’ve got Tripp, and I’ve seen Storm in action enough times to know he’s worth two men at least.

“You could always wait a few more days. Go in with a full squad,” he suggests.

“I don’t need a full squad, Jess, and I’ve waited long enough. Tripp identified him from Nyx’s sketch. He’s there now.”

“Just be careful. I don’t like all this cult shit. Those fuckers be crazy.”

“Not as crazy as a Soul with a woman to protect.” I slap him on the back, knowing that he’ll understand exactly what I mean.



“Stay cool and let me do the talkin’. If he gets disrespectful, don’t bite,” I warn Troj before we step into the ally that leads to the tiny bar where I know we’ll find Raze.

“Ain’t gonna let no fucker disrespect ya.” Troj shakes his head at me as if I should know better.

“I told ya, keep your cool. We’re gonna need him and I know for a fact he ain’t gonna like what I have to say.”

I let myself into the boozier bar, barely able to see across the room for smoke, and just like I predicted, I find Raze sitting at the end of the bar. He’s got his cigarette balanced between his lips as he turns the pages of the local newspaper.

“Much happenin’?” I interrupt him, and when he slowly lifts his eyes and sees me, he don’t look impressed.

“Put a shot in that.” He slides his coffee mug across to the guy he’s got serving behind his bar, keeping his deadpan eyes focused on me and waiting for me to tell him why I’m here.

“Where’s your cut?” I question, taking the barstool beside him while Troj remains on his feet like he’s waiting for something to break out.

“Hung up, where it belongs.” Raze nods at his bartender gratefully when he delivers him back his mug. Then when the barman looks at me for an order, I gesture my eyes to the bottle of Jameson behind the bar.

“You didn’t RSVP my invitation.” I start things off.

“I don’t have to attend your little meetin; for you to know where I stand on the Long Beach matter... I’m assumin’ that’s

why you've called us all in." Raze takes a long drag of his cigarette then looks back to his newspaper.

"Good to know you still have interests in the club you're a part of." I narrow my eyes.

"Takin' down Cliff has been a real long time fuckin' comin'." He lifts his head and glares at me.

"Word spreads fast." I shrug, accepting my drink with a friendly nod toward the barkeep. "Fuck the nomad meet, Raze, that's not why I'm here." I'm growing tired of the small talk real quick.

"Then why are ya here?" he snaps, and when Troj goes to take a step forward and teach him a little lesson on respect, I hold up my hand to halt him.

"I'm here because you're still a member of this club, and right now this club needs ya," I tell him, keeping my calm.

"What could you possibly want from me?" He chuckles to himself.

"I got all the votes I need to take Cliff outta power, I don't even need 'em now, due to recent events. What I don't got is someone to take his place," I tell him.

"Bullshit, you got plenty of people who can step into the role. What's wrong with Brian's kid, he's your little protégé, ain't he?"

"Jessie's needed in Colorado," I bite back at his suggestion.

"Gettin' sentimental in your old age, are ya, Jimmer?" Raze laughs at me again and when Troj goes to move closer, I stand up and block him.

"Trust me, you *do not* want to do that," I warn him under my breath.

"Raze, you got a duty to this club," I turn back around to remind him.

"If you came here to ask me to go run that shit show for ya, you might as well walk straight back out the door and take

your little fuck boy.”

“What the fuck did you just call me?” Troj launches forward, nothing I can do or say now is gonna stop this. So I do all I can do and knock back my drink, tap the empty glass on the bar for the keeper to fill back up, and watch the fuckin’ show.

It’s about ten minutes later before the two of them call it quits. The barroom is wrecked, there’s blood everywhere, and both of them look ready to go another round. It’s been a while since I’ve seen Raze fight, he’s in his mid-forties now so he’s got a few years on Troj, but he sure ain’t lost his touch.

“You ready to talk now?” I wait for him to catch his breath and wipe away the blood that’s dripping from his nose before I toss him my pack of cigarettes. Troj stares at him with the cocky grin he always takes into the ring with him.

“Forget it, Jimmer, I ain’t no president.”

“You got everythin’ it takes to be a president. That’s why I’m here,” I disagree with him.

“I ain’t the same person I was back then, I can’t lead people. I don’t even fuckin’ *like* people.” He shakes his head, sparking up a cigarette before he lifts up the stool from the floor and places it upright so he can sit on it.

“Long Beach has been run into the fuckin’ ground, Cliff’s been makin’ deals with people I ain’t ever heard of. Half his own club is rooting for this take-down to happen. They need someone to pull them out the shit they’re in.”

“No.” The stubborn fucker keeps on shaking his head at me.

“Raze, I’m askin’ ya as a friend. Your dad—”

“Don’t you dare bring my dad into this.,” he warns, pointing his finger at me with a vicious look on his face.

“Vex was so proud the day you got the cut, he knows as well as I do, you were fuckin’ born to do this.” I take the ring Vex gave me a few days ago from my pocket and hold it out for him. Twelve of these were made when the club was first

formed. The original Dirty Dozen, the start of a legacy, and Vex was one of ‘em.

“He wanted me to give ya this.”

I see the guilt on Raze’s face as he stares at it. It’s been a long time since he spoke to his father. Vex retired some time ago and I noticed a huge difference in him when me and Troj called in on him. Time is becoming precious to the old man and that’s something Raze should be aware of.

“He ain’t dead yet, is he?” Raze keeps his eyes focused on the ring in my hand.

“No, he’s holdin’ on. Determined to die up on that mountain. I think he’s hopin’ the whiskey will kill him before the cold does.” I smile fondly when I think about my old uncle.

“I don’t want it, Jimmer. I like my life how it is.” Raze refuses to look at me or the ring now.

“You really expect me to believe that?” I take a look around the run-down old bar he’s running in this dead-end town. “Am I missin’ somethin’ here? You got an old lady keepin’ you warm at night? Kids aspirin’ to be you?” I mock him.

“I don’t need any of that shit.”

“Which is exactly why Long Beach fuckin’ needs you, brother.” I use his words to prove my point. “They need someone focused, someone who is gonna lead but listen. No distractions.”

“I ain’t doin’ it, Prez, I ain’t goin’ back there.”

“Maybe it’s time you faced up to your problems rather than runnin’ away from ‘em.” I place his father’s ring on the table before I get up and head out the door with Troj following after me.

“What a dick.” Troj grips his bars when we get back onto the street.

“He’s the best choice for Long Beach. Yeah, he’s a little bitter and twisted, but he’s smart and he makes good decisions.”

“Why him? He’s a nomad. To be a leader you gotta be a team player,” Troj questions me.

“Raze knows how to be a team player, he’s just lost his faith in the brotherhood. He’ll come around.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“Because as stubborn as he is, he ain’t ever backed down from a challenge before.”

I start my engine and begin heading for home.



“I must have knocked you up the first time we did it.” Skid is still holding the image in his hand, staring at the tiny little dot as he pushes open the door and leads us out onto the street. The huge wide grin on his face is bursting with excitement.

“Give it here.” I snatch it out of his hand and try to make something out of it.

“It doesn’t look anything like a baby.” I focus really hard, yet all I see is a black blob.

“You heard what Blowit said, they count it from the first day of your last period, which means you’re only five to six weeks. It’ll look much more like a baby when we come back in a few weeks,” he assures me, hanging his arm over my shoulder and kissing me.

“I’m so glad you were there to take it all in. I can’t remember a thing he said.” I’m still in shock that this is actually happening.

“I don’t think we should tell anyone yet. It’s still early.” I bite my lip nervously. I don’t know why, but I keep getting this feeling that something’s gonna go wrong.

“Whatever you want, darlin’, but just so you know, if it was up to me, I’d tell the whole goddamn world.” He makes me gasp when he lifts me off my feet, not caring that we’re in the middle of a busy sidewalk when he kisses my lips and carries me over to his bike.

“I’m real fuckin’ happy, Ads,” he tells me, his face serious as he raises my chin with the crook of his finger and kisses me again. “I’ve been thinking... When Riley came to the club

with her son, Mads did her thing and fixed him a birth certificate.”

“Okay?” I stare back at him, confused.

“I was thinkin’ that if it’s okay with you, we could ask her to do her magic and put me on Charlie’s. We don’t have to, not if you thin—”

“Yes,” I answer him immediately, tears already welling in my eyes when I think about how happy that would make him. Charlie may not have known Skid very long but he loves him, and this gesture is so sweet it makes me want to cry.

“You look insanely hot when you do that,” Skid tells me, snatching the picture of our baby out of my hand when I get distracted.

“When I do what?” I laugh, not even attempting to reach behind his back and grab it back.

“When you look all happy and...” I steal the words out of his mouth when I decide to spread my legs a little wider on his saddle, enough that he can see the cotton of my panties under my skirt.

“Are you trying to get us arrested for indecent exposure?” He grabs one of my thighs in his hand and squeezes.

“I’ll let you into a little secret.” I pull him onto me using his cut, ignoring the stares we’re getting from the people passing by.

“The worst thing about my pregnancy last time was how it made me crave you, it got so bad it drove me crazy,” I confess. “There were times when I touched myself and thought about you,” I admit, ruining my attempt to be seductive when I blush at the memory. “This time, I’m hoping I’m not gonna have that problem.”

“You...” Skid leans forward and kisses me. “Can count on it.” He trails kisses all the way down to my stomach, then shifting his eyes to glance at the picture he’s holding in his hand, he kisses me there too.

“You’re gonna have everythin’ you need and then some,” he promises before pulling away and saddling the bike himself.

“But not here where everyone can see. I’m takin’ ya home.”

“I like the sound of home.” I wrap my arms around his waist and reach forward to kiss his beard-covered cheek. This time using his distraction to snatch the picture from his hands and study it again.

“It’s still just a black dot.” I shake my head and laugh.

“The most beautiful black dot in the world.” Skid takes it back and tucks it inside his cut pocket.



I watch them, wondering who this woman is and where she came from. Whoever she is, she's sure making my brother forget about the love of his fuckin' life. The selfish bastard looks like he ain't got a care in the world as he strolls outta the doctor's office staring at the picture in his hand like he just won the fuckin' lottery.

It reminds me of the time Luciana presented me with a picture and told me I was gonna be a father. Naturally, I told her to get rid of it. I never made her no promises, not even from the start. I guess it's a good thing she didn't listen to me since it was Tommy who saved my life. But Mary-Ann, she should have fuckin' listened. I wouldn't have had to have her killed if she did. I swear she did it on purpose and that I was part of some plan she had to hurt Jimmer. She always knew she wasn't the real love of his life. His heart has always belonged to his club. A club I'm going to destroy.

I watch my brother sweep the woman he's knocked up off her feet and carry her to the bike. You'd never guess from the happiness on his face that he was a widower, a man whose wife was so tragically taken from him. Carly's forgotten about now, just an old memory to him. He screwed up her life by bringing her to the club and now he's just moving on. I wonder what Mama would think of her precious boy now?

The two of 'em look disgustingly happy, like a scene at the end of a cheesy movie. I could end it for him right here, right now. Cross the street and slit her throat. It was always my biggest regret after I ended Carly, that he wasn't there to see it. Skid should have been there for it, he should have heard how

she screamed his name and expected him to come and save her. I never got to see his suffering.

The cute, little brunette that's sitting on his saddle could be my chance to remind him that he's not perfect. When it comes to what's important, Skid's a real failure.

I start the engine and drive back toward the Blue Spruce resort, there's a spot quarter of a mile from the gates where I can park out of sight but have the perfect vision through the trees. I've spent many hours in the past watching them come and go from that spot, lurking right under their noses. I'll spend a little more time... lurking. Until the perfect time comes, then I'll strike, and I'll strike hard.



“Do you really have to go back to the clubhouse?” Maddy has that needy little look in her eyes when I start pulling my jeans back on. Since Prez has been away I’ve had a lot to deal with, between trying to knock her up and running the club I’m exhausted.

“I’ll top ya up later, darlin’. I gotta talk Thorne and Nyx through the run I’m sending ‘em on.” I drag my tee back over my head.

“You don’t have to make it sound so crude.” She twitches her nose at me.

“Says the one who texted me... sayin’... and I quote... *‘get home, I need your baby juice.’*” I laugh at her when her cheeks flush pink.

“I was *trying* to be funny.” She kneels up on the mattress.

“Well, you aren’t a comedian, Maddy Donavon, but ya cute as hell.” I kiss the tip of her nose.

“I’m sorry for being such a distraction, I know you’re under a lot of stress.”

“You can distract me like that anytime you want.” I smile at her, loving how far we’ve come over the past few months. Ever since Maddy told me she wanted us to start trying, just like everything she does, she’s been committed to the cause. She’s even started working from home more often so we can steal moments like this one.

“You wanna hear a secret?” She chews on her nail, not intending to look seductive, but getting my dick good and hard

all over again.

“I don’t know, do I?” I act unbothered, knowing that she’s clearly bursting to tell me something.

“I think Rogue’s pregnant.” Her eyes glisten as she blurts out the words, and I immediately shake my head and laugh.

“Now, that’s a good one.” I point my finger at her before locating my sneakers where I kicked ‘em off.

“Jessie, I’m being deadly serious. Yesterday lunchtime, she came into the barroom on her break and asked Riley who her ‘Baby Doctor’ was.” I can see from the look on Maddy’s face now that she really is serious.

“Rogue?” I look at her blankly.

“Why else would she be asking that?” She shrugs back at me. “What if we end up being pregnant at the same time? Our kids could be in the same grade.”

“I think you’re thinkin’ a little too far ahead.” I step back up to her and take her wrists in my hand, pinning them behind her back and giving her a kiss that she’ll think about until the next time I see her.

“I gotta go. Maybe while I’m gone you and Rogue could —”

“Do *not* even finish that sentence.” Maddy grabs a hairbrush from the nightstand and launches it at me as I leave through the door.

I grab an apple from the fruit bowl on the way out the cabin, tossing it in the air and heading out for my bike. I’m still chuckling to myself at the idea of Grimm being a father when I take my saddle and hear my phone vibrate in my pocket.

“Jessie.”

A panic instantly sets over me when I hear how worried my sister sounds.

“Shan... What happened?”

“I need you to come to my cabin right now,” she tells me, all the softness is missing from her tone and I can feel my heart starting to beat real fuckin’ fast.

“Is Troj okay? Has someone hurt ya?” I go through every scenario in my head in about two awful seconds.

“Just get here and come alone,” she tells me, hanging up the phone. I toss my apple into the bush and start up my engine, pulling back my throttle and making it there as fast as I can.

I’ve barely knocked on the door before she answers it and when I see the panic in her eyes, I instantly barge past her to get inside and see what danger she’s in. I don’t see anything that looks like a threat, the place is spotlessly clean as it always is, but there is something here that gets my attention. A tiny kid, that I’d guess to be around Gabriel’s age, sitting in the center of the couch and staring at me like I’m some kinda boogeyman.

“Shan?” I look over my shoulder as she moves to stand beside me.

“It’s a kid.” I point out the fuckin’ obvious, realizing now what a state this kid is actually in. The clothes he’s wearing are dirty and worn through like he ain’t got no others, his hair is matted and he hasn’t got an ounce of meat on his bones.

“Yeah, it’s a kid.” My sister smiles at him warmly, before tugging me toward the bedroom where he won’t be able to hear us.

“So what’s he doin’ here? You lookin’ after him for a friend?” I ask, though if she is, she’s gonna have to have a serious talk with whoever’s responsible for him.

“Not exactly.” Her eyes avoid mine like she knows what she’s about to tell me won’t go down too well.

“So what’s he doin’ here, Shan?”

She huffs out a breath before she explains.

“Lydia has been helping me at the drop-in center while Grace’s been preparing for the baby, and today Lydia had to

leave early to watch the twins for Alex so, just for a little while, I was on my own.”

“What have me and Troj told you bout bein’ on your own?” I shake my head at her.

“Anyway, I saw the woman come in with him, she sat him in the kids’ play area and walked over to the stand to start flicking through some of the pamphlets. I did what I always do when we get somebody new stop-by, I gave her some space, allowed her some time to get comfortable before I approached. I thought maybe if I amused the little boy it might give her some more time to read the pamphlet. So I tried to play with him for a while. It was hard, he didn’t talk or interact, and then when I got back up to go over and introduce myself, she was gone.”

“Holy shit.” I scrub my hand over my face and peer back out the door toward the abandoned kid that’s sitting on Troj and Shaniya’s couch.

“Did you not think to chase after her?”

“Of course I did. As soon as I realized she was gone I ran for the door, but there was no sign of her, and like I said I was on my own. I couldn’t leave him.”

“Well, his mother fuckin’ did,” I point out, forcing a hand through my hair and trying to see a solution to all this.

“You need to call the police.”

“No,” she answers me back sternly.

“Wh...?” I do a double-take. “What do you mean fuckin’ no, Shaniya? This is someone’s kid. You can’t just go around leavin’ ‘em in libraries.”

“I’m not calling the police. He’s clearly scared. Having the police show up will terrify him.”

“Okay then, call child services.”

“And have him taken into some overcrowded foster home? No, Jessie.” She folds her arms over her chest and looks at me definitely.

“So what? You’re just gonna keep him here?” I throw my arms out and laugh at her and when she doesn’t start laughing too, I really start to worry.

“Would that be so crazy?” She shrugs as if the thought has more than just crossed her mind.

“Yeah, Shan, it would be fuckin’ crazy,” I tell her straight.

“Listen to me.” She drags me deeper into the room, showing a side of herself that I ain’t ever seen before.

“His mother clearly doesn’t want him, he’s malnourished, he’s dirty, and she brought him to the drop-in session today with full intent to leave him behind. I’m pretty sure he’s been beaten too. When I went to strap him in the car he flinched when I leaned over him, and when I carried him in here he screeched. I saw some nasty bruises on his ribs when I checked under his shirt. He’s scared, Jessie. He doesn’t need the police or child services. He needs to be cared for.”

“Jesus, Shan.” I bury my head in my hands when I realize she’s not budging on this.

“So, what do you need me to do?” I sigh helplessly.

“I need you to be in my corner. When Troj gets home and tries to talk me out of this, I need you to have my back.” I hadn’t even thought about how my best friend is gonna react to this yet.

“Shan, you realize you can’t keep him, right?” I check. Knowing her sweet nature and her need to care for all the people around her is gonna have her growing attached to this kid.

“Yeah, I realize that, but I can take care of him for now. His mother knows where to find me, maybe she’ll come back for him.”

“Even if she does, would you let her take him back? She’s hardly done a good job of takin’ care of him, and how do you know those bruises on him didn’t come from her?”

“I don’t,” she admits. “But everyone’s got a story and I’m hoping that she might come back and tell me hers.”

“You’re too good for this world, Shaniya Knox. Good fuckin’ job that ya got a big brother who’s always gonna have your back.” I shake my head and she nearly topples me over when she wraps her arms around my waist and squeezes me tight.

“Thank you, Jess,” she whispers.

“Go get that boy a bath. I’ll go see if Riley can spare some clean clothes for him. He looks around the same age as Gabriel, and for God’s sake get a decent meal inside him.”

The boy’s eyes follow me warily when I head back into the lounge and I crouch down in front of him.

“Ya got nothin’ to fear from us, kid. Shaniya here is gonna take real good care of ya,” I promise. The kid says nothing, just stares vacantly back at me. He must be hella confused.

I stand up and glance over my shoulder to my sister, who’s watching with a warm smile on her lips before I face him again.

“You may not feel it right now, but you just got real lucky,” I tell him under my breath, knowing there ain’t a gentler pair of hands he could be in.



I hold one of Addison's pert round tits in my hand as she grinds herself on my cock. She's about to come, I can tell by the desperate breaths she's making and how her head's fallen back. The way she throbs around me catches me up to her, and I hold her hips tight, keeping myself inside her as I empty.

"Do you have to leave today?" She flops forward, her long, brown hair tickling my neck as I grip both her ass cheeks in my hands and kiss her shoulder.

