

BRIDGE CITY
★ SECURITY FIRM ★

CHASING *Redemption*

B.A. CHAYUT

CHASING

Redemption

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Developmental Edit and Proofreading: Tori Ellis, Cruel Ink Editing + Design

Line and Copy Editing: Jaime Watson, Baker Street Revisions

Cover Designer: Cady Verdiramo, Cruel Ink Editing + Design

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Content Warnings

Dear Reader,

Thanks for picking up *Chasing Redemption*. This is a book of grey characters who make their own rules. There are some sensitive topics within these pages that I wanted to make you aware of.

Violence, Gun Violence, child neglect (off page), light stalking, domestic abuse (not the main characters), illegal activity, death/murder, kidnapping.

To my husband Jared, who without your constant reminder of how many pages Stephen King writes in a day, this book would never have left been written.

Prologue: Peyton Linwood—Eight Years Old

"I HATE THAT WOMAN. If I could get away with it, I'd kill her," Aunt Jeannie ranted as she paced in the living room, squeezing her hands into fists. Uncle Wolf sat on the couch, sipping his beer. "She's going to need therapy for *years*."

She'd been whisper-yelling for ten minutes, while I perched on the stairs, listening to her go on and on about how angry she was. Neither of them noticed me. I'd gotten good at hiding.

Those last words made my heart hurt. I didn't want her to get in trouble, not because of Mother or me. Aunt Jeannie was wonderful. She always tried to make me smile.

When Aunt Jeannie turned to pace toward the stairs, she caught sight of me through the banister, and her face went from angry to sad. She stopped moving, closed her eyes, and put her hands on her hips.

Too scared to move, I shoved my hands under my butt to stop them from shaking. The last time Mother caught me listening in, she sent me to my room for two days. Which wouldn't have been so bad if she hadn't taken my books too.

Aunt Jeannie walked to me slowly, climbed the steps, and sat next to me. "How much of that did you hear?"

Tears climbed into my eyes, and I clenched my hands as I tried to hold them back. Nothing good ever came from crying.

She slipped a thumb under my eye, wiping away a tear, and linked her fingers with mine. With a soft tug, she stood me up and walked me down the rest of the steps to where Uncle Wolf sat.

Without letting go of my hand, Aunt Jeannie pulled me to sit between her and my uncle. Was she going to yell at me? Would she call Mother?

“I’m sorry you heard that,” Aunt Jeannie said, talking slowly. “But I want you to know that I’m not going to take it back.”

Uncle Wolf barked out a laugh. He was big, bigger than Dad, even though they were brothers. Dad was meticulous about his appearance and always wore a suit. His brother was his opposite, with his long hair, beard, and casual clothes. He drove a loud motorcycle that hurt my ears, but that sound coming down our long driveway at home always meant it would be a fun day. He filled up the room in the best way, making it impossible for anything bad to happen.

I knew Uncle Wolf wasn’t his real name, it was too silly, but no one ever said what his real name was. “Are you okay?” he asked, his big warm hand rubbing the back of my neck. I nodded. Was there a reason I shouldn’t be okay?

“Do you understand what’s happening?” Aunt Jeannie turned to face me. “I know there was a lot going on when we picked you up earlier today.” She stopped moving, which was weird. My aunt was always a big ball of energy. She cooked, sang badly—it was fun though—and bounced around and called it dancing.

“Yeah. We’re having a big sleepover,” I said, all memories of being scared moments ago washed away by my excitement. This was my first sleepover, and even though it was just my aunt and uncle, I knew it would be so much fun. I hoped Hunter would join us too.

She looked at my uncle, and they said something with their eyes that way adults do sometimes.

“Peyton, what if we invited you to live with us? Would you like to stay with us?” Aunt Jeannie asked.

Live with them? Like forever? I blinked fast, making sure this was real. I’d dreamed about coming to stay with them, of them being my actual parents, for a long time. They hugged me, talked to me, and never called me weird or too smart for my own good.

I swallowed hard. “Won’t Mother be upset if I don’t come back?” Mother either acted like I didn’t exist or somehow made every wrong thing my fault, even if I wasn’t there. Either way, it was easier if I hid.

Aunt Jeannie made an ugly face. “Mother.” She stuck her tongue out and pretended to gag. “The woman has no heart.”