"Afraid so, darlin'." I've got mixed emotions about leaving her, part of me can't wait to make the man she fears suffer, the other part of me wants to stay inside this bubble we've created.

"I don't like the idea of you being away from me. I've gotten used to having you close," she admits.

"Got no reason to be scared. We know Abraham's there, Tripp's certain as he can be that all the Elders are. And I know Jessie will take good care of you while I'm gone." I stroke my fingers through her hair before I reach for the nightstand and grab the sonogram photo from the top drawer.

"You looking at that thing again?" She giggles.

"I'm gonna look at it every day 'til we get an updated version. Thought I'd take it with me if that's okay with you?"

"Do you need to keep looking at it to make it feel real?" she asks, sitting back up and resting her hands on my chest.

"Maybe." I shrug. "I never thought I'd be so grateful for a pill failin'." I laugh to myself before I place it safely back in

the drawer.

“What pill?” She stares back at me confused.

“Your birth control pills,” I remind her.

“I wasn’t taking any birth control pills.”

“Sure you were, you had ‘em on the list of stuff you wanted me to get from your house.”

“Skid, those were sleeping tablets. I asked for them because I was having bad night terrors. I didn’t even think about contraception, I got so swept up in everything that was happening, getting pregnant was the last thing on my mind. I was just...” I notice her starting to panic like she thinks she’s done something wrong.

“Hey...” I grab her shoulders and drag her body back onto mine. “It doesn’t matter how it happened.”

“It does, I don’t want you to think that I did this on purpose. I was distracted.”

“I would never think that.” I try putting her mind at ease.

“But this is my fault. Things like this keep proving that I’m still not adjusted to the real world. Any other woman would have thought about that kinda thing. I’m such a—”

“I’m glad ya didn’t think of it. I’m glad I misunderstood and thought those pills were for birth control. I’m glad I didn’t put on a rubber and I’m glad we’re havin’ a little black dot.” I cut her off before she has a meltdown.

“Me too,” she takes a few seconds to admit, holding back an adorable smile from me.

“Mom,” I hear Charlie call out from his room.

“I’ll go, you try and get some more sleep. Sleep’s important.” I point my finger at her as I drag myself up and pull on some sweats.

“You sure?” she asks, yawning as she cozies her head back onto the pillow.

“Absolutely sure. Me and Charlie need to have a man-to-man anyway.” I wink, reaching over to kiss her before I go sort Charlie out some breakfast.

“Mornin’.” I ruffle his hair the way I always do as I pass him on the chair he’s claimed as his since he came here, I grab us both a bowl and place the cereal and milk between us before I sit down myself.

“I gotta leave for a day or two, can I rely on you to take care of your mom and this place for me?” I watch him tip the cereal box and half-fill his bowl.

“Sure.” He nods back.

“That’s what I like to hear.” I take the box when he offers it and pour some for myself, while he uses all his energy to lift the milk and tip it into his bowl.

“I heard you asked your mom who your dad was a few nights ago.” I figure now’s as good a time as any to bring this up too.

Charlie drops his head like he’s about to get scolded.

“Hey, don’t look like that, there ain’t nothin’ wrong in wantin’ to know where you came from.” His head lifts back up, and the timid smile he makes back at me warms my chest.

“Kids back at school sometimes ask but I just ignore them. Don’t ever know what to say.” He shrugs.

“Well, how about the next time those kids ask, you tell ‘em that I’m your dad?” I test the water and feel a real sense of pride when that smile on his lips rises all the way up to his eyes.

“Can I?”

“I’d really like it if you did.” I nod my head

“I never had a dad before. And you’re way cooler than some of the dads that pick up from school.” His voice gets louder and more excited with each syllable.

“Do I get to call you Dad too?” he asks, dripping milk from his lips as he munches on his cereal.

“You can call me anythin’ you like, kid.”

“I think I’d like to call you Dad or Pa, not Daddy though, that’s for babies.”

“Whatever you decide.” I chuckle, relieved at how happy it’s made him.

Yeah, this is real soon, but I’m rolling with the start-as-I-mean-to-go-on approach. I never want Charlie to feel different to our kid. I want me and him to be solid before it gets here so he knows he’ll never be less important to me.

“Thanks, Skid...” He quickly shakes his head. “I mean *Dad*.” The smile on his face is infectious. I hold my spoon out like a sword, waiting for him to tap it with his before I dig into my breakfast.

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Addison is up and fresh out the shower when the door knocks and Tommy slowly opens it to let himself in.

“Mornin’.” He looks a little taken back when he catches me kissin’ her on her way back through to the bedroom. Guess it must be a little strange for everyone around here to see me happy with someone that ain’t Carly. I think they all started to believe it was never gonna happen as much as I did.

“Can I catch a word with ya?” He scratches the back of his head like he’s building up to something.

“Sure.” I head toward the door so we can take the conversation out to the porch and he nods his head politely at Addison before he follows me out.

“You spoken to Prez yet?” he asks.

“Ain’t had much of a chance, he ain’t been here,” I point out.

“I get it, I was just kinda hopin’ that when he gets back we could get things movin’ along.”

“There somethin’ you ain’t tellin’ me?” I question, noticing how edgy he’s being.

“No. I’m fine...”

“Is this about your dad headin’ out to Mexico?” I question. Tommy’s only ever known rejection. I’ve been too shadowed by grief to realize that I’ve been responsible for some of that too. I had my suspicions about him when he bailed after Carly died. I was convinced he knew something, I figure now he was just running scared.

“I don’t give a fuck about that man.” His eyes turn into slits.

“You’re gonna have to loosen that chip on your shoulder if you wanna be a prospect,” I warn. “Probation periods are tough around here. Luckily for me, I had a skill, it made my prospect stint a short one. Things are gonna get a lot worse for you before they get better.”

“Does that mean you’re gonna talk to Prez when he gets back?” There’s a glimmer of excitement in Tommy’s eye that I ain’t seen since he was a kid.

“I can speak to him, but I ain’t promisin’ nothin’.” I don’t wanna give the kid false hope but I will give him a chance.

“And you’ll be my sponsor?” He pushes a little further.

“I’ll be your sponsor.” I nod my head. “But it’s gonna take way more than that for you to make the cut.”

“I won’t let ya down,” he promises, trying hard to stay level and act cool.

“Listen, I’m headin’ out today, the club’s low on members so I’d appreciate you keepin’ an eye out around here for me.” I figure giving him some responsibility will be a good start to preparing him.

“I’m on it.” Tommy nods his head before making his way over to the battered old truck he gets around in. When he starts up the engine, Storm scowls at him like he’s a piece of shit as he crosses the yard from his cabin to get to mine.

“What did that asswipe want?” He keeps his eyes focused on him as he drives away.

“He wants to be our next prospect,” I tell him, casually lighting myself a smoke and waiting for him to fly into a rage over it. Tommy apparently tried some shit with Jasmine before she got with Storm, and that kid sure can hold a grudge.

“You ain’t seriously considerin’ taking that idea to Prez, are ya?” He stares at me like I’m batshit crazy.

“Actually, I am.”

“Tommy’s not a Soul... he’s just... he’s Tommy. He creeps out all the whores and can’t keep his hands off the old ladies.”

“Jasmine wasn’t your old lady when he tried to kiss her,” I remind him.

“He was still lucky I didn’t fuckin’ kill him.” Storm’s hands ball up into fists.

“Hey, save that aggression, we’re gonna need it. It’s just gonna be me, you, and Tripp today. I need your head in this,” I remind him. This day feels like it’s been a long time coming and by tomorrow it will be over. Addison and Charlie will be safe and we can move on with the rest of our lives.

“How many we taking out?” Storm blows out a breath, taking a seat on my porch step and pulling out a cigarette of his own.

“There are seven Elders, I’m sure there are plenty of other men there but from what I can gather they’re just followers. Abraham is mine, you can have all your fucked up fun with the rest.” Like Jessie and Brax, Storm gets a sick satisfaction out of causing suffering. I think today I might get that same kinda pleasure when I make Abraham bleed.

“These men ain’t fighters, Storm, but that don’t mean they ain’t dangerous. They call themselves protectors and they believe their own hype. There ain’t gonna be many lengths they wouldn’t go to to prove it. There could be a whole lotta surprises for us when we get into that fortress of theirs.”

“Mornin’.” Jasmine’s voice comes from their cabin. She starts making her way over, holding Faith’s hand as she toddles across the yard. Storm crushes his cigarette out under his boot and blows the last of the smoke away before Jasmine releases her and lets her take the last few steps toward her dad by herself.

I can’t help smiling as I watch her wobble into his arms. She giggles when he lifts her into the air above his head and tickles her tummy with his nose. It’s full-blown proof that love can change a man. I know from past experience that it can tear him apart too, but it’s a risk I’m prepared to take.

“Is Addison up? I was gonna see if she wanted a trip into town with me later. Storm said that now we know all those cult leaders are in the village, it would be safe for her to leave the compound.”

“He did, huh?” I turn my head toward Storm who’s too distracted by his daughter to notice the glare I’m giving him.

“Is it not?” Jasmine checks, looking a little unnerved.

“I guess it’s safe, but I wanna see that he’s there for myself first. I ain’t takin’ no risks when it comes to them.”

“Skid, it’s grocery shopping.” Jaz giggles as she takes Faith back outta Storm’s arms and steps past me to let herself inside.

“She’s kinda got a point, Skid. You can’t keep the girl holed up here forever. She had a life before all this shit, her kid’s gonna need to get back to school.” Storm raises back onto his feet. “I can see where you’re coming from though, and I’d be the same. Let’s go get a head start, check the fucker we want is there so our girls can go shoppin’.” He shakes his head at me and grins at how ridiculous his words sound.

I’m getting more and more used to seeing Storm smile. It only started happening when Faith and Jasmine came into his life, but it suits him. I look at the wedding ring he wears on his finger, the one that used to be mine and can’t help smiling a little to myself when I remember the day Carly slipped it onto my finger. She looked so fuckin’ beautiful on our wedding

day. I felt like the luckiest guy in the whole world. After I lost her I never imagined I could ever feel that way again, but I've learned recently that life's full of surprises, and not all of 'em are ugly.

"Skid." Storm knocks me out of my thoughts.

"Yeah," I turn my attention back to him. "Let's go nail these bastards."

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"Don't look at me like that." I shake my head at Addison as I saddle my bike down at the clubhouse.

"Maybe you should wait just a few more days. Storm told Jasmine that if you went tomorrow or the day after, Grimm would be back from L.A., and Prez and Troj could be back too."

"Storm says a lot." I turn my head to him and scowl. He winks at me as he holds his daughter steady on his gas tank while she reaches for the bars, then he passes her over to Jasmine and kisses them both goodbye.

"Skid, I'm scared," Addison tells me for the tenth time today.

"Well, you shouldn't be. We're gonna be just fine. I'll call you when I get there, then you can distract yourself in town with Jasmine once I know for sure it's safe."

"Okay." She nods her head, doing her best to be brave before she kisses me. Marilyn interrupts us when she starts shoving something into the bag I've got tied to the back of my bike.

"Just a little something for the journey." She smiles at me when I twist my head around.

"Appreciated." I nod back.

"And don't think I forgot you." She shuffles over toward Storm and places a foil package right into the palm of his hand.

“It’s a real shit idea you leavin’ us behind.” Squeal crosses his arms over his huge chest as he watches us prepare to leave.

“We need people here to protect the club,” I point out. “And I don’t think rockin’ up to a cult village with you and your sense of humor is gonna help get people on side.”

“Are you kiddin’ me? I’d show those folk a whole new way of livin’. Hell, with the shit I could teach ‘em I’d be their new messiah.”

I look across the yard and realize that the garage is still locked up. I haven’t heard a thing from Rogue since yesterday which is starting to worry me.

“Hey, has anyone seen Rog—” The sound of engines drowns out my words and when I look down the track toward the compound gates and see Prez and Troj cruising through them, I feel a relief that I wasn’t expecting as they pull up beside us and cut their engines.

“Didn’t think we’d let you have all the fun without us, did ya?” Prez winks as he gets off his saddle.

“What the fuck happened to you?” Storm asks Troj when he sees the state of his face. He looks like he just stepped out of the ring.

“Don’t ask. I need a beer.” He storms through the clubhouse doors and out of sight.

“You boys mind holdin’ on an hour?” Prez asks. “Now I’m back we can spare Jessie, maybe Troj if he ain’t too tired.” I like how he makes it sound like a request rather than an order.

“Yeah, I can hang on an hour.” I nod back at my leader, eager to get on the road, but at the same time liking the idea of numbers. I can see from the look on Addison’s face that she likes it too.



“Job done?” Ruckus checks when I arrive back inside the Long Beach clubhouse. I nod my head and let my eyes roam around the galvanized walls. I hate it here. I hate being away from home, and more than anything I hate being away from Rogue.

“How bad was it?” he asks, not getting the hint that I ain’t here to be sociable.

“It’s a good job I came,” is all I tell him as I toss him the keys to the cage that I had to borrow, then I take the half-smoked blunt from the inside of my pocket and light it up. What Cliff did to that girl proves how unhinged he is, his lame attempt at covering it up makes me question if he wanted her found.

“Good to see ya.” Tawk lifts his chin at me as he steps in from the side door that leads out to the balcony overlooking the beach. Inside here is dark and gloomy, but it’s much better than being out there.

“How ya holdin’ up?” I make sure there ain’t anyone around to hear me when I do my duty and check he’s okay. Tawk may have left Colorado to chase after pussy, but he’s still our brother. He’s keeping his ear to the ground and learning a little about who we can trust around here.

“It’s... different,” he tells me. “Tense.”

“I can see that.” I look across to the other side of the room where three of Cliff’s clingers are staring at us. Me being here seems to have everyone suspicious instead of fuckin’ grateful.

Cliff hasn't even bothered to fuckin' thank me for riding my ass all the way out here and taking care of his shit.

"Well, it's good to see a... friendly face," Tawk assures me, smiling a little awkwardly when I snigger back at him.

"I'm gettin' outta here. If I leave now I can be back home by mornin'."

"Not so fast." Tawk grabs my arm, then when my eyes stare coldly at his hand he slowly retracts it.

"Follow me. I've got a surprise for ya." I frown as I follow him through the clubhouse out to the balcony. A few of the other Long Beach members are staring down onto the beach, their tongues hanging out their mouths like thirsty dogs.

"Come get a fix of this." Their prospect gestures his head over the railings at whatever's got their attention and Tawk tries to hide his smirk.

"I ain't fuckin' interested. I'm outta here," I tell him.

"Oh, I think ya will be." Tawk crosses his arms over his chest and looks all smug.

"Jesus." I heave out a breath and take a step forward so I can see what all the fuss is about. It makes me wanna take each one of these men and hang 'em by their balls.

"Hey, baby." Rogue sits up from the sunbed she's lounging on down on the beach as she drags her sunglasses down her nose. She twists her slender legs around and gets up, swaying her hips and lookin' smokin' fuckin hot in the bright pink bikini she's wearing.

"Wait... is she?" Long Beach's Prospect looks like he's 'bout to crap his pants.

"A heads up would've been good, Tawk." The one they call Dev shoves Tawk in the chest, yet he still doesn't take his eyes off her. None of 'em fuckin' do.

"I will scoop every one of your eyeballs out with a spoon and feed 'em to your prospect," I warn them under my breath as she gets closer. She stands below the balcony holding the huge sun hat she's wearing on her head as she looks up at me.

“Surprised to see me?” She smiles, running her tongue over her pink-painted lips.

She doesn't wait for an answer before she races up the stairs, not caring that she loses that sun hat when she leaps into my arms and wraps her legs around my waist.

“Maybe not surprised but definitely excited.” Her eyes drop seductively between us as my hand grips the back of the bikini bottoms she's wearing and pulls them into a thong.

“Now, how about you show me how much you've missed me?” She dangles a room key in front of my face.

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Rogue is practically skipping as she leads me back through the clubhouse, past the drained-out swimming pool, and toward the three-story motel building that is part of the Long Beach compound.

She kisses me like we've been apart for months instead of hours as she drags me up the stairs to the second floor and fumbles with the key in the lock. Her lips find mine again once we're inside and her tongue invades my mouth like she's been starved of it.

“Rogue, we ain't fuckin' in here,” I tell her.

“Oh, we are. I took a plane ride especially.” She slides the cut off my back and starts lifting up my shirt.

“Rogue, I can't.” I grab both her arms and hold her back.

“It looks to me as if it ain't gonna be a problem.” Once again her eyes drop down to the bulge in my jeans, and just the attention of them makes it fuckin' throb.

“This place is filthy,” I point out the fuckin' obvious. The Long Beach brothers have no pride in their club, they invite anyone off the beach to use these rooms for ruttin' in.

“Here, I'll show ya.” I draw the curtains to make the room go dark before taking the UV light that I have in my back pocket and shining it around the room.

“See that?” I draw her attention to all the brightly lit stains that linger on the surfaces, the bed covers, and even the walls. “I don’t have to tell you what it is, do I?”

“Only you would have a UV light to hand.” She flicks on the bedside lamp and comes toward me, snatching it out of my hand and tossing it at the bed.

“Can’t you just make some allowances? We’re in L.A.,” she reminds me, taking my hair between her fingers and playing with it. Just being in this room makes me twitchy, it’s filthy. I can feel the contaminated particles in the air sticking to the back of my throat, but Rogue’s fingers sliding over my chest distracts me from our surroundings.

“Come on.” I drag her through to the bathroom and turn on the shower. It’s still not fuckin’ clean, but it’s a compromise and it’s been far too long.

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Since my job here in Long Beach is done, I finish fuckin’ my girl in the rancid motel shower and decide it’s time we head back home. I hand the room key back to Tawk and say my goodbyes to him and Ruckus. Cliff doesn’t even come outta his office to show me his gratitude, maybe he doesn’t wanna look me in the eye since he knows I’ve seen what he did to that girl. That fucker really does think he’s indestructible, what he did to that girl almost felt like a statement, a warning to Prez that he makes his own rules. He’s about to get the shock of his life.

“Before we go back I need to tell you something.” Rogue stops me just before we get to the gate that leads to the parking lot.

“You okay?” She’s got this worried look on her face that I don’t see very often and I don’t like it at all.

“I don’t want kids.” She forces the words out like she’s been holding on to them for a while, and I’m surprised by how they cut me up a little.

“I get that you’re seeing all the other guys making babies and playing happy families, but I need you to know that that will never be us.”

“Okay.” I shrug, going to move forward but immediately getting pulled back.

“What do you mean, okay?” She shakes her head in confusion as if she was expecting a different response.

“What do you want me to do, Rogue? Get on my knees and beg you to give me kids?” I huff a laugh at her as I swing my leg over my saddle and take my bars.

“Well... yeah, kinda,” she admits, still looking confused and maybe even a little pissed off at my reaction.

“Grimm, I’m telling you that we can never have kids. Not ever.”

“And I’m telling *you*, that that’s okay.” I make it as clear as I can for her and get another hard-on from how exasperated she looks.

“Listen.” I take her hips and pull her toward me, my hand creeping up her neck and settling around her throat just how she likes it. “I got everythin’ I need. Maybe there’s a part of me that wonders what it would be like, but all I really want outta this life is for you to be happy. If you don’t want kids, we don’t have ‘em, it really is that simple.”

“Grimm, I—” I shut her up by kissing her lips.

“Let’s just get the fuck outta here,” I beg.

“Sounds good.” She smiles before tucking herself on behind me and wrapping her arms around my waist.

“Take me home, big boy.” She bites hard on my ear before I start the engine.



“I’ll take a beer,” I order from Tommy and cuss myself for getting outta shape. Raze is way older than me, there shouldn’t have even been any competition between us.

“Jesus, what the fuck happened to you?” Jessie asks as he takes the bar stool beside me. Tommy flicks the top off a bottle before landing it in front of me and I waste no time knocking it back.

“I needed that.” I ignore his question. “When we get back from sortin’ this cult shit, me and you are headin’ for the trainin’ ring.”

“I think you’re gonna need more than just that when you check in with your old lady.” Jessie raises his eyebrows in a way that has me real fuckin’ concerned.

“What you talkin’ ‘bout?”

“I’m just sayin’, you should head on home. And just so you know I’ve already promised my sister she’s got my full support.”

“She painted the kitchen that nasty fuckin’ green color, didn’t she?” I drop my head and shake it.

“Just head on home, Troj.” My best friend pats my back before he starts headin’ for the door.

“Where you goin’?” I call after him.

“To pack a bag. Prez is back and I’m headin’ to Oak Creek for some fuckin’ action.”

I leave my half-finished beer on the bar and head out to my bike, making my way toward home to see what the hell's got my VP lookin' so worried.

"Hello," I call through the house as I open the door. Thankfully, the kitchen is still the same color it was when I left it, and when I see my wife sitting on the couch reading a book, she quickly gets up and races toward me.

"I didn't think you'd be back until tomorrow." She squeals as I lift her off her feet.

"I wanted to surprise you. Something happened which means we didn't need the approval of the last two Charters. Prez was pretty sure we had their vote anyway but..."

"What happened to you?" Her expression changes when she sees the state of my face, and her hand grips my jaw so she can examine my face.

"It ain't nothin'. Just got into a little scuffle."

"And you let him get a swing on you?" Even she can't hide her shock.

"Yes, Shan, he got a swing on me." I place her back on her feet and slide my hand over my bruised face.

"Well, I'm glad you're home." She smiles at me warmly, then as she takes a step back and pulls in a breath I watch that smile start to drop off her face. She's suddenly become real tense, and it reminds me of Jessie's warning. If the kitchen ain't fuckin' green, what the hell am I supposed to be worried about?

"What's up?" I ask, doing my best to keep calm.

"We need to talk about something." She twists on her heels, the way she always does when she assumes I'm not gonna like something.

"Troj, I need you to promise that you won't yell, or freak out."

“Shan, you’re scarin’ me,” I warn her, my body getting tenser every second that I have to wait for her to tell me.

“Okay.” She releases a nervous breath before she takes my hand and leads me toward the guest room, then quietly she opens the door and steps aside so I can look through it.

The curtains are closed and there’s a soft light coming from the tiny lamp in the corner of the room, enough light for me to see the kid that’s sound asleep in the spare bed.

I turn my head and go to speak but she silences me with her finger.

“Please don’t shout, it took me so long to settle him last night,” she whispers.

“Shaniya, why is there a kid in our spare room?” I take her wrist and use it to drag her finger away.

“He got left at the drop-in center yesterday.” She stares up at me with those stunning wolf-like eyes that are so blue you could fuckin’ drown in ‘em.

“Did ya call the police?”

“No, I didn’t call the police, nor child services either, and I think you should be reminded of the fact that no one here called them when Mel dumped Faith at the clubhouse door either.”

“That’s because we knew Faith belonged to one of us,” I remind her, wondering what the hell is goin’ through her head.

“Don’t look at me like I’m crazy, Troj. I’m not fuckin’ crazy.” I know she’s angry when she swears at me. Shan never swears.

“Hey, hey... I don’t think you’re crazy.” I wrap her up in my arms and grip her thick black hair in my hand. “I don’t even know why I’m surprised, of course, you brought the poor kid home.” I laugh to myself as I kiss the top of her head.

“So you understand?” She snuffles back her tears.

“Yeah, I understand, but that don’t solve the problem, darlin’,” I look down at my beautiful, naive wife, and love

how she tries to change the world.

“I’ve heard too many stories about foster homes, Troj, I can’t hand him over and let him be taken to one. He’s so young and tiny. He smiled at me earlier, after I’d bathed him. I put him in some of Gabriel’s pajamas and told him a story, and he actually smiled. He trusts me, even though he must be so scared.”

“Well, he seems pretty comfortable to me.” I look back toward the door that he’s sleepin’ behind and smile. It makes my split lip sting, but it’s worth it when she smiles back at me.

“I want to give his mom the chance to do the right thing, I won’t judge her on what she did, not until I know her story. I don’t think the bruises he has came from her. She brought him somewhere safe before she left him. Maybe she’s in an abusive relationship and she was getting him away from it. I don’t know, Troj, but when all this settles in and she’s ready for help, at least she’ll know where to come and find him. If I call the authorities, hell knows where he could end up.” She’s gone from looking sad and vulnerable to stubborn somewhere during her explanation.

“You want me to stay here and help ya?” I ask her.

“You mean, he can...” Her eyes stretch wider than I’ve ever seen ‘em.

“Shaniya, if you didn’t already know before I walked through that door that I’d support whatever decision you made on this, then the years we’ve been together have taught you nothin’.” I shake my head at her and laugh.

“He can stay here with us?” She still has to check she’s hearing me right.

“For now, but we *are* gonna get Maddy and Alex workin’ on findin’ out who his mom is and why she left him,” I warn.

“Of course.” Shaniya has to bite on her lip to stop herself from beaming.

“We’re doing the right thing, Troj, every kid should know how it feels to be cared for. And I don’t need you to stay. In fact, looking the way you do might be a little scary for him.”

“So, I’m gettin’ kicked outta my own cabin now?” I raise my eyebrow at her as I lift her up by her ass.

“No, I just think that Skid would appreciate all the help he can get. Not that I won’t miss you. I hate it when you’re not here.” She drops her head, looking sad again and I quickly pick it back up.

“I’ll be back by tomorrow night,” I promise. Kissing her lips before I carry her to our room so I can get a proper goodbye.



“What you got for us?” I sit opposite Tripp in the cage he has parked three miles west of the compound. It’s snug in the back with me, Troj, Jessie, and Storm all piled inside ready to be briefed.

“These are all on live feeds. I set the cameras up at different locations just after I got here so I could see who’s coming and going, and I’ve been watching this guy’s movements since I knew he was the target.” He points efficiently to the printed-out version of the sketch Nyx did that’s stuck to the side panel of the van. “His comings and goings has matched the activity you’ve been seeing in Manitou Springs,” he informs us, and it concerns me that the man would make so many lengthy trips in such a short time. He’s not just been trying to spook her, he’s been looking for an opportunity to take her.

“And you’re sure he’s there now?” I ask, thinking about Addison and Charlie back at home.

“Check this state of the art shit out.” Tripp winks as he uses the laptop in front of him to zoom in on one of the cameras.

“Where the fuck you get this?” Jessie questions him.

“I couldn’t possibly tell ya. What I can tell you, is that it’s all military production.”

“That’s him,” I point to the screen when I see the old fucker strutting through the center of the village.

“How did you get the cameras high enough to see over the fence?” Storm is clearly impressed.

“The cameras are in the fence,” Tripp explains. “Those Elders have got a fortress built around that village. I waited until dark before I rigged a few of these up. The cameras are so small no one would notice ‘em, even if they were lookin’ for ‘em.”

“And you did all that without them noticin’ or gettin’ blown up?” Troj shakes his head in amazement.

“Stealth is kinda my thing.” Tripp winks. “Once they were up I could watch everything from here, I only had to head back there to figure out what I was gonna do ‘bout your little explosive issue.”

“You really do have all the fuckin’ gear, don’t ya, Tripp?” Jessie looks impressed as he checks out all the stuff he’s got crammed inside this van.

“You thinkin’ ‘bout how hot this would be makin’ your old lady?” Storm shoves him with his shoulder, and Jessie gives him an unimpressed look before he focuses back on what’s important.

“From watching their movements I’ve figured out who the leaders are. Every morning, they gather in that building over on the far right side of the perimeter around 8 a.m, they remain inside for half an hour before they all go back to their houses. So far, your man here has been the only one of ‘em who left the gates.

“And the C4? I take it since you got those cameras up that you know where the trigger point is?” I ask.

“There are a few trigger points. I’ve traced the wires with a scanner and pinpointed on the map where they disappear under the fence to link up to the detonators. I’m not comfortable about anyone crossing that line until I know they are all disabled.”

“So, how ya gonna disable ‘em?” I ask, scratching my jaw through my beard.

“I need to get on the inside.”

“You just said...”

“I said, anyone. I ain’t anyone, Jessie. I’m trained for this shit. I’ll make my way in while the Elders are in their meeting tomorrow morning. Soon as I’ve made it safely, you guys can move in and do your thing.”

We all nod our heads back at him.

“Every one of those Elders needs to die,” I tell ‘em all, staring at the picture Nyx drew of Abraham that’s in front of me. “But you leave that one to me.”

“And what about the others? There’s a few handy-looking men in there,” Storm nods his head toward the screen.

“We save whoever wants to be saved, those who don’t, we leave behind.”

“And what if Addison’s sister is one of those people?” Troj checks.

“She’s the only exception, she comes with us whether she wants to or not.”

They can judge me if they think that’s unethical, but it’s the way it’s goin’ down.

We get out of Tripp’s cage and into our own once we’re fully briefed. It was Storm who drew the short straw and had to leave his bike at home, so he drives us back to the motel a few miles away where me, Troj, and Jessie have left our bikes.

We head out to a local bar to grab some dinner, I call home and check in with Addison and she sounds every bit as anxious as I expected. She’s so worried something will go wrong and I’ll either end up either dead or in jail, but I promise her that nothing in this world is gonna stop me from going home to her.

It’s not late when we get back to the motel, but we all decide to make it an early night. I’m bunking up with Storm and when I get out the shower, I take a toke on the blunt he offers on my way past him.

“You think tomorrow’s gonna go without a hitch?” he questions.

“Yeah, I do,” I tell him, pulling on some boxers under my towel before I let it drop and get under the rough, overused bed cover.

“Jasmine likes Addison, says she’s good for ya,” he adds.

“Jasmine’s a smart girl.”

“Too smart for me, right?” Storm grins before reaching over to take his blunt back.

“Far too smart for you.” I manage a laugh before sending a reply back to Rogue. I got a little worried when I hadn’t seen her around, should have figured she’d chase after her man to L.A., that pair have real separation issues.

“Rogue and Grimm have stopped at the Nevada Charter for the night. Rogue wants to hit Vegas before they leave tomorrow.”

“Bet Grimm’s lovin’ that.” Storm shakes his head.

Our Nevada Charter is a hectic one, it may be in the ass-end of nowhere but it sure attracts folks. Thinking of Vegas reminds me of Nora. I still haven’t decided what I’m gonna tell Addison about what happened to her.

“You thought about where all this is goin’ with Addison when we’re done here? Is she gonna stay at the compound?”

“Why do I get the impression you’re workin’ for the girls, right now?” I cock my eyebrow at him.

“I ain’t workin’ for the girls.” He chuckles at me, lying back on his pillow and blowing smoke at the ceiling.

“So, Jasmine *didn’t* ask ya to question me on it?” I stare at him so he can’t lie to me.

“Okay, ya got me. She’s worried that once you’ve dealt with this shit, you’re gonna push Addison away. Jaz’s got this stupid idea in her head that you don’t believe you deserve to be happy.”

“That’s exactly how it was,” I admit.

“So, what changed?” He sits up a little straighter when he becomes intrigued.

“First, I decided I wanted to live, then I figured a lifetime’s a real long time to be unhappy. When you reach rock bottom there’s only one way you can go, and I think you know as well as I do, that all it takes is that one special person to make you wanna start climbin’ again.”

Storm nods back at me.

“You can report back to your old lady, Addison and Charlie are stayin’. They’re gonna live with me at the compound and become part of this fucked-up family,” I tell him, a smile twitching on my lips with how happy that makes me.

“Well, Jaz is gonna be pleased to hear that.” Storm smiles before he stubs out his blunt.

“Better get some shut-eye, we got work to do tomorrow.” He rolls onto his side and finds a comfortable spot before turning off his lamp while I shut off mine and lie back, staring into the darkness

I’ve gotta leave any nice thoughts about Addison and our future behind me tomorrow when I storm into that village and make those sick cunts pay. Tomorrow, I have to become a man without a conscience.

Abraham won’t be the first man I’ve killed. There have been plenty before him. But taking a life doesn’t come as easily to me as it does to Storm. Him, Jess, and Brax can kill a man with no remorse. But that shit stays with a man like me. I don’t mind that though, in fact, I’m grateful for it. It reminds me that I could never be like my brother. Chop takes lives for fun. Everything is a game to him and when I think about him doing the shit he always talked about and living it up in Mexico, it makes my blood itch under my skin.

I could go after him when all this is over. Bide my time, wait a few years for him to really get comfortable, and then chase him down. I could strike when he least expects it. For years, all I’ve thought about is causing him pain. For making him suffer for what he did to Carly.

It's felt like a burden, a heavy, draining burden that I've been tired of carrying around with me.

*"Take care of him,"* I hear Mom's voice in my head.

Tobias always thought I was her favorite, but he was wrong. That woman would forgive him for anything. She was always bailing him outta the shit. When his mastermind plans fell through and he got himself in deep water she'd do whatever she could to get him out of it. I've never wanted to believe it, but I know deep down Mom knew he killed Luciana as well as I did. She never admitted it, but she knew. It's another reason why I haven't told her about Carly being dead. Mom's a good woman, she would only blame herself, and think she failed at being a mother.

I think about Mom too while I stare into the dark. I wanna tell her she's gonna be a grandma, I wanna send her pictures and video call her so she don't miss out on my kid's life the way she did with Tommy. But to do that I'll have to admit I've been lying to her. I'll have to reveal to her that one of her sons is an outlaw, and the other is a murdering psychopath.

*I fuckin' hate that bastard.*



“Hurry up and finish that.” I encourage Charlie to finish up his breakfast.

“Do I have to go back to school?” he moans.

“Yeah, you have to go back to school.” I shove a wrapped-up P and J sandwich into a brown paper bag and throw an orange in there too. The smell of it makes me squirm a little, but I smile when I remember why.

Skid called last night to let me know everything was safe here. The village is being watched, Abraham is there and we can leave the compound. I’m choosing not to think about what Skid will have to do today to make sure it stays that way. I’m far too happy to let those brutal kinds of thoughts into my head. Instead, I focus on the hope that tonight I will be reunited with my sister.

“Do we have time to stop by the house and get my school bag?” Charlie admits defeat as he slides off his chair and carries his bowl to the sink.

“Yes, I’ve scheduled it all into our route.” I pass him his sneakers. “I need to speak with your teacher before school starts so we need to leave...” I look up to check the time. “...right now.”

Charlie’s school is on the other side of town, it’s gonna take us at least forty-five minutes to get there if we stop at the house.

“Okay, Mom.” He starts putting on his sneakers and I leave him to it, making my way out the door to the car Skid said I could use to get around. Soon as I get inside I know it

isn't *Skid's* car. There's a pair of sensible shoes tossed in the passenger side footwell. The air freshener that hangs from the rearview mirror may have faded from the sun and lost its scent but I can still see traces of the floral design that used to be on it.

This is Carly's car.

The engine starts up right away, proving that Skid's maintained it over the years, and taking the wheel in my hands I blow out a nervous breath.

"I sure hope you're watching over him today." I look up through the windshield at the clouds. Surprised that talking to her doesn't feel strange at all.

Charlie stops stalling and rushes out the house, breaking the silence when he hops in beside me.

"You ready?" I ask once he's buckled up.

"Guess so." He still looks unenthusiastic about school, but normality is what he needs. It's what we all need.



I sit in the driver's seat staring at the same spot I've been watching for hours. My eyes feel heavy but I can't afford to close 'em. Skid left the compound on his bike with Jessie, Troj, and the father of Mel's kid driving a cage yesterday. He still hasn't returned. Which makes this the perfect time for me to strike. To take something from him and make him suffer all over again. Rogue would have been my first choice if this new little scenario hadn't come up. Me and Rogue have a history, and although she would certainly be more of a challenge than the girl I saw him with in town the other day, I'm going on what I think will cut Skid the deepest.

My fingers tap on the steering wheel impatiently while I wait for something to happen. I've seen a lot of the other old ladies come and go from the club gates, but not her. Skid's pretty, little bitch is keeping herself safe. I'm about to admit defeat and get some sleep. I've been awake all night, waiting either for him to come home or for an opportunity to get to her, and just when I'm about to rest the seat back and kick up my feet, I see exactly what I was lookin' for.

It's a little haunting to see Carly's old car stop at the club gates before it pulls out onto the road. I inch closer to the windshield and squint my eyes to see, but I'm a little too far away to be sure if Skid's new bitch is the one behind the wheel.

Figuring it must be, I slap my face a few times to wake myself up before I start the engine.

"Who the fuck does she think she is?" I mutter to myself as I head in pursuit.

Thankfully, the girl drives real slow, making it easy for me to catch up, but then hard to keep a safe distance between us. I watch her through her rear window, see her head bobbing along to whatever music is coming out of the stereo with the little boy who's sitting beside her. It would be real easy to press down on the gas pedal and bump into the back of her. To put a little fear into her, just for starters. But I hold off. I'm curious as to where this woman is headin' in Carly's fuckin' car.

The past few days I've been hard, I can feel that hunger building back up in me and getting stronger. Some call it hate or venom. I call it fuel. I can't pinpoint the moment I lost my conscience, if I'm honest I can't ever remember havin' one. I've never reached a limit on how far I'll go. I wonder if a child could be it?

Maybe I should feel some kinda cold shudder at the thought of hurting something so innocent, but all I visualize is the depths of Skid's despair. He would blame himself, more than he ever could me, if anything were to happen to the precious lives singing away in front of me.

More lives lost because my brother's love is lethal.

The little laugh I make isn't for anyone's benefit but my own. It would be interesting to talk to a shrink and get an evaluation of myself. Tommy's mom always said I was crazy, told me I was "*missing parts in my head.*" That's what ended her up in the fuckin' river with her head stoved in. She never did learn to control that fuckin' mouth of hers.

Tension builds in my fingers as I continue to follow the woman who I'm pretty sure is carrying Skid's child. I stay close through the windy lanes that lead toward town, thinking of all the ways I could hurt her.

I wonder if he really is in love with her, if he could love her any more than he did Carly. Maybe he never really loved Carly at all... Perhaps all my life I've got Skid wrong, and he's just like me, *missing parts*, just better at hiding it.

What I do know is that this game of cat and mouse that Skid started is about to reach its end. Only one of us can be the

winner, and it doesn't take a genius to figure out which one of us that will be.



“Can I grab more toys while we’re here, Mom?” Charlie rushes through the front door when we get back to the house.

“If you’re quick.” I roll my eyes as I toss my keys on the table by the door. My pregnancy symptoms must be really kicking in now because the place smells really weird. The disinfectant with a hint of lemon scent hits me as soon as I walk through the door. I follow it into the kitchen where it seems to be the strongest, but nothing seems out of place. My coffee cup from the morning I left the house is still in the sink, growing something furry on the remnants at the bottom, and when it makes me queasy I quickly turn my head away.

“Shit.” I gasp when I see the tower of a man who’s now standing in the kitchen door frame. He’s thick set, like Skid, maybe a little shorter, but they have the same almost-black hair and beard.

“Hello.” He smiles at me almost gentlemanly, and when I see the huge jagged-edged knife in his hand that he’s making no attempt to hide, panic starts to rise from my stomach up to my throat.

“I don’t believe we’ve been introduced. I’m Tobias, my friends call me Chop.” He casually places the rope he’s holding in his other hand on the table to free it, then steps toward me holding it out like he expects me to shake it.

“I...I...”

He studies my face, his mouth moving to replicate mine as I struggle to get my words out.

“I got everything, Mom.” Charlie’s voice comes from behind him, and when I tilt my head to look past him and see the confusion on my little boy’s face, I manage to force one very important word past the lump in my throat.

“Run!”

“Don’t do that, kid, not if you don’t want your mom to get hurt.” Chop keeps his eyes on mine, not bothering to turn around, just holding the knife up to make sure Charlie sees it.