“Focus, babe,” Uncle Wolf said, but he wasn’t mad. He was smiling, and it made me want to smile too.

“Right, sorry. We’ve worked it out with your parents. And if you want, we’d really love it if you stayed with us. I’d love to have another girl in the house.” My heart beat so loud that I could barely hear her.

“You want me to stay with you?” I asked. This wasn’t real ... it couldn’t be. No kid I ever met had their dreams come true. Any second, I was going to wake up.

“We want nothing more than for you to stay with us. We’ve already looked at that special school for you and have a tour scheduled for tomorrow,” Uncle Wolf said. For a big scary biker—that was the nice version of what Mother called him—he was the best.

“I thought I wasn’t going because ...” Do I tell them about what happened when the teacher called Mother and told her I needed to go to a different school because they didn’t have the resources to keep me there anymore? Mother was so angry. She yelled at me and told me I’d have to deal with it, that I wasn’t getting anything special.

“If that’s where you want to go, that’s where you’ll go.” Uncle Wolf squeezed my hand. “Tomorrow, after we take a look, we’ll decide together, and if it doesn’t feel right, we’ll figure something else out.” I remembered the brochure, all the kids smiling. A school for gifted children, kids like me. Nobody would make fun of me because I was eight and they were eleven and twelve and we were in the same classes.

My bottom lip trembled. This wasn’t a dream. “So, I’m staying here with you? Forever? I never have to go back?”

“I know this place isn’t as big, but we’d love it if you called it home,” Aunt Jeannie said, her eyes watery.

All the tears that I’d been holding in for as long as I could remember—tears I was too afraid to let fall—came out, streaming down my face uncontrollably. The fear I’d lived with for so long, fear of being noticed in a house full of people who yelled at me for existing, poured out of me.

Uncle Wolf picked me up, wrapped me in his big arms, and held me tightly while I cried on his shoulder. It only served to make me cry harder.

And although I was little, I knew that it wasn't normal for parents to not hug their child.

“No, sweetheart,” Uncle Wolf whispered in my ear as he rubbed circles on my back. “You can stay here with us for as long as you want.”

Uncle Wolf parked the car in front of a big warehouse with the words *REDEMPTION MC* hung in an arch over the front of the building. There were balloons tied to the picnic tables, people everywhere, and loud music blasting from speakers. The yard was large and open, with dense woods beyond.

Aunt Jeannie crouched in front of me. “It’s a lot, I know. But Redemption is a big family, and they want to celebrate you being a part of that.”

“They’re all here for me?” I knew people had parties, that happy occasions were usually celebrated, but I’d never had that. Mother hated my birthday. She said it was a reminder of how I ruined her body with marks on her tummy. The balloons said *welcome*, and I knew they were there for me. Right then and there, I promised myself that I’d always be good. I’d never give them a reason to be upset with me so that I could continue to live with them and live this life. I’d be perfect if that’s what it took.

Aunt Jeannie helped me out of the car, holding my hand as she guided me through the crowd with Uncle Wolf on the other side of me. They waved, called out to people, but no one approached us, which I was thankful for.

My mind spinning, I tried to keep up with everything going on around me. This was nothing like the parties Mother

had. All those required poofy dresses and sitting quietly in a corner. Invisible was safer.

This party was like a competition for who could talk the loudest, laugh the loudest, or do something crazy. Like backflips off a picnic table.

A smiling man with long hair, a scruffy beard, and a faded black shirt approached us. He was probably about the same age as Uncle Wolf. The pretty woman next to him had her eyes on me and a kind smile on her face. She was tall, maybe the tallest woman I'd ever seen.

The man clapped my uncle on the shoulder, while the woman crouched down to my height. "Hi, I'm Scarlette. You must be Peyton." Her voice was soft, but I could still hear it over all the noise. I gave her a small nod. "This big guy is Connor, but you can call him High. And do you see those boys out there?" She pointed to the group of teenagers that Hunter was hanging out with. "The four tallest ones are ours. Colt, Van, Nash, and Ares."

The boys were throwing a football, then piling onto the one who caught it and laughing. I focused on the tallest one. He didn't laugh, but I could tell he was having fun from the way he tossed everyone else around. I wanted to join the fun, to play and run, but I couldn't. Just the thought of going over and asking to play made me freeze with nerves. Instead, I gripped Aunt Jeannie's hand tighter.