“Please, don’t. Just let him go,” I beg as fear grips into my chest and makes it hard for me to breathe.

“Can’t do that, sweetheart.” He uses the knife tip to flick the hair out of my face before he reaches toward the table and pulls out a chair.

“Take a seat. I think it’s time for me and you to get better acquainted.”



That'll be the adrenaline," Jessie tells me, watching my hands shake as we wait for Tripp's signal.

He entered the village over fifteen minutes ago and while we're waiting here just outside the gates, I'm starting to feel real fuckin' anxious.

"This ain't my first rodeo," I remind him.

"First one that's ever really mattered," he points out accurately. I may have done plenty of shit like this for the club in the past, but never has the outcome been so detrimental to my future. To *our* future.

"It's a good thing, it'll make you twice as fuckin' strong." He slaps me on the back.

"God fuckin' help 'em."

I stare at the gates to the fortress that Abraham has built around his people and want to smash through 'em. Everyone out here is ready. Tripp drilled the plan into us like a sergeant fuckin' major when we got here earlier. If he hurries his ass up, all the leaders will still be in their morning meeting. We've taken a guess that they are the only ones who know about the cult's weapon supply, so it's Troj's job to round everyone up in the village center, while me, Jessie, and Storm read the sick old men, who control them, their last fuckin' passage.

I got orders from Prez not to cause a panic here today, our intent is to take each of those men alive. They will be driven away from here in a cage and killed with no dignity and no mercy, far away from their *sanctuary*. Their bodies will rot

wherever Grimm decides to bury ‘em, and the people who wish to remain here can make their own fuckin’ rules.

I spot some movement at the gate, and when they slightly open and Tripp pokes his head out to call us in, all four of us rush into action. I hear the loud gasp come from behind Tripp when a woman steps outta her front door and spots us, and Troj gets straight to work, sliding up behind her and covering her mouth with his hand so she doesn’t create a panic.

“Sorry for the disruption, darlin’. We ain’t here to hurt ya,” he assures her in a soft, calming tone, before nodding his head at me, Jess, and Storm so we can get to work.

We leave Tripp to go get the cage and Troj handles crowd control while we head for the red-brick building where our target is. From the outside, everything seems quiet and still. I press my ear against the wooden door and can just about make out the deep, dull voices that come from behind it. When I get the signal from Jessie and Storm, who are looking through the windows, I kick it open.

Seven shocked faces look up from the table they are gathered around.

“Morning, gentlemen.” Jessie lifts his chin at them, while Storm closes the door behind him and bolts it shut. We have to stall them here long enough for Tripp to drive in with the cage. We’d like to load them into the back as quietly as possible without causing the others to panic.

“What... What is this?” One of the men stands up from the table in an outrage, but he’s not the one I’m focused on. My eyes are set on the man sitting at the head of the table, whose face is every bit as haunting as it is in his picture.

What didn’t strike me until now, was how old this man actually is. It seems almost laughable that Addison is so afraid of him. I watch him fumble beneath the table, and when he pulls out a remote control and holds it in the air his hand trembles.

“Take one step further and I’ll blow this whole place,” he threatens, thinking that he has the element of surprise.

“You would kill yourself and all the people out there?” I stare at him, somehow managing to remain calm.

“Everyone here took the oath, we will not be polluted with the *filth* from outside. If you have come to—”

“I came here to kill ya,” I tell him with no expression on my face or tone in my voice. Two of the men make a run for the door, Jessie stops one with a clothesline, while Storm forces the other into the wall by his throat.

Abraham’s finger hovers over the button, he has no idea that his bombs are no longer active. Now, we will test this old man’s faith. Will he risk being blown from this life, for the promise of another? His top lip is sweating, his eyes jerking between the other men like he’s seeking their approval.

“Why are you here?” one of the others questions.

“He knows exactly why I’m here. He’s been watchin’, he knows who I am.” I keep my eyes pinned on Abraham.

“You said there were no complications.” The stockiest of the men stands up looking pissed. I’m starting to wonder which of these men is Addison’s father, she told me he was an Elder too, and it surprises me a little that she never asked me to spare his life.

“There are no complications.” Abraham still tries to hold his authority.

“I’d say this was a pretty big complication.” Jessie folds his arms and gives them all one of his cocky grins.

“Addison and her son do not belong to you,” I warn him as I step closer.

“She was chosen,” one of the other men speaks up, and the sound of pride in his voice suggests to me that he’s her father.

“They do not belong to you, or your fuckin’ cause. You are not holy men, you are *not* chosen. You are rapists. You are murderers, and all you sick, narcissistic old freaks are goin’ to hell.” I hear the engine outside the doors and know that it’s Tripp with our cage. Storm pulls out his gun and holds it up

while he opens the doors and Tripp reverses right up close. He holds his hand up, before rushing off to help Troj.

“I will be your designated driver on your one-way trip to Hell.” Storm takes the handful of cable ties outta his back pocket and passes some to Jessie. All the men wear the same shocked look as, one by one, they get their hands tied behind their backs and a sack thrown over their heads before they get escorted into the back of the van.

“You can’t be serious? Stop this. I won’t let you take us.” Abraham’s finger continues to linger over the button.

“Go ahead, press it,” I dare him, hearing a groan come from one of the old men behind me when Jessie shoves him in the back to get him moving out the door faster.

Abraham closes his eyes and presses down his finger, bracing himself for what comes next.

“BOOM!” Storm grabs hold of his shoulders and shakes him real hard, and when Abraham opens his eyes and sees us all still standing he looks confused and presses the button again. He taps it frantically, and all that happens is the color drains from his face.

“It’s over. All the years you’ve exploited these people, all the lies you fed to maintain your sexual urges are done.”

“Is that what you think?” The man’s demeanor changes as he drops his detonator and holds out his hands for Storm to tie. He has a freaky smirk on his face that makes me question what else he has up his sleeve.

“Every person out there will be given a choice,” I tell him how it’s gonna be.

“And you think that choice will be to trust you?” He laughs at me.

“My followers are loyal, they have bred for me, and sacrificed their own children to live by our beliefs. Do you really think you can undo all the work we have done?”

I swear I’m staring pure evil in the face as I look at him. This man doesn’t speak for a higher power. He knows what he

has done and he has no remorse for it.

“One day, my son will find his way home. All paths will lead him back to here, you can’t stop God’s will,” he warns.

“You’re full of shit,” I lean in real close and whisper at him, my hands desperate to crush his brittle bones.

“Come on, Skid, we need to get ‘em outta here,” Jessie calls from behind me.

“Have you had her?” Abraham shows no fear now, he’s accepted that he will die and wants to make one last impact.

“My wife, have you fucked her?” he asks again, wetting his lips as if he’s tasting her on them. I grip his throat in my hand and squeeze.

“Tight little thing, isn’t she? Nothing like how she was on our wedding night though, she was really tight then. Scared too.” He smiles as I choke him.

“Skid,” Jessie warns me again.

“Take ‘em, he’s stayin’.” I punch the fucker in his gut so he folds over and drops to his knees. Grabbing the front of his limp, white hair, I drag him past Jessie and the cage full of Elders, and across his sacred little village.

A crowd has formed around the slightly raised platform in the center of it. Everyone is dressed like they are taking part in some kind of historic reenactment. The women look anxious, the men look angry, and yet none of them are doing jack shit about our invasion because they are all weak.

I watch their clueless faces drop in shock when they witness their leader being dragged across the dirt, and seeing the wooden post in the center of the podium reminds me of the story Addison told me about the boy who tried to save her. I drag Abraham’s frail body onto the platform and wait ‘til I have the attention of all his people. Then, lifting him up onto his feet by the front of his shirt, I press my hand into his forehead and pin him up against the wooden post.

“You better hope that God of yours exists,” I hiss through my teeth, watching his mouth open like he’s got something

clever to say. He don't get the chance, I silence him when I pull the blade from my belt and slice it across his throat.

Gasps of hysteria come from behind me, and my blood rushes through my ears as his pours over my fingers. I intended to make him suffer, to take my time and butcher him for what he put Addison through. But being here changed my mind. I figured it would be much more of a torture for him if his followers saw how weak and pathetic he really is.

I stare into his shocked, lifeless eyes, and feel no remorse as I let his body drop onto the wooden platform that he preaches off. Then I turn to face his followers.

"I'm looking for Everleigh," I shout over the noise, silencing all their chatter. "She will come with us, but the rest of you have a choice. You have not been livin' in a community, you have been livin' under a dictatorship. This village has been rigged with explosives, not just to keep the outside world out, but to keep you in. A few minutes ago, this man who you put all your faith in, pressed the button that could have killed you all." The shock escalates on the faces of the people in front of me and suddenly I feel the responsibility to give 'em all a little hope.

"God does not speak to this man and this man alone. God speaks to all of us. He's in our conscience and our hearts. He doesn't choose what young girl should be taken from her home and family and forced into a marriage she doesn't want. He doesn't order men to breed women like dogs. These men you call leaders are abusers. We're not here to hurt you, and I'm not standin' up here to tell you what to do. I came here to protect someone I love very much, someone who these men were a threat to. Now, you are all free to make your own choices. Let your God, whoever he is, give you his messages himself." I nod, before I hop down from the podium and listen to the chaos pick back up. Somewhere, among these people, is Addison's sister and my next mission is to find her.

"My daughter is dead." A tiny woman with long, brown hair plaited down her back and Addison's eyes moves to stand in front of me.

“What?”

“Everleigh is dead, she killed herself a few days after Addison left. I guess she always figured that if Addison got away, she’d take her with her.” She stares back at me vacantly.

“Shit.” My heart drops into my stomach, this is gonna crush Addison, she was relying on me to bring Everleigh back so she could live a normal life. She was telling me last night how she couldn’t wait for her to try ice cream and watch TV for the first time.

“Where is my husband?” the woman asks, still looking as if she’s in some kinda trance.

“You should pack some things, I can take you to Addison.”

“Where’s my husband?” she asks again, ignoring me completely.

“He’s with the other leaders,” I tell her.

“And will you kill him too?” Her question comes out robotically.

“Yes,” I answer her honestly. There’s something about this woman that’s holding my attention like a hostage. Maybe it’s because I’m trying to understand how a mother could allow these things to happen to her children. It only makes me more aware of how strong Addison is.

“Good.” The woman nods with acceptance before turning around and heading back toward one of the houses.

She’s only in there for a few seconds before I hear the loud bang and everyone around me automatically drops to their knees in defense. I see the blood that splatters at the window and rush towards her, but Jessie comes outta nowhere and blocks me.

“That’s Addison’s Mom!” I yell, pushing to get past.

“All the houses have been cleared, she was in there alone. I think we both know what just happened. I’ll check it out, you focus on findin’ the sister.”

“She’s dead, killed herself years ago.” I shake my head and close my eyes.

“Skid, what ya just did... It wasn’t how Prez wanted it to go down. There were a whole lot of witnesses to it, if any of these folk go to the police we’re screwed.” VP looks a lot more nervous than he does angry.

“None of these people are goin’ to the police,” Storm interrupts us, gripping my shoulders and squeezing. He gestures his head toward the couple who are currently shaking Tripp’s hand as they thank him. I look to the other side of the village where a woman is on her knees holding Troj’s hand in hers and bowing her head against it. One family is already leaving their house with a suitcase and a chest which I assume holds all their belongings.

“We’re fuckin’ heroes,” Storm points out.

“I’m done bein’ a hero. Let’s fuckin’ go home.” I slap Jessie on the back and start heading toward the gate, while Storm makes his way to the cage where the rest of the Elders are tied and gagged ready for their final destination.

“Wait.” I’m about to step back into the forest when I hear a weak voice call from behind me. The woman’s tiny frame struggles to carry her huge, round belly as she shuffles towards me cautiously

“Everleigh isn’t dead,” she whispers, searching the space around us to ensure no one can hear.

“What? Her mom just told me...”

“Follow me.” The girl turns her back and leads me behind the row of houses that are built along the perimeter.

“I don’t understand.” She ignores me as she continues to walk as briskly as her condition will allow her.

She stops when we get to the house that’s much bigger than all the others here, then starts to move the heavy milk churns that are against the back wall. I notice her struggling and tell her to stop so I can move them myself, and despite the confusion on her face, she manages a grateful smile.

“I’m not supposed to know, I’m ashamed to admit that I was too afraid to save her. Abraham would have...” She lowers her head.

“He can’t hurt you now,” I promise.

“I heard him and the girl’s father talking one night last winter. He was mad because Abraham had kept the fact that she was alive a secret and he’d kept his actions hidden from all the other Elders.”

“Kept what actions hidden?”

“He told Elder Thomas that God had spoken to him and told him that Everleigh should pay for Addison’s sins. That she would belong to him even though she wasn’t chosen. Elder Thomas wasn’t happy, he had been told she was dead like everyone else was.”

“Wait, are you tellin’ me that he’s had her down there since Addison left?” I stare at the metal doors that lead underground beneath my feet and when I look back up at the girl, she’s nodding her head sadly.

“She wasn’t worthy of bearing him children, he kept her to pay for Addison’s sins. He kept her to beat.” Tears brim in the little woman’s eyes as she explains.

“Abraham told her parents that he found her in the forest hanging from a tree. There was no reason for anyone to doubt him, Addison had escaped, and the two of them were close. I hope you can help her. Please tell her I’m sorry.” The woman goes to walk away.

“You’re Annie, ain’t ya?” My voice makes me pause and turn back around.

“How did you know?”

“Addison’s talked about you. She liked you.”

“I liked her too.” She smiles fondly.

“What will you do now? You need to be taken care of. I can help.”

“You already helped.” She reaches out for my hand and lowers her head.

“Here.” I take my wallet from my back pocket and give her all the cash I have. “It ain’t much but it’s a start. I know what you’ve seen today doesn’t back what I’m tellin’ ya, but we’re good men. You ever need anythin’, you find your nearest Dirty Soul clubhouse and you tell ‘em Skid sent ya.”

“Appreciated.” She smiles before she walks away while I turn around and brace myself for what I’m about to find.



I absorb the fear from both of their eyes as they look up at me.

My brother's bitch and her son are now tied to chairs in the kitchen. I have two rags ready to gag 'em if they make too much noise, but since we have some time to kill I'd prefer to feed my curiosity.

Grabbing a chair for myself, I twist it around and straddle it in front of them.

"Now, which one of you is gonna tell me your name first?" I wave my blade between them.

"Don't worry, he won't hurt you," the young woman tells her son, trying her best to sound like she has some control.

"See, that right there is bad parentin'. You should never lie to your children." I stare deep into her eyes before I turn my head to him.

"Unless it's about Santa." I wink.

"Please, let us go." All that fake confidence seems to have run out real fast for her, and now she's back to being weak and pathetic again.

"Answer my question." I roll my eyes impatiently.

"Charlie," the boy's innocent, little voice speaks up first.

"That's a good name." I nod at him. "And how old are ya, son?"

"I'm five." He looks up at his mother for her approval.

“Well, it’s good to meet ya, Charlie.” I turn my attention back to the woman and wait for her to show me the same respect.

“Addison,” she whispers, and when a pretty, little tear rolls over her cheek, I make her breath catch when I press my blade against her skin to catch it.

Slowly, I bring it to my mouth and watch her eyes swell with horror as I lick it clean.

“I’m assuming that it’s my baby brother who is responsible for this...” I redirect my knife so the tip presses against her lower stomach.

“Oh God,” she gasps, her eyes looking up at the ceiling like she’s saying a little prayer.

“I don’t know if Skid told ya, but I never got to meet my last niece or nephew.” I grin at her smugly, making the panic in her eyes a little more prominent. I had no idea Carly was pregnant when I killed her, and finding out only made things seem more justified. Two birds, one stone, and all that.

“Please don’t hurt us,” Addison begs desperately.

“*Please....Please.*” I mock her whiny voice before laughing at her.

“Where’s Skid?” I turn things serious again, and I can tell from the look on her face that she doesn’t have a clue how to answer my question.

“Don’t try and be smart, it’ll make this poor boy an orphan. Just tell me where he is?” I warn her.

“He’s in Oak Creek taking care of something.”

“Okay.” I nod my head while figuring that Oak Creek is a good four-hour ride from here. “That’s quite some distance. Hell, me and you have time for some real fun.”

Addison remains silent as I reach forward and squeeze her tit through her shirt.

“Do you like havin’ these played with?” I ask her, softening my tone. Her eyes shut tight and she shakes her

head.

“I bet you’re a real borin’ fuck, ain’t ya? Nothing like Carly. Carly had spunk, she was cute and innocent to look at, but there was a fire in her eyes. A take me to bed and fuck me like a whore kinda fire. You ever been fucked like a whore, Addison?” I ask, and when I get a weak whimper for an answer I slam my fist hard at the table.

“Y... Yes.” I watch her throat tense as she swallows.

“Have you ever had your throat squeezed while you come?” I slide my fingers around her throat and apply a little pressure, the hum of fear she makes from it gets my dick hard. “Done correctly, it can be earth-shattering.” I greet her with a smile when she opens her eyes back up and helplessly glances across to her confused-looking son.

“I wonder if Carly reached that high before her lights went out?” I think out loud.

“Just let him go.” She shakes her head weakly against my grip.

“That’s not how this works, Addison. I make the decisions here. All you gotta do is suffer ‘em.”



The first thing that hits me is the smell of ammonia, it's so strong that it burns my eyes, and although the sunlight pours through the open doors above my head, it doesn't quite reach the back of the room where there's a hunched up body in the shadows. I can hear the fear in her breath and see the way her body is shaking.

"I'm not gonna hurt you," I call out as I slowly approach the back of the room.

"I'm here to help you. Addison sent me. You can trust me." I get no response, and when I see how afraid she is, I crouch down on the floor to make myself smaller.

"Everleigh, the man who did this to you is dead." I reach out my hand and get nothing in response.

The smell is almost choking me, there are flies swarming around the poor girl, and the bare legs that I can now see more clearly are scrawny, bloody, and bruised.

"Come on, let's get ya outta here." I reach out a little further, and as soon as I make contact she screams like a banshee. It slices through my brain and rings in my ears, and I realize there's only one way I'm getting this girl out.

"I am not here to hurt you," I tell her one more time, praying she believes me before I lunge at her and lift her over my shoulder. Her body tries to protest as I rise back onto my feet but she's too weak and frail.

I move fast, taking the stairs back up to the fresh, open air and hearing her screams get louder when the sun invades her eyes. I try placing her feet back on the floor but when they fail

to hold her up, I quickly catch her again. Lifting her into my arms and heading for Tripp's cage. She waves her head around with her eyes firmly closed, looking like a blind dog trying to catch a scent.

"I'm not gonna hurt ya. I'm here to help," I repeat the words over and over again as I speed-walk us through the village and out the gates.

"What the fuck?" Jessie pulls himself away from the crowd of people who are surrounding him.

"I found Everleigh, she ain't dead. Not yet." I look down at the limp, broken body in my arms. The white nightdress she's wearing is stained with blood and feces, her face is swollen with bruises and covered in infected scabs, and her hair is knotted into one big mat.

"She needs a hospital." I can see that she's dehydrated from the dryness on her lips and there's no meat on her bones, I can feel them rattling with each step I take.

"Come on, let's get her outta here." Jessie slaps my back before nodding over to Storm and Troj, who are throwing Abraham's dead body into the back of the cage where all the other leaders are tied.

"Tripp, this girl needs water and a hospital," I tell him as Jessie opens the back doors of his cage so I can put her inside.

"There's one about an hour from here."

"No. You fix her up for the journey and take her to the one in Manitou Springs. I'll just need you to stay with her until I can prepare Addison for this." I look at the mess that's been made of Addison's sister.

"I gotcha." Tripp nods, grabbing a med bag from one of his shelves and shocking me when he pulls out a saline bag. Lucky for us, Tripp's got medical training. I shouldn't be surprised that he's prepared.

"I gotta get straight back and speak to Addison," I tell Jessie, as Storm pulls out the gates and stops so we can get inside.

“That girl ain’t in her own head no more. She needs somethin’ familiar. She needs her sister.”

“Jump in, I’ll drop ya off where the bikes are.” Storm reaches his arm out the window, curling it behind him so he can open the side door. All the Elders who are tied up in the back and I lift the sacks of their heads so I can see their faces. Some look hopeful, some look scared. Their saggy cheeks gape over the gags that are tied around their mouths and I get in the back, climbing over Abraham’s body so I can get to the one who I’m confident is Addison’s father. A man who allowed his daughters to become possessions.

I hook my finger into the fabric that’s wedged between his lips and drag it down to his chin.

“Your daughter is alive. Barely.” I let him know. “Your *other* daughter is safe and well, she’s strong and not only a beautiful person but she’s a kick-ass mom to her kid.”

“P-P-P-Please don’t kill me,” he begs, disregarding everything I just told him.

“Sorry, I already made a promise to your wife.” I take out my gun and put a bullet right between the eyes of the man who allowed this to happen to his daughters. A man who, in my opinion, is no man at all. Even with a silencer attached, the noise makes everyone else jump. I feel no guilt or remorse like I expected to, just strangely satisfied.

When we get back to the motel where the bikes are, Storm gets a head start and starts making his way to Sinnerman’s Quarry. We figure if we kill these fuckers on site, it will save Grimm the job of moving them when he gets back from L.A.

I call Addison just before we leave but she doesn’t answer. That’s nothing new. Addison has spent so many years without a cell phone it isn’t an essential item to her. She hasn’t even had to charge the thing since I bought it for her. I leave her a voicemail telling her I’m on my way home and that I did what I came here to do. I’ll explain to her about her sister when we’re face to face. Addison needs to be prepared for what she’s gonna see, and I can’t risk her trying to get to the hospital without me being there to soften the blow of it.

“You ready?” Jessie asks once I’ve slid my phone back inside my cut pocket.

“Yeah.” I nod, more than ready to make the journey home.



“You know, you’re gonna have to get better at this phone thing, darlin’.” Skid’s voice message comes out from the speaker of my phone his brother is holding up, so we can all hear.

“Everythin’ went to plan, Ads. You’re safe. That fucker ain’t gonna ever be able to hurt you again.” There’s relief in his voice, he sounds so happy and it’s painful to think how oblivious he is to how far from safe we really are. Right now, Skid is on top of the world. He thinks he’s saved me, and that our new life together can start.

“We’re headin’ home now. Should be back at the club around three so we can pick Charlie up from his first day back at school together. Anyway, I love ya, darlin’. See ya in a few.” The room goes silent when he hangs up and Chop shakes his head.

“Just Skid doin’ what he does best. Bein’ a fuckin’ hero.” He rolls his eyes and slams my phone on the table, while I remain silent, just trying to focus on not panicking. Charlie is trying so hard to be brave but I can tell that he’s petrified. I have to stay strong for him. “*Nothing is going to happen to us. Nothing is going to happen to us,*” I tell myself over and over again in my head.

“How are we gonna pass the time while we wait for him?” Chop paces in front of us, tapping his finger at his mouth theatrically.

“I could tell ya a story. You like stories, Charlie?” He tilts his head and studies him.

“Sure.” Charlie nods his head, attempting to seem enthusiastic, and I join him. I figure if he’s telling us a story, he won’t be hurting us. He can tell all the stories he wants.

“You think I’m bad.” Chop points his finger at me accusingly. “Skid would have told ya that I’m a cold-hearted monster, but none of that’s true.” He crouches down in front of Charlie and when he takes his hand it makes me shudder.

“Skid would be no one without me. Everythin’ he’s got is because *I* brought us here. *I* set our path.” He gets more frustrated with each word he speaks.

“If he would have just left her alone, she would still be alive.” His voice drops into a whisper, proving that the man is clearly unstable. He’s acting as if we’re supposed to empathize with him.

“I saw her first,” he continues to explain, standing back up. His mood switching back to anger in a split second. “She was the kinda girl you only had to look at to know she’d change your fuckin’ life. I wanted her. I wanted her more than I could stand. I felt like I couldn’t fuckin’ breathe when I was around her. But I also knew I was bad for her.” He slumps down in the chair and strokes his hand through his beard, the fury in his eyes turning to sadness.

“By then, I’d already killed a few others. I didn’t want her to ever become one of ‘em.” He raises his head back up to look at me. “I saved her.” He holds on to that thought as he nods his head.

“I gave her a shot at fuckin’ livin, and I had every intention of staying the hell away from her. But...” His fists tense and his breath releases through his nostrils as he struggles to get his words out.

“He did it. He brought her into the life I was protecting her from. He brought her closer to me, into the danger zone where I had nothin’ but time. Time to watch her and torture myself with how it could have been. Time for my anger to build and all those nasty, little thoughts in my head to develop and become an obsession.” Chop is breathing like a bull about to charge as the rage creeps higher. “She should have been

mine,” he bellows, standing up and flipping the table over. Charlie screams, squeezing his eyes shut tight, then when a soaked patch starts to spread across the front of his pants, I realize I have to do something.

“You’re right. Skid was selfish to do that.” I speak up. “You did the right thing. You showed control.” I try to talk him down, and when he looks at me like I’ve shocked him, I realize my plan is working.

“You have no idea how hard it was watching them together. How he lived that life I wanted right in front of me.” He opens up a little more as I nod my head back understandingly.

“I lived like that for years, just lettin’ him have her. Watching her fall more and more in love with him. Everybody does that. Perfect fuckin’ Tristan. Perfect fuckin’ Skid. He kills someone and he’s a fuckin’ hero. I kill someone and I’m a fuckin’ psychopath.” He kicks the table and makes both me and Charlie jump.

“When the feds came lookin’ for me at the club I had to cut and run. I knew that I could never go back. Skid had no idea what they had on me when he pretended he was me so I could get a head start on runnin’ and the Souls would never have condoned it. I had every intention of leaving quietly. I was gonna slip off and start over, but in my rush to get away, I left somethin’ behind. Somethin’ that, if Prez ever found, would have made him hunt me down. If I stood any chance of livin’, I had to go back and get it.”

“What was it?” I ask, his story reeling me in and making me curious.

“Some fucker was trying to put the shit into me. Sent me a USB stick with a recording that would have been made a long time ago. It was evidence that I was slammin’ it into Prez’s wife, and contained a not-so -friendly conversation I had with his best friend, who just so happened to be dead a few days later...”

“And did you?” I don’t know why I ask when I’m already certain of the answer.

“I had to. Brian was gonna tell Prez, it would have blown my whole cover and got me kicked out of the club. I wasn’t gonna die because that bitch wanted her husband to notice her, and I sure as hell wasn’t gonna let Brian Donavon rat me out.” He shakes himself out of his thoughts before he continues.

“The trunk I kept that recording in had been taken outta my cabin. Tommy told me the boys made my cabin clean, they knew that when the Feds found out Skid wasn’t me and came back searching they’d go through the club until they found something. He was certain that the trunk was taken to Skid’s, but he couldn’t get to it without anyone questioning him. I figured that I’d have to do the job myself. Judge Jackson created a distraction for me by serving a search warrant on the club. That was meant to be my final goodbye present but turns out they got a tip-off. Jimmer Carson always lands on his fuckin’ feet,” Chop snarls

“The distraction still worked out. Everyone was panicking, tryin’ to shift shit. I moved in from my hiding place in the forest and went to Skid’s place. I don’t know why I was surprised when I saw her there. It was her home, after all. It felt like fate though. Just like the first time I saw her. There was no one else there, just me and her, and I knew it would be the last time I saw her. I just...” He pauses like he doesn’t know how to describe his emotions. “I wanted him to feel how I felt. I wanted him to ache real deep. To have that hole inside him that he’d never fill.

So I took her. I fucked her and I killed her. And Addison...” His eyes are focused on me now, and I search them really hard to try and find some remorse. “...it felt every bit as good as I imagined it would.”



My boot stomps on the empty cardboard box to flatten it when my phone starts to ring.

“You seen Addison anywhere?” Uncle Skid asks as I pick it up and toss it into the huge dumpster around the side of the clubhouse.

“Not today.” I balance the phone between my ear and shoulder as I slam the lid shut and dust my hands together.

“I tried callin’ her when we left Oak Creek and again just now, she ain’t answerin’.” He sounds worried.

“You want me to go up to the cabin and give her a message?”

“Yeah, just tell her I’m only an hour away. I ain’t bringin’ these assholes back to the club, we’re droppin’ ‘em off at Sinnerman’s Quarry.”

“Droppin’ ‘em off alive?” I ask.

“No, they’re dead now. Grimm’s got a storage container built into the ground out here where they can wait for him ‘til he’s back. You know if ya make it to Prospect, you’ll get the honor of helpin’ him,” Skid points out, giving me a little more hope.

“You sound like you’re tryin’ to put me off.” I laugh to myself.

“Just remindin’ ya that it ain’t all drinkin’ beer and fuckin’ pussy.”

“I know that.” I get what he’s tryin’ to tell me and also realize that Uncle Skid’s given me a little more information than he usually would.

“I’ll go speak to Addison for ya now,” I tell him before hanging up and feeling positive that things are moving in the right direction.

There’s not much to do around here today, the club ain’t busy since most members are out takin’ care of things. I could easily head back to my trailer and blaze up for the rest of the afternoon, no one would even notice I was gone.

But that ain’t me anymore. I know I can be a Soul. All I gotta do is prove to Uncle Skid that I’m worthy of being sponsored.

I’m sick of being labeled as Chop’s son. The nobody who the Souls took pity on after his psycho-murdering daddy turned all crazy and left him behind. I’m sick of everyone being wary of me and waiting for me to snap too. But most of all, I’m sick of feeling sorry for myself all the damn time.

All my life I’ve felt like an outsider. Like one big inconvenience. Just lately, I’ve realized that I’m the only reason for that. I’ve always held back, kept people at a distance because I was scared they’d either abandon me or end up getting hurt like my mom and Aunt Carly. I’m fed up with seeing other people come to this club and turn their lives around. It’s my time now. Sometimes you just gotta grab life by the balls and stop waiting for shit to fall at ya feet.

I head up to Skid’s cabin, and the first thing I notice is that Carly’s car ain’t here. I knock on the door before I open it and when I do a quick check and see that there ain’t no sign of Addison or her kid, I take out my cell and call Skid back.

“She ain’t here, the car ain’t here so I figure she’s left ya,” I attempt a little humor.

“Yeah, good one. She might have gone into town with Jasmine. No, wait...” I hear someone talkin’ to him in the background. “She ain’t with Jaz. Storm’s just spoken to her...”

Jesus, I'll bet she's gone back to her house to start movin' her and Charlie's stuff over." He sighs.

"You want me to head over there and check it out?" I offer, he did ask me to take care of her while he was gone, I guess this is the kinda stuff he meant.

"Yeah, and make sure she ain't liftin' anythin' heavy while you're there. I gotta go. I wanna get back on the road."

"I'm on it," I assure him, hanging up and sliding my phone back into my pocket.

I use my initiative and knock on a few more cabin doors to check if any of the other girls know where she might be before I head off. When I get no luck, I get into the cage and head for the house where Skid had me clean the spray paint from the front door a few weeks ago.

I arrive at the house about half an hour later, and text Skid to let her know she's here when I see Carly's old car is parked outside. Skid's changed since Addison came to the club looking for help. He's becoming his old self again and I know it's got everything to do with her. It's good to see him happy again.

I've just got outta the cage when I hear a loud crash come from inside the house and when it's followed up by a high-pitched scream, I immediately start to panic. I'm as sure as I can be that Addison is inside that house, and it sounds to me like she's in trouble. I take a deep breath before I dash across the lawn and carefully peer inside the first window I come to. At first glance, everything looks okay. The living room is empty, there's no sign of anyone inside, but then I see something that makes my stomach turn cold.

I see the man who I told I never wanted to see again.

"*Shit*," I whisper under my breath, immediately turning my back to the window and sitting my ass on the floor so I don't get seen. My hands shake like hell as I take out my phone to call Uncle Skid, but there's no answer. Of course there ain't, no one ever picks up when they're ridin'.

“Shit. Shit. Shit.” I curse myself for not leaving him tied to that fuckin’ tree. All this is my fault. Now, I gotta try to figure out what the fuck I can do to fix it. It’s pointless trying to call anyone that’s with Skid, they’ll all be ridin’ too. And I can’t take him by myself, especially not when I’m unarmed. I’ve only got one option. I’ll have to phone Prez, hang tight, and wait for backup.

Another loud scream comes from inside, one that tells me there’s no time for that. Right now, I’m the only chance Skid’s girl’s got.

If I wanna be a Soul, I guess it’s time to see if I got what it takes.



Five Minutes Earlier

**I**t feels good to be back in Manitou Springs, closer to home and closer to her again. I stop again when we get to town so I can call Tripp for an update. He tells me he got Everleigh to the hospital safely, and she's had to be sedated due to the state she's in. He also promises to stay with her until I can speak to Addison and drive her over to get them reunited.

I figure I should leave the others here and head straight for the house where the text, I've just read from Tommy, told me she is. It's only natural that Addison would have wanted to leave the compound as soon as it was safe. I guess it's something I'm gonna have to get used to. Storm was right in what he said yesterday morning. I can't wrap her up in cotton wool and never let her outta my sight.

It's been one helluva day, but the idea of everything being normal again for her and Charlie makes it all worthwhile.

Storm heads inside the grocery store to grab some cigarettes, and I decide to follow him in and pick up a box of Nutter Butters for Addison. I wonder if she'll crave them the same way she did when she was pregnant with Charlie. The thought of it makes me smile to myself like an idiot as I scan the shelves to locate them.

My cut starts to vibrate and when I take out my phone and see her name flashing, the smile on my face grows a little wider.

"I was just thinkin' about you," I answer it.

"How sweet." The deep, cold voice that responds makes my heart stop.

"What the *fuck* are you doin' with her phone?" I ask, noticing how Storm looks at me funny when I drop the box of Nutter Butters on the floor.

"She's pretty, Skid, and fear looks real good on her. You should come see it for yourself."

“Chop. I swear if you—” My blood curdles and my heart stops.

“Relax, she doesn’t have to get hurt. You can save her, just tell me to hurt the boy instead.” I hear Addison scream in the background and immediately start rushing for my bike.

“You can’t have it all, Skid. Make a choice.”

“Skid, you choose Charlie. Choose him,” I hear Addison yelling in the background.

“Shut up, bitch!” The loud crash and ear-splitting scream that comes next sets my rage on fire.

“What’s goin’ on?” Jessie asks when I quickly tuck my phone away and start my engine.

“Chop’s fuckin’ got her.” I see the fear on his face when he looks across to Troj before I take off and head full throttle toward the house. The engines that roar behind me confirm that my brothers are right there with me.



I lay on my side, my cheek pressed against the floor from where he struck me so hard and made the chair topple over.

“Sounds like your fuckin’ hero is on his way. Will he get here in time?” Chop presses the tip of the knife he’s holding so it indents the cheek that’s facing upward. It still throbs from the impact the back of his hand made against it, and blood starts to trickle as he twists the sharp blade into my skin.

“Please don’t hurt my little boy. Please.” All I can do is beg and try to reason with this monster.

Chop lifts me and the chair back up as if we’re weightless, then starts pacing in front of us again.

“All I did was prove that he didn’t love her as much as I did. I would never have let anyone hurt her.” He shakes his head and although what he’s saying makes no sense at all, I know I have to try and keep him engaged.

“Chop, please listen to me. You can’t hurt my little boy.” My eyes flick between him and Charlie, who still has his eyes squeezed tight.

“That’s where you’re wrong. I can do anythin’ I want.” Chop rushes toward him and starts shaking him, and the chair, so violently I scream at the top of my lungs hoping someone hears.

“Open your eyes, boy!” Chop shouts in his face. “Don’t be a fuckin’ pussy. Open your eyes.”

“He’s scared. Please, stop.” The knife is still in the hand Chop’s clinging to Charlie’s shirt with, and the blade is

dangerously close to his face.

“*Open your fuckin’ eyes!*” he screams like a maniac. “Skid’s not gonna save ya. He can’t always be the fuckin’ hero... He—” My breath catches in my throat when Skid’s nephew comes rushing in out of nowhere. Charging at his father’s back and trying to pull him away. Chop moves fast, spinning around and plunging the knife he’s holding straight into Tommy’s gut.

“Charlie, keep your eyes shut. Do *not* open your eyes!” I scream as I watch Tommy stare at his father in shock before his eyes drop to the blood that’s pouring from his side.

“*Tommy?*” Chop remains still, shock and confusion on his face as his son stumbles back and falls against the kitchen cabinet.

“Tommy.” He says his son’s name again as the knife drops from his hand and yet he doesn’t go to him, he just stands there, stunned as he watches Tommy cover his wound with his hands and the blood pour through his fingers. Tommy’s skin whitens, and terrified tears run over his cheek as he continues to look up at his father in disbelief.

I want desperately to help him, but I’m still tied down.

“Dad?” Tommy shakes his head helplessly, looking like a lost little boy who expects his father to save him.

“You picked the wrong side, son,” Chop tells him, his voice almost sounding weak as he trudges out the room almost in a trance. His boots leave bloody footprints across the white tiled floor as he walks out the door.

“Tommy. Stay with me,” I call over to him. I don’t know what Chop’s next move will be or where he’s gone but I just have to focus on keeping Tommy alive. I try shifting the chair I’m tied to closer to him. “Tommy, have you got a phone? We need to call an ambulance.” I look across at Charlie whose face is still scrunched up tight.

“Charlie, you’re doing so good. Keep those eyes closed for me, okay?” I try holding everything together despite the fact I can barely breathe.

Tommy's skin is turning whiter by the second, and although I'm sure he's still conscious, he's not responding to me now. His chest is rising and falling like he's having a panic attack.

"Tommy, breathe. Stay with me. Please."

"You okay? The kid's okay too, right?" he asks, seeming oblivious to the pool of blood that's spreading out wider across the floor.

"We're fine. You saved us." I fight back my tears and try to stay calm. "Tommy, we really need to get that phone," I tell him through my tears.

"It's okay, it doesn't hurt," he tells me, sniffing back his tears and trying to be brave.

"That's good." I nod my head and force a smile for him.

"I saved ya." He smiles back at me, his eyes not looking scared anymore.

"Yeah, Tommy, you saved us."



I pull my bike to a halt outside Addison's house and let it drop onto her front lawn before I rush inside. I follow the trail of blood that leads to the kitchen, and when I see her and Charlie both alive, I start to breathe again.

"Help him." The desperate look on her face has me following her eyes and when I see Tommy on the floor in a pool of blood, I immediately scramble toward him.

"Shit, what happened?" Jessie follows in close behind me.

"Call an ambulance!" I rip off my cut and quickly take off my shirt, so it can replace Tommy's slick, bloody hands. He's barely conscious, his eyes aren't focusing.

"Tommy, listen to me." I slap his face with my other hand and force him to look at me. "You're gonna be okay. Just don't go under. Stay awake," I order.

"He stabbed me." Tommy shakes his head in confusion.

"Yeah, he did, but it's gonna be okay." I have no idea what the hell happened here or where Chop is but I can't worry about that right now. Right now, I have to keep my nephew alive.

"I wouldn't let him hurt them. I made ya a promise."

"You did good, Tommy. Real fuckin' good." I glance over my shoulder and see Troj untying Addison and Charlie.

"Get 'em outta here!" I yell, pressing as hard as I can into Tommy's stomach. "And stay with 'em. We don't know where that son of a bitch is."

“Tommy,” Addison sobs as she clings tight to her son and lets Troj drag them both out the room.

“Ambulance is comin’.” Jessie steps back inside the room and starts searching for more stuff to help me stop the bleeding with.