"They're rowdy, but they'll make sure you don't get hurt. Go on over whenever you want." With that, Scarlette stood up and started talking to my aunt.

The two of them chatted for a while, and every so often my aunt gave my hand a reassuring squeeze. Eventually, Aunt Jeannie sat me at a picnic table, setting a plate piled high with

food in front of me. More people approached, introducing themselves and telling me about their positions in the club. I learned High was the vice president and that Uncle Wolf was president. The rest of the titles all ran together—road captain, enforcer, and those were the only ones I remembered.

The names confused me, but every person at the party made a point to come over and speak to me. From what Mother had told me, these people were wild, mean, and reckless. From my corner of the party, I couldn't understand why she'd said that. Everyone was smiling and having a good time together, and the music was fun. One man even burped loudly, and nobody told him it was gross.

I wanted to explore, but I wasn't ready to meet anyone else. I was tired, the music was loud, the sound of motorcycles coming and going hurt my ears, and the day was getting hotter.

Quietly, I left the picnic table and headed into the woods. I wouldn't go far. I only needed a little quiet time away from all the fun chaos.

I walked until the noise from the party faded away completely. Tall trees blocked out the sun, and the quiet peace of the woods calmed me. My brain no longer fired a million miles a minute trying to keep up with everyone. I'd spoken to more people today than I had in the past year.

I sat down against a tree and enjoyed the time I wanted to myself. No one would notice I was gone. They never did.

Unsure how much time had passed, I got up and realized it was darker, almost night. I thought I walked back in the direction I'd come, but after a minute or two, I knew I should have heard music and the noise of people talking, but there was nothing. Only silence.

Don't panic.

I whirled around, trying to place where I was. All the trees were the same. I couldn't remember because I hadn't been paying any attention to my surroundings while I walked. Going over to a tree with a thick trunk, I sat down and willed away the tears that threatened to fall.

Someone would find me. Aunt Jeannie and Uncle Wolf weren't the same as Mother. If I'd gone missing, she would have been the last to know, and she would've been more upset if I was found than by my absence.

My aunt and uncle cared. They hugged me, talked to me at dinner, took me to see a lady to talk about myself and my feelings.

Someone would find me. Because I was family.

My hands formed into fists, my nails digging into my palms as I tried to keep myself from panicking. What if they hadn't noticed I was gone? What if they left me?

"There you are," said a voice I didn't recognize. Although it was dark, I could make out who it was. Colt, Scarlett's son.

He crouched down and reached out his hand. "Come on, we've been searching for you. Prez and Jeannie are freakin' out." I instantly liked his deep voice.

Swallowing hard, I gave him my shaking hand and let him pull me up to my feet. Colt led me in the opposite direction that I'd headed before, never letting go of my hand. His was big and warm, and it sent a little shiver down my arm.

After a few minutes, the noise of the party filtered through the trees. When Colt and I entered the clearing, he let out an ear-piercing whistle that had everyone's attention snapping in our direction.

Aunt Jeannie pushed someone out of her way and ran to me, worry written all over her face.

Colt stared down at me, his lips ticked up at the sides. He gave my hand a squeeze, and something slammed into me.

Something I didn't know I'd never had until this moment.

Safety. The knowledge that someone would come find me if I went missing. People cared enough to worry about me.

Aunt Jeannie scooped me up, forcing me to let go of Colt's hand, and I couldn't help but peek at him over her shoulder.

I want to keep him.

Chapter One

PEYTON

AN OMISSION WAS STILL A LIE, right?

Guilt ate away at me. I'd never lied to my aunt and uncle before. When I told them I had an interview, they were so excited. I neglected to tell them that it wasn't really a choice.

Since the day they'd brought me home, they had loved me. Showered with me affection and attention, because that was who they were. They treated me like I was their daughter, not a wayward niece who needed a safe place to live. If I told them I was in trouble, they'd burn the world down trying to protect me. I couldn't let them do that.

I'd screwed up and needed to handle the consequences of my actions. Not hide behind my loved ones, letting them fix what I'd done.