“Am I gonna die?” Tommy asks, his lips turning blue and his body shaking.

“No!” I tell him firmly. “You are *not* gonna fuckin’ die.” I switch my drenched shirt for the wad of dish towels Jessie hands down to me.

“You’re gonna have one helluva kick-ass scar though.” I smile at him through the tears that are blurring my eyes and when I look up at Jessie and he shakes his head back at me, I know that he’s thinking the same thing I am.

“The ambulance is on its way,” I assure him again, keeping the pressure on him as best I can as I take him in my arms and shift my body behind his. I rest my back against the kitchen cupboard and hold him against my chest. “We’ll just wait it out together, okay?” I press my head back against the drawer behind me and pray for a miracle that I know ain’t gonna come, the pain burning through my chest as I feel him slipping away from me.

“Hey, Uncle Skid.” Tommy’s voice croaks. “D’ya think I’ll make the cut now?”

“Yeah, kid. You made the cut.” I tap my hand on his chest and hold it there until I feel his heart give up beating.

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“He’s gone.” Jessie reaches down and places his hand on my shoulder and I remain still, focusing on the knife that’s on the floor as Storm and Jessie carefully drag Tommy’s body off mine and lay him flat on the floor. Suddenly all the pain I’m feeling accelerates into anger and I act on impulse, getting up on my feet and picking up the bloody knife in front of me.

“Take care of them,” I growl at Jessie as I walk out the door and go in search of my brother. My head is numb of anything other than tracking him down. I won’t let him get away this time. I don’t know where to start looking but I *will* find him. The bloody footprints lead down the side of the house and when I see the dark pair of boots poking out from behind the wood store the rage inside me has me gripping the knife in my hand a little tighter.

“Is he dead?” His low, gravelly voice asks, and when I step in front of him he looks up at me from where he’s sitting on the ground with his arms hanging over his knees.

My hand shakes, willing me to drive the knife it’s clutching into his empty fuckin’ chest, but I don’t. Instead, I grab the front of his shirt and drag him onto his feet, dropping the knife so I can throw fist after fist into his face. All my hurt and frustration comes out in growls of pain and fully loaded fists until eventually I get dragged away from him.

“Not here. Not like this.” Jessie holds on to me, keeping me back while Troj comes from behind him with the rope that cunt had tied Addison and Charlie up with.

“We’re takin’ our time with this one, brother,” Jessie whispers, as Troj drags my half-conscious brother up off the floor and spits on his face. He slams him face-first into the side of the house and ties his hands behind his back before he forces him toward the cage that Storm must have just pulled up in.

“Go be with your girl, Skid. She needs you. We’ll make sure he gets back to the club, and he’ll be waitin’ for ya in my basement when you’re ready. We got him. Now it really is over.” There’s a relief in Jessie’s voice that overcomes his anger.

“Yeah, we got him, Jess. But this is far from over.” I look my brother in the eye and hope he hears as he gets dragged further away from me.

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“Skid.” Addison rushes toward me when I step into the living room where she’s comforting Charlie.

“You okay?” I pull back from her so I can check her over, there’s blood on her face and her left eye’s really starting to swell. That fucker is gonna pay.

“We’re not hurt. He... He...”

“Sssshhh. It’s okay now, we got him. We got ‘em all, Addison.” I hold her and Charlie tight to my chest and appreciate every little breath I feel ‘em make.

“Tommy?” She looks up at me hopefully, and when I slowly shake my head back at her, she bursts into tears.



Skid insists that me and Charlie get checked over at the hospital, despite me telling him we're okay. But when he tells me that my sister's there too, I go willingly. It takes us a while to get seen but after we both get the all-clear, Skid holds my hand and carries Charlie on his hip as we make our way to the other side of the hospital where my sister is.

"How is she?" He tips his chin at the guy who's waiting outside the door to the private room she's in.

"She's still out. Doc said she could be for a while," he informs us.

Skid hasn't told me why they brought her here yet. Skid hasn't said much at all. He's still tense and I know he's not going to ease up until he's finished what he started with Chop.

"You should go back to the club." I turn and face him.

"You must be crazy if you think I'm gonna leave you—" I slam my hand over his mouth so he has to hear me out.

"We're fine." I take his hand and place it against my chest so he can feel my heartbeat. "Feel that, I'm fine. Charlie's fine and our baby is fine. I really need to be here with my sister and you need to be with the club."

"Addison, I can't..."

"She's right." His friend interrupts him. "You've been waitin' on this a long time. The club has been waitin' too. It's time for Chop to get what's coming to him. I'll stay with 'em, and I won't let 'em out of my sight. You got my word on that. But, Skid... there ain't no one left to hurt 'em."

Skid nods his head as he takes in what his friend tells him. He told me that himself, but hearing it from someone else seems to make that sink into his own head.

“Go.” I nod my head encouragingly before I reach up on my toes and kiss his cheek. “You go, and you kill that fucking bastard,” I whisper in his ear so Charlie doesn’t hear me.

“Come on, let’s go take care of your aunt.” I leave Skid and his friend in the corridor so I can go see my sister.

I smile at the nurse who’s tending to her and when I step closer and get a look at her, my breath catches in my throat. Skid did warn me before we got here, he told me that I should wait. But nothing could have prepared me for what I’m seeing. I clutch Charlie’s hand, feeling guilty for allowing him to see it too.

“She’s heavily sedated, she won’t be in any pain,” the nurse assures me.

Everleigh looks unrecognizable, her face is gaunt and her body barely more than a skeleton. All her beautiful hair has been cut to just an inch.

“We had to cut it, the knots were too thick,” the nurse explains when she sees me trace my hand through it. “I washed her myself and treated the sores. She’s going to need a lot of help but she’s going to be okay.” The nurse takes my hand and smiles positively before she gets back to filling out her paperwork, and when I look over my shoulder and see Skid’s friend step through the door, I allow him to comfort me when I burst into tears.

“What happened to her?” I sob as Charlie wraps his arms tight around my waist and squeezes me like he’s trying to comfort me. I shouldn’t be crying in front of him like this, he shouldn’t even be here after all he’s been through today. But I need him close.

“Here, darlin’, take a seat.” Skid’s friend drags one of the more comfortable chairs in the room closer to the bed and encourages me to take it. I pull Charlie onto my lap and hold

him tight in one arm while I reach out my other hand to take hers.

“I don’t know much, just that she was being kept in a basement. Clearly, she ain’t been fed properly for a while. She’s got signs of beatings and...” He pauses when he thinks he’s said too much.

“Just say it.” I shake my head and close my eyes.

“They kept her like a dog.” His words bring more tears to my eyes.

“Doc says she’s gonna be out for a while.” He looks across to the nurse who’s just about to make her way out the door. “What are the chances of an extra pillow and blanket, sweetheart?” he asks her.

“I’ll see what I can do.” She nods at me with another warm smile before she leaves.

“I say you and your boy here get some rest. She’s safe, you’re both safe. And if any other fucker wants to try his luck today, he better be one helluva hard-ass bastard.” He smiles as his hand squeezes my shoulder. “I’ll be right outside,” he assures me before he steps out to take the hard, plastic seat beside the door.

“Mom,” Charlie speaks for the first time since all this happened. I was starting to wonder if he’d ever speak again.

“Yes, baby?” I kiss the top of his head and try not to think about what could have happened if Tommy hadn’t come when he did.

“Are you gonna have a baby?”

“Yes, sweetheart. We’re gonna have a baby.” I manage a tiny laugh when the words that come out aren’t at all what I expected.

“I’ll be braver when it gets here. Big brothers have to be brave.”

“Hey.” I pull my head back and lift up his chin.

“You were brave today. You were so brave, Charlie.”

“I thought he was gonna kill us,” he says, his bottom lip starting to wobble.

“So did I,” I admit, letting him know that it’s okay to be scared. “But he didn’t. We had our very own superhero come to save us, and somebody very special watching over us.” I wipe away my tears and hug my little boy back into my chest, gripping my sister’s hand and suddenly feeling very grateful to be here.



“What’s the hold up, Skid? Why ain’t I dead yet?” Chop laughs at me, though I fail to see what he finds amusing. He’s got his arms tied above his head, and his ankles shackled to the floor. There’s no way for him to escape.

I don’t answer his question, just stare at him blankly the same way I have been for the past two hours that I’ve been down here.

I don’t care that he can see how broken I am, I don’t give two fucks if he’s feeding off my weakness. All I care about are the people who have suffered because of him. I rest my head against the breeze block wall that I’m sitting against and glare right at the cunt.

“You aren’t gonna kill me, you would have done it by now if you were. Let’s just face it, Skid, you just ain’t got it in ya.” He shakes his head and laughs again.

“And what did *you* have in you that allowed you to *kill*, Tommy?” My voice comes out scratchy. My body feels heavy and my head is pounding. It feels like it’s been a year since I woke up in that motel bed this morning with just the intention of killing Abraham.

“That wasn’t supposed to happen... I would never...” The smug look drops off his face and he almost looks a little broken himself.

“He came at me from behind me. I reacted. Anyone would have done the same.”

“No, Chop.” I shake my head at him. “You were waving a knife in a little boy’s face.” My voice gets progressively louder

as my cool starts to slip when I remember what Addison told me back at the hospital.

My weak body draws strength from my anger when I think about the lengths this man will go to just to hurt me. “Your son died provin’ he was nothin’ like you. Guess that’s *somethin’* you can take to the grave with you,” I hiss at him.

“Don’t see me headin’ to no grave yet, not if you’ve got anything to do with it.” He smirks and I know what he’s doin’. Chop’s not a fool. He knows this is the end of the road for him and he wants it over quickly.

“You really think that I don’t want you dead?”

“Oh, you want me dead, Skid, you just don’t got the balls to do it yourself,” he taunts.

“You’re so wrong.” I shake my head.

“Then why am I still alive? I killed your wife, Skid. I raped her, remember?” He narrows his eyes like he’s getting a sick, little kick from the memory, and I stand up on my feet and storm toward him, pressing my forehead up against his and breathing through my nose.

“You ain’t dead yet, because not everyone’s here.” I let him in on a little secret before I throw a left hook at one of his already swollen-shut eyes.

“This has been a long time comin’, not just for me, but for everyone. You didn’t just take Carly from me, you took her away from this club. And even after that you couldn’t just back off and leave. You had to keep on fuckin’ with us,” I snarl. “You ain’t dead yet, *brother*, because you still have to endure the longest couple hours of your sorry fuckin’ life before I end you.” I grab the front of his hair in my hand and take the pocket knife outta my back pocket, slicing its blade carefully through the swell on his eyelid to release the pressure so he can open it again, then when the blood starts to seep, I spit at the wound.

“You are gonna experience unthinkable pain, and you are gonna beg me to fuckin’ kill you just to make it stop.”

“Bring it,” he dares me, looking unfazed. It makes me question if maybe everyone is right, and he really is just a fuckin’ psychopath.

“Just tell me why. Why did you take her from me? You knew how much I loved her.” I’m prepared to trade some of my weakness for his honesty.

“Because I loved her too.” I swear I see a trace of sincerity in his cold, black eyes.

“What?” I take a step back and shake my head.

“I loved her. I loved her in a way that fuckin’ hurt. I loved her enough to let her go because I know what I am, and I knew that I would have eventually hurt her.”

“You’re crazy. You’re not capable of love, Chop. You just killed your own son.”

“I did somethin’ nice for her and you ruined it.” He ignores my point. “You brought her into this life, a life where she would always be in danger. You brought her to me. You killed her, Skid. *You!*”

My fist smashes into his face again, and I have to remind myself that there’s a club full of men upstairs who have been waitin’ to watch this man die. I find enough control to step away from him, resting my hands against the wall and dropping my head between them while I breathe myself calm.

“You’re doin’ the same thing right now, with this girl and her kid. Ya really think you’re good for them? That you can protect them?” I can feel him getting under my skin, he wants inside my head and I’ve given him far too much of that space in the past to let him win.

“Yeah, Chop, I do. Because my version of love and yours are very different.”

“You gonna talk to me about love or ya gonna kill me, Skid?” Chop laughs.

“I forgive you.” I ignore all his taunts and look him straight in his eyes.

“I knew you wouldn’t kill me.” He shakes his head like I’m some kind of disappointment. “Best send Jessie down here, he’ll do the job properly, ‘specially since he knows what I wanted to do to his old lady.”

“Oh, I’m gonna kill ya. I have to. I can’t look over my shoulder no more, I have to protect all the people I care about. I just want ya to know that I forgive you before I do it. I want you to know that I forgive you because I pity you. You can take as many lives as you want, you can hurt people, and make ‘em suffer. You can spread fear, but you ain’t ever gonna be fulfilled. You’ll never know what happiness feels like, and you’ll never know what it’s like to be loved by someone. I ain’t the reason you killed Carly, Chop. You killed her because you wanted to *be* somebody to her. You killed her because she didn’t see you.” I turn my back on him and leave him with that thought, knowing it will hurt, but not be a scratch on what’s coming.

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Everyone looks somber when I head into the barroom. The news of Tommy has really rocked the club, nobody here really gave my nephew the time of day, me included, and that’s weighing on all our consciences now.

“Thorne and Nyx are back from the run they went on with Hayden, there’s just one brother we’re waiting on and Grimm ain’t far away.”

Jessie heads toward me and passes me a drink.

“I spoke to Tripp half an hour ago. Addison and the kid are fine, they’re both sleepin’ at the hospital.”

“I hate her bein’ there without me.”

“She’s safe and it’s where she needs to be,” he assures me.

“You want me to go and be with her?” Jasmine offers. “Lydia said she’ll watch Faith for us tonight.” I nod my appreciation at Carly’s sister, it’ll be nice for Addison to have some female company for a few hours. I can’t imagine Tripp is

much of a talker. “I’m sorry about Tommy.” Jasmine kisses my cheek before she heads over to Storm, who nods back at me before he leaves to take her to the hospital.

It’s another hour and a half before the doors burst open and Rogue marches through them.

“Where is he?!” She looks ready to take on a fuckin’ army. Since Grimm’s now back and Storm’s returned from dropping off Jasmine, there’s nothing holding us back no more.

“Ladies, if you’ll excuse us. We got business to attend to.” Prez starts walking toward the door and Rogue quickly follows after him.

“I want in,” she tells him, blocking his exit with a determined look on her face.

“Rogue, this is club bus—”

“She’s in.” I knock back my whiskey and risk the consequences of undermining my Prez. After the day I’ve had, what’s the worst that can happen? Prez narrows his eyes at me as I start to walk toward him.

“You said we’d get this done however I wanted and I want her there,” I explain.

He looks between me and Rogue before he nods his head.

“Let’s go make this right, brother.” He steps aside, allowing me to be the one who leads him and all my brothers down the stairs to the basement. Judgment day has come for Tobias Saunders, and I got a feeling it’s gonna be brutal.



“Nice to see you all turned out.” Chop laughs sarcastically as we all step into the basement where he’s tied up. I don’t believe for a second that he ain’t feelin’ any fear. Right now, there are thirteen men and one crazy-assed woman standing in a horseshoe around him, all wondering what the worst thing they could do to him is.

“Wouldn’t have missed this for the world,” Brax snarks back at him, his fists shaking from the rage they’re holding back.

“So, who’s going first?” Chop keeps the cocky grin on his already fucked-up face as he looks among us.

“First order of business.” Prez nods his head toward Nyx, who immediately steps behind Chop, takes out his knife, and tears it through the back of the tee Chop’s wearing.

“Once a brother always a brother, huh?” Nyx slaps him hard on the back and gives Prez the nod of confirmation that he’s still got the club’s tattoo on his back.

“Hard to find a place to get a decent cover-up done around here.” Chop sniggers and Prez keeps his cool as he slowly steps closer to him.

“Don’t worry, we got ya covered.” Prez nods his head to send Hayden on his way before returning his eyes back to my brother.

“You were never worthy of my patch, you didn’t have a clue what it stood for.”

“We do what we have to do, I guess.” Chop’s words make no sense but I’m more focused on Hayden when he comes back into the room and hands Nyx the bottle of hydrochloric acid.

“Ahhh, there’s the Bastard-turned-Soul. How does it feel to be one of the good guys?” Chop attempts to wink at him through his swollen eyes and Hayden slams his fist into his jaw so hard he knocks one of his teeth right outta his head.

“It feels good, real fuckin’ good,” he tells him before getting back into his spot and watching what comes next.

Nyx has put some heavy-duty gloves on and we all watch as he takes the bottle and tips it, slowly letting the acid trickle over Chop’s back. He breathes steadily at first, trying to hide the pain he’s in, but as Nyx keeps pouring and the acid starts to eat through his skin, Chop has to let go of the agony it causes him. His fists clench and his face turns red as he screams. And we all stand united and enjoy the way it sounds.

“Son of a bitch,” he manages to hiss out between his teeth when Nyx is finished. “That’s the first problem dealt with,” Nyx tells him as he takes his spot beside his brother.

One by one, my real brothers step up and take their turn. He’s fucked everyone up in one way or another and there’s a lot of anger for them to unleash. Chop roars as the acid continues to burn and he takes blow after blow from Thorne, Squealer, Screwy, Storm, and Troj. He’s hanging from the ropes that are keeping his arms up and we haven’t even really gotten started.

“My turn.” Jessie steps up, swinging a set of bolt cutters in his hand as he stands in front of him.

“I watched you put your hands on my old lady. You made her scared.” He frowns at him. Then with that thoughtful look on his face, Jessie takes the cutters and reaches up over his head. Chop tenses his body tight, and moans in pure pain as Jessie cuts each of his fingers off to his knuckles, letting them drop to the floor like he’s pruning a fuckin’ rose bush.

“You killed my dad.” He tosses the bolt cutters away when he don’t need them anymore, and then uses his bare fists to punch Chop’s hung-low head hard enough to knock it back.

“I had to watch that happen, and now I’m really gonna enjoy watchin’ your brother kill you.” He spits in his face before he backs down and lets Brax take the floor.

“If I lose my head, I’m relyin’ on you boys to drag me back before I kill him.” He looks to the Temper Twins before he steps forward.

“This has been a long time comin’.” He speaks calmly as he slowly circles my brother’s body.

“I’ve thought it out in my head more times than I can remember, and this is not how I wanted it. I wanted you all to myself.” He stops to whisper into his ear. “I wanted time to make you suffer endless pain, and I wanted to be the one that dealt ya the final blow.”

“Sorry to disappoint ya,” Chop manages, his voice groggy and almost inaudible.

“You took our mom away from us,” Brax reminds him as he takes out his knife and slowly drags it through the melted skin on his back. Chop can’t hide the pain he’s in, and with the little strength he has left in his body, he starts thrashing against the ropes.

“Don’t you dare pass out from the pain, you fuckin’ pussy,” Brax whispers at him again as the blood seeps outta him.

“I spent a whole lifetime waitin’ for this moment. I wish I could slit your throat the way you did hers.” He moves around Chop and slowly does the same thing to the front of his body, dragging the jagged blade of his knife slowly from his sternum all the way down to his belly button.

“I wish I could cut you deep enough to rip your guts out. But I’ve learned from this club that I can’t be selfish, so I’ll make do with this.” He reaches into his back pocket and takes out a tub of salt, tipping it into his palm and rubbing it into the

wound to mix it with his blood. Chop hisses in agony. The pain must be excruciating, yet he ain't begging to be dead yet.

"It's your turn." I look to Rogue and watch the dark smile she makes at my brother as she steps toward him almost seductively.

"Long time no see." She gets straight to work unbuttoning the belt of his trousers and ripping them down to his ankles. My brothers all exchange the same confused look, but Grimm is smiling as if he knows what's going on.

"It's not that cold in here, is it?" She tilts her head as she looks down at his flaccid penis.

"Not many people in this room know what you did to me, I figure they will now." She smiles and it puts some pride into my chest when it proves she ain't ashamed of it.

"You tried to take away my safe place. You tried to weaken me, but that's not what happened. You made me stronger than I've ever been before. You made me realize that there ain't nothing in this world that I can't get over and I've waited for this day, Chop. I've waited like every brother in this room, and I've known exactly what I would do to you when I got the chance". She reaches behind her and when Grimm steps forward and hands her a hack saw, I see the fear on my brother's face... and so does Rogue. It makes her giggle like a schoolgirl as she takes him in her hand and pulls him taut.

"Not gonna get hard for me now?" She frowns at him playfully as she takes the saw and slowly drags it through the flesh at the base of his cock. Everyone in the room grimaces as they watch her amputate my brother's dick, and he growls out in pain as she takes her time and really makes him suffer. The blood starts coming out fast, which limits the time me and Prez will get with him a little, but it's worth it, especially when she takes his detached cock and taps it against his cheek.

"Don't seem much to it now, does there?" she taunts him, and he whips his head back when she starts to tease the tip of it around his lips.

“I’ll never forget you, Chop.” She smiles at him as she drops his limp dick on the floor in front of him and laughs as she backs away from him.

“You got anythin’ you get off your chest, Grimm?” Prez asks.

“No, I’ll do what I wanna do to him when he’s dead.” He looks at Chop as he speaks, with a sinister look in his eyes.

“That dick’s goin’ up his ass, ain’t it?” Squealer looks between him and the blood-covered cock that’s lying on the floor.

“It might, right before I sew it inside his mouth.” Grimm wraps his arm around Rogue’s neck and kisses her cheek, waiting for whatever comes next.

When Prez steps in front of my brother he studies him hard, like he’s absorbing every ounce of his suffering.

“Well, will you look at this? The man who tried to ruin my club.” He chuckles to himself. “Take a look around you, Tobias Saunders, tell me what you see.” I don’t think my brother’s even capable of words. His body’s been in and outta shock for a while now, he’s barely conscious. I don’t think there’s much more he can withstand.

Prez grabs the back of his head and forces it back up so he can look at everyone around him. “What you see are *real* men, who fight for what they believe in and protect the ones they love. You see a fuckin’ brotherhood. You know what we see when we look at you...? Failure. You killed my best friend and you tried to ruin somethin’ I’ve put my heart and soul into buildin’ and look where it got ya, Chop. I could lay into you some more. Draw more blood, but I don’t need to, because knowin’ what I just told ya is painful enough.” Prez laughs at him as he turns to face me.

“He’s all fuckin’ yours.” He shakes his head at me.

I feel a tug of pain as I step up in front of him. This is the moment, the bittersweet end. I pull the knife that Chop used to kill his own son outta my back pocket and grip the front of his hair in my fist as I hold it in front of him.

“This blade still has your son’s blood on it,” I tell him as I examine it myself. “I don’t know where it all went wrong for you, but I know it’s down to me to make it right.”

“Mom will be... so... pr-oud.” He attempts to throw one last taunt at me, even in his dying state, and it makes me think about her for a while. It also makes me think about Carly, Tommy, and all of those who came before him.

“Mom will understand,” I tell him.

Gripping the handle of the knife tight in my fist, I use all the strength I got left inside my body to force the blade of it up under his chin. I hold him still as his body jerks against the knife, his blood gushing from his mouth and nose, his eyes looking like they’ll pop from his skull. Then leaving the knife stuck inside him, I take a step back and slump onto the ground, running my bloody hand over my face and feeling numb.

All the anger has released from my body exactly how I expected, what I wasn’t expecting was the overwhelming sadness. I never wanted it to come to this, and now that he’s hanging dead in front of me, all I can remember are the good times. Like when he taught me how to ride a bike and when he beat up the kid who told me my sneakers were shit on my first day of high school.

One by one, my brothers grip my shoulder on their way out the door. Rogue kneels down to kiss my cheek before Grimm leads her out and leaves me alone with Jessie.

“You good, brother?” he checks.

“No,” I admit, knowing that it’s pointless trying to lie to him.

“You want me to stay here with ya a while?”

“No, I’d like a little time alone,” I tell him, holding in my tears

“You did what ya had to do. He was too dangerous to let live,” Jess tells me.

“I know.” That’s the part that hurts.

“I’ll leave ya to it. You know where you’ll find me.” Jessie takes the shoulder of my cut and squeezes real hard, and I grab his wrist and hold it tight to let him know I appreciate him.

I wait ‘til my tears are all cried out before I wipe my eyes and take the phone outta my pocket. I scroll to the number I need and take a brave breath before I hit call.

“Tristan.” She sounds so happy to hear from me, so happy that it fuckin’ chokes me.

“Mom, we need to talk.” I drop my head into the palm of my hand and unleash five years of pain on her, hoping she has it in her heart to forgive me.



I feel his beard tickle my cheek and his lips press against my temple. His fresh piney scent fills my airways and encourages me to open my eyes.

“Hey.” I smile up at him.

“You okay?” He smiles at me sadly when I nod back at him. His hair is still wet from the shower he must have taken before he got here, and he looks drained.

“Is he okay?” His huge hand strokes affectionately over Charlie’s back who is still fast asleep in my arms.

“I think so.” I stroke my hand through his hair.

“What about her?” Skid lets out a breath as he looks at my sister.

“No change. Nurses keep coming in and doing their checks, they tell me she’s going to be okay, but... look at her, Skid.” My eyes fill with tears as they fall back on my sister. She looks so small. Her body is covered in bruises and her unevenly cut hair looks so strange. Everleigh always took such pride in her hair, she brushed it a hundred times every morning and then again at night.

“Is he dead?” I ask, closing my eyes when I think about Skid’s brother. I can’t get his face out of my head.

“They’re all dead, Addison. Anyone who might have hurt you or him is dead.” His face is stone cold, and I can’t imagine what it must be like to have taken your own brother’s life. Even if the man was evil, there would have been a time in Skid’s life when he loved him.

“Ads, I know you ain’t gonna like what I say here, but you have to come home. I spoke to the doc when I came in, and they’ll call us when she wakes up. I promise I’ll bring you right back in.”

“I can’t.” I shake my head firmly. “She’ll be so scared. She doesn’t know anyone, and all this will be too daunting. You saw the place. You know how we lived. That’s all she’s ever known.” I look around the room at the bright white walls and all the machines and monitors. “She needs me.”

“And she will have you. It’s been a long day, you need to get some proper rest or you ain’t gonna be no use to her at all. Trust me when I say she’s gonna need you to be strong.”

“I’m fine, Skid,” I argue.

“It ain’t just you that you have to think about,” he reminds me with an equally stern look on his face. “You don’t need to exhaust yourself. Storm and Jasmine are here, they’ll watch over her. I’ll bring you back as soon as you’ve had a shower and a few hours’ sleep.”

“Or as soon as she wakes up,” I remind him.

“Promise.” He nods, taking my hand in his and kissing my knuckles.

“I’m so sorry.” He crouches down in front of us. “I should have figured Chop runnin’ to Mexico was another of his plans. I shouldn’t have left you both.”

“You couldn’t have known. You went to Oak Creek to keep us safe.”

“It’s over now.” Skid places his hand gently over Charlie’s ear. “Every single Elder from that village is dead. Chop’s dead. There’s no one left to hurt ya,” he reassures me again.

“Thank you.” Tears flow over my cheeks as I take in what he’s *really* telling me. My father was an Elder. I never asked Skid to spare his life. Maybe I should feel guilty for that, but when I look at my sister I don’t. He let this happen to us.

“And my mom?” I manage to ask. I have mixed emotions about her, she was brainwashed, and just as trapped as we

were, but I never once saw her fight for us.

Skid shakes his head at me. “I’m sorry. She... She...”

“She used the revolver, didn’t she?” It’s worrying how numb I feel when the look on his face tells me that I guessed right.

“Guns were forbidden, that’s why I was so surprised when you told me the Elders had purchased AKs. But I knew about the one Mom kept hidden, I found it once when I was small. It was a really old thing and she only had two bullets for it. *Our secret*, she called it.” I always wondered who those bullets were for. I figured they were meant for my father.”

“I’m sorry.” Skid drops his head, acting as if he’s let me down.

“You need to stop being sorry, Skid.” I take his hand in mine and squeeze it.

“Instead of focusing on what was out of your power, focus on what you’ve done for us. You made us safe. We can have that normal life now. No more looking over our shoulder.” Despite everything that’s happened today, I have to look at the positives

“Come on, it’s time to go home.” Skid carefully lifts Charlie off my lap and my poor boy must be shattered because he barely stirs as he makes the switch and rests his head on his shoulder. I lean over the bed and place a kiss on my sister’s forehead.

“I’ll be right back, Everleigh,” I whisper to her softly. “You’re safe now, we all are.”

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I head straight for the shower when we get back to the cabin and once I’ve finished scrubbing my body and washing the events of today from my memories, I head straight toward Charlie’s room to check him.

“I put him in our bed.” Skid’s gravelly voice comes from the corner of the room where he’s resting in the armchair. “I figured he’d want some security tonight.”

“That’s sweet.” I smile at how thoughtful he is and when he stands up and comes toward me, he takes my hand and leads me into the bedroom. I feel his eyes watching me as I slide into some PJ shorts and one of his tees.

“You need anythin’?” he asks.

“I’ve got everything right here.” I carefully climb over the bed and wrap my arms around Charlie. He looks so calm and peaceful, not at all like he’s been through the hell he has today.

Skid replaces his jeans with some sweatpants and slides in behind me, his arm reaching around us both and providing the comfort we need.

“I spoke to my mom,” he tells me, sounding sad. “I told her everythin’ about Carly and what Chop did to her. I told her about you and Charlie and that she’s gonna be a grandma. I also told her what I did to him.”

“Skid.” I turn my head and look over my shoulder, seeing the pain in his eyes. “What did she say?”

“She cried, then she cried some more and I cried with her. Then she told me that she understood. She admitted to me that she knew he had his demons. That was why she moved so far away because she couldn’t face it. She told me she loved me and that I didn’t need forgivin’ but I heard the pain in her voice.”

“You gave her a lot of information, Skid, it would have been hard for her to take.”

“I was scared today,” he admits, throwing me off when he changes the subject.

“So was I.” I slide my hand back over my head and brush my fingers through his thick beard.

“Killin’ those men was easy. Too fuckin’ easy. Killin’ Chop was easy too. What happened today was too close of a call...”

“Skid. Don’t. Don’t you dare push me away.” Suddenly I feel more scared of that than anything.

“Push you away?” He huffs a tiny laugh at me.

“Darlin’, this ain’t me pushin’ you away. This is me warnin’ ya that I’m never gonna let you outta my sight again. I’m gonna be overbearin’, I’m gonna drive you crazy, and I—”

I scrunch my hand into his hair and force his lips down on mine. Kissing them to stop him from talking.

“Sounds perfect.” I smile at him when I eventually pull away. “Now hold us tight.” I rest my head on the pillow and allow myself to breathe. Today may have been one of the worst in my life, but thinking of all the days the four of us have to come makes it a little easier for me to close my eyes.



“He’s gonna be fine. Kids are a lot more resilient than we give them credit for.” Ella smiles as she watches Charlie rush to join Dylan in the back of her car.

“I feel torn.” Addison smiles at him bravely as he waves at us from the window. “I can’t make him wait around the hospital all day, but I need to be there for Everleigh.”

“Addison, he’s gonna be fine. Playing with Dylan is gonna be just the distraction he needs. You gave him the choice, remember?” Ella reminds her. “If he gets upset or starts to miss you, I promise I’ll call.”

Addison nods her head, though I can see she’s not completely comfortable with the idea of being away from him.

We wait for them to be gone before I grab the keys to the car and open the passenger door for her.

“I’m nervous,” she admits once I’m behind the wheel beside her.

“What ya nervous of?” Starting the engine I pull away from the yard and head for the hospital. I haven’t fully explained what happened to her sister. I should’ve done it before I left her at the hospital last night, but all I could focus on then was killing my brother.

“It’s been a long time. I’ve changed so much since I left the village. I look back to how it was when I first escaped. Everything out here is so different and scary. She’s going to need a lot of support.”

“Which we’re gonna give her.” I take her hand and bring her fingers to my lips so I can kiss them. I want Addison to know that she ain’t got a damn thing to worry about no more. There ain’t a thing in this world I wouldn’t do for her.

We get to the hospital car park and Addison checks her phone for the tenth time in case she’s missed a call from Ella.

“It’s a good sign, isn’t it?” She frowns.

“It’s a great sign, it means you’ve raised a confident boy. He knows you wouldn’t leave him with anyone ya didn’t trust. And Dylan is a much better Lego builder than you are,” I tease her, hoping it will lighten her mood.

“Hey.” She shoves me hard on the shoulder. “I’m great at Lego.” Seeing her smile again is such a good sight, it makes me really hate what I have to tell her before we go inside.

“Ads, I’ve gotta prepare you for somethin’.” I keep her hand squeezed tight in mine and watch that gorgeous smile fade.

“What?”

“Fuck.” I don’t wanna tell her this, there’s no way she won’t blame herself. It’s gonna crush her and, after all she’s been through, I’m starting to wonder how much more she can take.

“After you left the village, Abraham took your sister.” I watch her eyes widen and horror overtake her expression. “Your mom and the rest of the village were told she’d killed herself because you left. She’s been kept in Abraham’s basement for all the years you’ve been gone. He... He...” Damn, I wish I could kill the fucker all over again.

“Just say it.” Addison closes her eyes and braces herself for what’s next.

“He took her so she could be punished for what you did.” The color drains from her face as she shakes her head back at me.

“No.”

“I don’t want ya blamin’ yourself for this. I wish I didn’t have to tell you, but you need to be prepared for how fucked-up she’s gonna be. She was down there for years.”

“Did she have any children?” Addison tries so hard to be brave but I can see how disturbed she is. Stress isn’t good for her, or our baby, so I have to focus on keeping her calm.

“No, not accordin’ to Annie. She wasn’t *chosen* like you were.”

“So, she was used as a human punch bag instead?” Addison says as she lets the idea sink into her head.

“There are many people to blame for this, Addison, you ain’t one of ‘em. That place wasn’t like anythin’ I’ve ever seen before. It was like goin’ back in history. Those men fucked with everyone’s heads. People were livin’ in fear, petrified to leave. What happened to your sister wasn’t your fault. But we will fix it, okay?”

“I should have taken her with me.” Addison shakes her head as more tears spill over her cheeks.

“You had no time, you thought you’d killed that bastard. You were scared. She will understand that. Abraham is responsible for all this. I need you to remember that.”

Addison nods and blows out a long breath before we get outta the car. I hold her hand as we walk through the hospital and onto the ward where Everleigh has a private room.

“Addison.” The staff nurse who was here when I left yesterday afternoon smiles at us as we approach the door.

“I was just about to call. Your sister’s awake.”

“Oh my God!” Addison’s hands cover her mouth, her shoulders sagging with relief as she looks up at me with a sparkle of excitement in her eyes.

“Is she okay?” I question, remembering how scared the poor girl was yesterday.

“She seems calm, though she’s still quite heavily sedated. You mustn’t expect too much out of her. We haven’t spoken to her about anything, we’ll have someone from the psych

department come and talk to her once we think she's ready. What we need to do is make sure she knows she's safe here," the nurse explains

"Okay." Addison nods back enthusiastically.

"Well then, you better head on in and see your sister." The nurse smiles as she makes her way over to her station.

"This is it." She takes another brave breath as she ventures inside with me following behind her.

I'm surprised to see Everleigh sitting in an upright position, her head facing out the window and looking out at the top of the buildings that surround the hospital.

"Everleigh." Addison slowly approaches the bed, but she doesn't turn to face her, she just keeps on staring vacantly out the window.

"Evy, I'm so glad you're here." Ada reaches out to touch her sister's hand and when she turns her head, her eyes widen with fear. She snatches her hand away and starts to tremble.

"Everleigh, it's me. Addison. You're safe now."

"No. no. no." She shakes her head violently, crawling up the bed like she's petrified.

"Addison." I step forward and take my girl's shoulders.

"Get away from me." Everleigh's fingers grip the bed sheet that covers her. "*Get her away from me!*" she screams.

"Evy. It's okay now. No one can—"

Addison gets cut off by the piercing scream her sister makes, and the room quickly floods with nurses.

"Skid?" Addison looks up at me helplessly as I usher her back out the door. The nursing team gather around Everleigh as she thrashes against the bed. Still screaming like she's petrified.

"Skid, what's happening?" Addison looks as though she can barely breathe and all I can do is wrap her up tight in my arms and hold her.

“I hate you! I hate you!” Her sister’s voice echoes down the corridor, and I do the only thing I can do and drag my girl outta there.



One week later

“This is such a special time for you, you should be resting.”

I look down at the beautiful, baby girl in my arms and can't help wondering if the baby I'm carrying is a girl or a boy. Then I immediately feel guilty for thinking like that when my sister is suffering.

“Rest is overrated.” Gracie smiles at me as she takes a sip of her coffee. “You have no idea how much I've missed caffeine.”

“Can you give it to me straight, no bullshit?” I hand the baby girl back to Brax, who's been standing over me and practically breathing down my neck the whole time I've been holding his little girl.

“Brax, why don't you take Eloise for a walk outside?” Gracie smiles up at him while Skid moves to sit on the couch beside me, taking my hand in his like he knows what she's going to say isn't good.

“I've spoken to Everleigh a few times, and I've also spoken to her doctor. The hospital isn't ready to release her yet but when they are, she has to have somewhere safe to go and will need regular counseling.”

“Well, of course, she has somewhere safe. She has us.” I haven't seen my sister since the incident at the hospital. The doctors thought it best that I stay away. Jasmine has been making regular visits to check in with her and as grateful as I am for her helping, I hate that I can't be there myself.

“Addison, Everleigh is making progress. She's started to talk, not much but enough. The doctors are worried that being around you might...”

“Be a trigger,” I say the words I know she doesn't want to.

“This isn't a forever thing. I'm sure it can be healed. It's only been a week and what she's suffered is beyond what most doctors have treated. It's going to take time and support.”

“But not from me.” I have to face up to the truth. Everleigh has been abused, she’s been pushed to the limit and all because of my sins.

“Not right now. But that doesn’t mean never. The club is gonna take care of her, pay for all her treatment, and get her the best care we can. What you need to remember is that it’s not your fault.”

“People keep saying that.” I don’t mean for the words to come out quite so snappy.

“They keep sayin’ it because it’s true,” Skid tells me.

“I’m going to work between both of you,” Gracie assures me. “I’m going to do everything I can to rebuild your relationship. But it’s gonna take time and patience.”

“Thank you.” I manage half a smile for her before I slouch back on the couch. I have no choice other than acceptance. I’m lucky to have people around me who want to help, but at the same time being useless really sucks.

“You know where I am if you need me.” Gracie gets up and sees herself out while I stare at the wall and absorb everything she just told me.

“Don’t go to that place, Addison,” Skid warns.

“What place?”

“The place where you think about what he did to her, you can’t blam—”

“I don’t blame myself,” I interrupt him. “I blame them. Abraham, my parents, all those fucked-up Elders. I blame them and I hate them and I wish *I* could have been the one who fucking killed them, Skid.” I let out all the words I’ve been holding in since this happened. My outburst seems to shock him at first but he nods his head as if he understands. “I hate that I can’t help her. I feel so useless.”

“Hey, the last thing you are is useless. You’re so busy takin’ care of everyone around you that sometimes I think you forget that you’ve been through hell yourself. Look at Charlie, a week ago he thought a madman was gonna kill you both. He

went back to school today, he's already sleeping in his own room. *You* did that, Addison, you gave him confidence and made him feel safe. You've been solid for him. Not to mention the fact you're growin' us a baby. How can you feel useless?"

"I'm useless to her."

"No, you're not. She's gonna get better, and when she does she's gonna need you. That time may not be right now, but it's comin' and ya need to be strong for it."

"I guess." I smile.

"No guessin' about it. You are a very special person and when she's ready, you're gonna make all the difference for her. Just like ya did with me, Addison. I was broken. I never thought I could be happy again, and you fixed me. You'll fix her too, and you'll do it without even realizin' it because that's your way. You gotta let the club deal with this, and get yourself ready for when she needs ya." Skid wraps me up the way he always does when he senses I need him to, and I take on what he says and pray it's true.

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"I'm headin' into town to take these to the drop-in center." Skid walks out of Charlie's room with the last of the boxes that were stored in the wardrobe in there. Since we've moved all our stuff in, things are getting a little cramped and it will only be worse when the baby comes.

"I can take them, I wanted to call in on Shaniya anyway." Since what happened with Chop, I've forced myself to leave the compound at least once every day. I won't let him or Abraham make me a prisoner in my own head. The world outside may not be a safe place, but it is safe from them now.

"You sure?" Skid checks, placing the boxes on the table. "It's just that..."

"I know it belongs to her." I place my hand over his, hating that he's trying to hide his sadness from me. "You don't have

to get rid of it yet. We don't have to get rid of it at all. We'll find space for it."

"No, it's stupid to keep it, especially when it could be goin' to good use somewhere else." He smiles sadly.

"I may not have met her, but from what I'm told. I think she'd agree."

Skid nods at me like I got it right.

"Let me take it. You can spend some time with Charlie. I do recall you and Nyx promising to build him and Dylan a soap box." I roll my eyes as I pick one of the boxes up from the table, kiss him, and head for the door.

"Not so fast." Skid snatches the box from my hand. "I'll let you take 'em, but you ain't carryin'."

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"Don't you have better things to be doing?" I question Hayden when I pull up outside the library and he's waiting on the sidewalk to open the trunk.

"Yeah, but Skid called and gave me a very strict order." He picks up both the boxes and smiles as I lead the way and open the door for him. The whole club knows our secret now. Turns out Skid was right, news travels real fast around here. Charlie got excited and told Dylan and the rest just snowballed. Glad to say that everyone's really happy for us, though I never expected it to be any other way.

Shaniya looks happy to see me when I arrive at the library and she quickly takes the boxes out of Hayden's hands and places them on the desk.

"I'll leave ya to it." Hayden salutes us as he strolls back out the door and gets to work.

"How is he?" I gesture my head to the little boy who's sitting behind the desk and concentrating on his coloring.

"Still hasn't said a word. I don't even know if he can talk." She shrugs sadly.

“And there’s been no sign of his mother?” I can’t help wondering how bad something must be for a mother to leave her child behind.

“Nothing. Maddy keeps checking the police database for reports of missing kids but nothing fits his description. I’m assuming she was on her own and just couldn’t cope, or in some kind of abusive relationship.” Shaniya keeps her voice low so the boy can’t hear her.

“This the last of Carly’s stuff.” I don’t know why I feel the need to tell her that, maybe I need a little release from the guilt I keep feeling.

“I figured. I’m sure it will be made good use of. Are you and Charlie settling into the club, okay?”

“Yeah, we’re doing as well as we can be. Everyone’s being so nice and understanding. I just don’t want...” Suddenly I realize that I’m talking to the wrong person. There are things I need to get off my chest, and not to Skid or Shaniya.

“I’m sorry, I have to be somewhere.” I turn on my heels and quickly rush back out to my car.

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The cemetery is calm and peaceful. The grass is well maintained and the lushest color green, and as I kneel at Carly’s gravestone I can’t help remembering the day I saw Skid here a few months ago and how sad he looked.

“Hi,” I start, suddenly having no idea how to word this. All the way here I’ve thought about it, and now I’m blank. “I don’t know what you must think about me, turning up here in your car, living in your house... But I felt you needed to hear this as much as I need to say it.” I take a deep breath. “Ever since me and Skid started this, I’ve felt this need to live up to something. All I hear about from everyone is how amazing you were. I had no idea how I’d replace you, and today, for the first time, it dawned on me that I can’t. More than anything, I realized that I don’t want to. You’re irreplaceable to him, you’re a part of Skid’s life that will always be precious. And I

never want him to forget that. You made him so happy, I want him to share those memories with me. I want him to smile when he talks about you and never feel guilty for missing you. I've felt like I should be sorry for taking all these things that should be yours," I admit, trying to hold back my tears. "I could have come here today and apologized for taking the life you should be living, but I've got this incredibly strange feeling like I know you, Carly Saunders. I feel like you were there for me and Charlie last week, watching over us, and I don't think you'd want me to apologize. So, I came here to make you a promise instead." I wipe the tears from my eyes when they start to flow.

"I promise you that I will do everything I can to make him happy. I promise that I'll hold him real tight on the days he misses you, and I promise that I will love him enough for both of us. Skid told me once that he thought you sent me to him to save him, and I'll never know if that's true or not, but I can promise that if you did, I won't let you down. I may have a lot still to get through but I'm strong and with him, I'm even stronger." I think about my sister and how Skid is right. I can't blame myself for what was done to her, it's useless.

"Keep watching over us." I smile at Carly's headstone before I turn and head for the car, feeling a lot less burdened, and a hell of a lot stronger.



“You seem different.” I look at her suspiciously when she comes outta the bathroom. I thought what Gracie told Addison this morning would have put her back some steps but she seems to have taken on board what we both told her.

“I feel different.” She smiles as she joins me on the couch. “You’re right about Everleigh, I have to be ready for when she needs me. Things are gonna start getting crazy around here soon and I’ve decided that I have to start appreciating how lucky I am,” she confesses. “I lived too many days in fear, now I don’t have to anymore. I did what Grace suggested and wrote everything I wanted to say in a letter. She will give it to my sister when she thinks she’s ready. I hate not being there for her, but if it’s what she needs to make her better, I’ll suffer it.” This new positive attitude of hers is making me feel a lot more comfortable.

“Did you order?” Charlie comes outta his room with Dylan, tonight we have the boys, they’re starting to become inseparable, and seeing Charlie so happy puts my mind at ease too.

“Ordered what?” I ask.

“Pizza? It’s Friday. I did tell—”

“Ahh yeah, Pizza Friday, how could I forget?” I interrupt him as Addison tucks her head into my neck and laughs. “How about we change it up a little and go out for pizza?” Both the boys jump up and down with excitement, and I wait for them to rush off and get their sneakers on before I grab Addison’s face and kiss her real hard.

“What was that for?” She smiles at me when I’m done.

“It was a thank you. And there’s plenty more of them to come.”

She grabs my face between her hands and squeezes my cheeks together tight as she kisses me back.

“And that was a thank you back. You did save me, after all.”

“Nah, darlin’, you’re the one who did all the savin’.” I stand up with her still in my arms, making her squeal as I carry her into the kitchen. After I place her on the kitchen table she stares at me confused when I pick up her Converse and start sliding them on her feet.

“What are you doing?” she laughs at me.

“I’m putting on ya shoes for ya. Pretty soon you’re gonna be askin’ me to do it for ya anyway.” I balance the sole of her foot against my thigh so I can lace them up.

“Not for a while, hopefully.” She rests back on her palms and switches feet for me.

“Well, we’ll just start as we mean to go on. Accept that I like takin’ care of ya and be done with it.” He grabs the loops in my jeans and drags me to the edge of the table by them.

“Ain’t a thing you can do about it anyway,” I warn, my lips hovering close to hers.

“Come on, I’m starving.” Charlie interrupts us, leading Dylan back into the room all ready to leave. “Yuck, were you guys gonna bone?”

I freeze when I hear what he just said.

“Where the hell did ya hear that?” Both of us turn our heads toward him in shock.

“Uncle Squealer, he told me it’s all pregnant women want to do and that it starts with kissin’.” He smiles back at us innocently.

Thankfully Addison sees the humor in it, but I’m still gonna kill that bastard.

“Charlie, there are some rules around here that you really need to learn. The first and most important of them is...” I guide us all out the door and grab the car keys. “...never... EVER... listen to Squealer.”

I forget the rest of the rules as I watch them all get in the car. I’m too busy taking a moment to appreciate how lucky I am. There was a time in my life that I never thought I’d smile again when I was riddled with anger and weak from pain. I was a broken soul. Now, I’m proof that nothing that’s broken can’t be fixed. All it takes is special people around you and a little bit of faith.

“Come on, what you waiting for? I’m hungry!” Addison calls out to me from the car with a huge smile on her face, and I don’t keep her waiting any longer. I round the hood and get behind the wheel.

“What do you think about Nutter Butters on a pizza?” She rolls her head against the headrest to look at me.

“I think it sounds perfect.” I lean over to kiss her before I check the boys are strapped in and start the engine.



“Whose smart-assed idea was this?” I stare at the scrawny girl who’s sitting on the edge of the camp bed in front of me.

“Actually, it was mine,” Brax speaks up, a little more sheepishly than usual. “She had no place to go, and Gracie said she needed somethin’ familiar.” I grab him by his shirt and drag him outta Jessie’s basement room, giving Jessie a look that tells him to follow us.

“So, ya brought her down here?” I hiss at him through my teeth, seriously wondering if he’s lost the fuckin’ plot. The poor girl’s been through hell, she’s been imprisoned for years and this half-wit puts her in a dingy fuckin’ basement just like where she was kept.

“Well, actually it’s worked. She’s calm, she’s comfortable, and she ain’t in the fuckin’ nut house which is where the doctors threatened to put her after today’s episode.”

“He’s got a point,” Jessie speaks up from behind us. “I mean, it ain’t a long-term solution but it *is* a solution for now.”

“Holy shit.” I slide my hand over my face and take another look in the room where the poor girl is staring at the wall like she’s empty inside.

“We can take care of her for now. Gracie can do some research and find a doctor who specializes in this kinda thing. We can fix her, and introduce her back to civilization.” Brax sounds hopeful.

What I’m really hearing is Grace’s words through his voice. She’s spent a lotta time with Everleigh over the past few

weeks.

“Can ya hear yourself?” I question my Road Captain’s sanity.

“This girl’s never known civilization. That’s the problem.” Jessie looks a little haunted as he looks back through the door at her. “That village... You’d have to see it to believe it, Prez.”

“Does Skid’s old lady know she’s down here?” I keep my voice low, so the girl doesn’t hear.

“No, Skid don’t even know she’s here, yet. We kinda had to think fast,” Jessie explains.

“Jesus Christ.” I sigh before I head back into the room to figure this shit out.

“My name’s Jimmer Carson. I’m President of this club and you’re very welcome here.” I start off by introducing myself, but the girl’s eyes don’t move from the wall.

“Are ya... comfortable?” I question, thinking about how unethical this all seems. She doesn’t answer but her lips start moving as if they’re chanting something.

“We could find ya somewhere more appropriate if you’d like?” I take a step closer and hear the words that are being whispered so quietly they are barely audible.

“He will be gracious and forgive us our sins. He will be gracious and forgive us our sins. He will be gracious and forgive us our sins.”

“Darlin’, do you want us to find ya somewhere else? It doesn’t have to be near your sister.”

Her lips stop moving and she slowly turns her head toward me.

“To speak her name is to sin. Sins will be punished, through Him, unto me.” The blank look on her face puts a little fear in me, and after she calmly stares back at the wall and continues her chant, I head back out to Brax and Jessie.

“She’s bat-shit crazy. Are ya seriously tellin’ me the doctors released her?”

“Not exactly.” Jessie cracks his neck awkwardly, his eyes looking across at Brax in a way that I don’t like at all.

“Someone better tell me what the fuck is goin’ on here, *right now*.”

“Grace went in to visit her after she spoke to Addison this mornin’ and there had been an incident. The girl had locked herself in the store room at the hospital and wouldn’t come out for hours. The doctors decided they’d done all they could for her there and they were gonna get her sectioned. Grace had made Addison a promise and she wasn’t gonna let her go to the crazy farm. You know the kinda shit that happens in those places.”

“So, you took her?” I rush them to the part of this story that’s important.

“We waited until she was out of it from the drugs they gave her to calm her down and, yeah, we took her.” I can see that Jessie is nervous about my reaction.

“That’s the real reason she’s down here, ain’t it? You brought a crazy person to *my* club.”

“She’s not crazy, she’s been abused. She needs help and Skid’s old lady is one of us now. You’re the one always tellin’ us that we help family. I didn’t have time to consult ya, you were holdin’ your meeting with the nomads. Me and Brax only had a small window of opportunity while the nurses were doing handover,” Jessie explains, and I can’t help but notice how much he’s matured just lately. He handled shit real well while I was riding out with Troj.

“Look, Prez, Grace is on board. She’ll help all she can and the girl seems to be more at ease here than she was at the hospital. The place was too clinical and modern for her,” Brax tries to convince me.

He knows a little about tough love. I remember a time not so long ago when he helped Ella’s friend, Abby, get over her heroin addiction by keeping her down here. His being cruel to be kind method worked out, but this situation ain’t the same.

“No.” I shake my head.

“Prez, she needs our help.” Jessie scratches the back of his head. I can see how passionate he and Brax are about this, and how he hates to go against my word. I hate to refuse them, but the risk is too much.

“Jessie, she can’t stay here. Not if Addison is a trigger for her. Crazy people can do crazy things and she needs proper help.”

“But—”

“But, that don’t mean we ain’t gonna help her,” I interrupt him before he starts trying to question me. “Just leave this one with me.” I point my finger between the pair of ‘em before climbing the stairs back up to the foyer and heading for the members-only bar.

Once I’ve poured myself something strong I take out my phone and dial up the person I know will always answer.

“Jimmer Carson.” Mitch almost sounds pleased to hear from me.

“Does the ranch still have that cabin? The one, off-grid, that no one knows about?” I get right to it, wondering if the safe house my grandfather built in case things ever went south is still at a Carson man’s disposal.

“No one’s been out there for a while but I’m pretty sure it’s still standing. Why? Ya need somewhere to lay low?” Now, my old friend sounds concerned.

“Not me. I got someone here who needs to heal and I gotta put some distance between them and someone at the club.”

“I’ll make sure the place is ready,” he assures me, no questions asked. I like that about Mitch, he was loyal to my father and he’s loyal to me.

“Good. Tell Garrett I got his invitation. Me, Nyx, Ella, and the kids are coming for Thanksgivin’, and we’ll be bringing a few extras.”

“He’ll be pleased to hear that,” Mitch says.

“Ya can also tell him that you’ll be takin’ some vacation time. I got a little project for you to work on. This person is

gonna need some guidance.”

“Hey, Jim... Now ain’t the time for me to be takin’ no vacations. We gotta lotta shit goin’ on up here. Garrett’s in deep with some political bullshit—”

“I know about the shit Garrett’s in, and when we’re there we’re gonna talk about how to get him out of it.”

“He told ya, huh?” Mitch almost sounds surprised.

“I’m his uncle, ain’t I? Bill may have kept us apart while he was alive and I may ride a Harley instead of a horse. But I’m still a Carson. We’ll get him outta the shit he’s in, but in the meantime, I need you to take care of this for me.”

“Consider it done,” Mitch assures me before he hangs up the phone.

I light myself a cigar and enjoy a few moments peace before the door bursts open and Aaron Adams storms through it.

“Decided to stick around, I see.” I smile at him sarcastically. I’ve been trying for a long time to get him to stay in one place, preferably here. He’d be an asset to any Charter. I decided to still hold the nomad meeting today, despite the fact I don’t need anyone’s vote. All my members need to be aware of what’s happening over in Long Beach and this is one man I was sure would be interested. Aaron, or Wrath as he’s known these days, left his father’s Charter a few years ago after he got his cut. No one knows why, and there’s few who are brave enough to ask him.

“Can I get a word?” he asks, sitting himself opposite me and lookin’ real serious.

“What can I do for ya, kid?”

“I ain’t a kid no more, Jimmer, ain’t been for a long time. You see shit in Long Beach that grows ya up real fast.”

“I can imagine.” I nod my head slowly, thinking about what Grimm told me Cliff did to that girl and wondering how many more of ‘em I don’t know about.

“I wanna be the one who kills him.” The words that come outta his mouth don’t shock me at all. They call him Wrath for a reason, and all of this is for the man who calls himself his father.

“Will you tell me why?” I ask.

“Never.” He shakes his head, determined to stand strong, “But I *will* offer you somethin’ else.” He crosses his hands over the table and leans in a little closer. “I will return to Long Beach and I will help whoever you choose to run it any way they need me to.” He narrows his eyes like he’s just played the winning move on the chess board.

I have to admit, what he’s putting on the table is tempting, Aaron is a strong member, he’s nowhere near old enough to lead, but he’d be invaluable to any Charter he committed to. I’ve offered him enough opportunities to patch in here over the past few years.

“A lotta men want him dead.” I try my best to drive a hard bargain.

“None of ‘em deserve it like I do, Jimmer. And to get it I’m prepared to offer you my soul. That Charter is gonna need more than just a strong leader, it needs strong men under him. I’ll help Raze, any way I can.”

I smile when he fucks up. *Checkmate, mother fucker!*

“How d’ya know Raze is in the runnin’?” I question him with a smug grin on my face. If Aaron’s pissed off at his error, he doesn’t show it.

“He called me.” He casually sits back in his chair and crosses his arms.

“So, he’s recruitin’?” I nod my head and laugh to myself. I knew Raze wouldn’t be able to resist a challenge.

“He’s still unsure, but I think he can be convinced. The fact he asked if I’d consider staying in one place if he did tells me he’s thinkin’ about it.” Aaron makes a real good point.

“And is this you tellin’ me that you would?”

“This is me askin’ you to let me kill my father.” He creases his forehead at me. I gotta admit, I’m pleasantly surprised that he’s come here to ask. It’s proof that he respects the cut he wears and that he respects me.

“Okay, if it means that much to ya, but I want your word that you will return to Long Beach and stay there once it’s done.” I hold out my hand.

“You got it.” He takes it, gripping it firmly and making a deal with the devil.

“So, when do I do it?” he asks, keen to get to work.

“I’ll be in touch, stay close to Long Beach but under the radar. When I need ya to move, we won’t have a lotta time.”

“I hear ya.” He nods his head before standing up and making his way out.

I swallow the last of my whiskey once I’m alone and I’m just about to pour myself another when my phone buzzes. The message that comes up makes the taste in my mouth turn sour.

#### BE AT THE MOTEL IN 30

I shake my head as I place my phone back in my cut, hating the fact that I have to jump to someone’s fuckin’ order. I leave the club and make the journey out, toward the motel in Fountain. Parking my bike outside room number 7 when I arrive, I check the coast is clear before I head inside.

“How did your meeting go?” she asks, looking so outta place in a seedy room like this one.

Agent Kathrine Consuela is uptight, obnoxious, and just happens to be irritatingly beautiful.

“It went well, though I didn’t need to have it. Adams has screwed up for the last time.” I can’t help taking her in; the heels she wears under her pantsuit, purposely to give her some height, shows that she does have some hang-ups. She’s

probably used to being downtrodden by her male peers. The fact she's good to look at will have them assuming that she's screwed her way to the top.

"How bad is it?" I take a seat on the bed and push my hand through my hair. Burlusconi put me in touch with her after he got his tip-off.

"It's bad enough to take down your whole club. Cliff Adams got greedy and very, very sloppy." She makes the words sound seductive rather than destructive.

"He's been running deals with small-time gangsters, small-time gangsters who have been working undercover." The smart bitch looks mighty pleased with herself and I'd just love to humble her by ripping her hair out the neat little bun she's got it in, and fuckin' her on this filthy mattress.

"A case is being put together and a full investigation will be conducted, one that doesn't just look into Long Beach, but all your Charters."

"Holy shit." I massage my temples, this is the last thing I fuckin' need, right now. Like I haven't got enough shit to be dealing with.

"And who's gonna be runnin' this investigation?" I look up to her.

She's changed her position. Confidence has drawn her in a little closer, and now she stands in front of me with her arms crossed under her pert little tits.

"That's where you got real lucky, Jimmer Carson. You're looking at her."



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