I picked my way through the airport, stopping for coffee and to check the outgoing flights. Dreamed that I was going somewhere exotic rather than the exit.

Running wasn't an option. Pretty sure the government would track me down and drag me back by my hair.

Six weeks ago, I got the call that ordered me to Washington, DC. As soon as I hung up the phone, I had a

plane ticket and a picture of a man labeled *driver* waiting in my inbox. No name.

The clock had been ticking slowly and painfully since. Fear was a constant companion, keeping me up at night. I'd been so paranoid that I barely opened my laptop once the countdown reached single digits.

The farther I walked, the bigger the cloud of impending doom grew over my head. All the questions I'd had these past few weeks about what I would face were soon to be answered.

After stopping and grabbing a snack and a decent latte, I went to baggage claim. Except I never made it. The man from the picture stood near the escalator, and both of my bags lay at his feet.

The man was far more unnerving in person than he was in his picture. His bald head, serious face, and ill-fitting suit set off sirens in my head. This guy was the poster child for stranger danger. If I hadn't been expecting him, I would have run screaming in the other direction.

I barely made it to him before he gave me a stiff nod, grabbed my duffle bags, and strode out of the airport without glancing back to check if I was following. I jogged to catch up as he stopped at an SUV with tinted windows. He threw my bags in the back, then climbed into the car. I jumped into the passenger seat, almost afraid he would leave without me. The scathing look he shot my way made me wonder if I'd done something wrong.

After an hour and a half, most of which was spent in standstill DC traffic, Stranger Danger turned toward a nondescript building. He swiped his keycard at the first gate, did an eye scan for the second, and gave a verbal password

—“bloodborne”—to get past the guy in Army fatigues at the third.

I stayed silent the entire time, unsure of what to say. He hadn't seen fit to speak to me or even tell me his name. Which was fine. I didn't have the bandwidth to carry on any kind of conversation in my overwhelmed state anyway.

He pulled the SUV into a parking spot and climbed out of the car, leaving me in the passenger seat. When he realized I wasn't following, he turned and waved at me, his agitation clear. He opened the door and strode inside, and his pace never slowed as he marched down hallway after hallway. Finally, he stopped outside a door to an office, and I rushed to catch up.

Five women stood at the back wall, all of them around my age, and I froze when they turned their eyes on me. Stranger Danger nudged me all the way into the room and closed the door behind me, leaving me alone with the other women.

One woman stepped forward and flicked a lock of wavy dark brown hair over her shoulder. “Hey, I'm Adrienne Vinci,” she said with a faint New York accent. She arched one perfectly sculpted eyebrow. “My dad was obsessed with the *Rocky* movies. One of my brothers is named Sylvester. Mom got ahold of the birth certificate before it could be filed, so at least it isn't spelled like the movie. Bless her. But consider yourself warned. If you do that screaming thing or say ‘Yo, Adrian,’ I *will* punch you in the throat.”

I blinked a few times, processing the information she threw at me. “Peyton. And don't worry, I have no idea what you're talking about. I don't know who Rocky is.”

Adrienne's mouth fell open. “Deadass?” Her accent went thicker. “What planet have you been living on?”

A woman with a long blonde ponytail elbowed Adrienne. “Don’t mind her. She forgets how to act sometimes. I’m Isla Riberio.” She said her last name with an accent I didn’t recognize. It was Spanish, but also not. She crossed her arms, showing off defined biceps. “But call me Izzy.”

I gave her a small wave and a tight smile.

Another woman stepped forward and pushed her glasses up her nose. “Jessen Chambers.”

Next to her stood a deeply tanned woman whose long, shiny black hair made me jealous. She shot me a wide smile. “I’m Chris—Christina Mendoza.”

“Peyton Linwood,” I said back, then immediately remembered that I already introduced myself. Heat crept up my neck, and I knew I looked as mortified as I felt based on the smile gracing Chris’s face. Her kind expression went a long way toward easing my embarrassment.

The tallest of the group stood in the far corner. Rage seemed to pump out of her, signaling for the rest of us to keep our distance. The way she stared at me made me think she disapproved not only of my presence in the room but of my very existence. She didn’t introduce herself. Instead, she turned her head and stared at the wall. *Sheesh. What’s her deal?*

We all stood silently in the room. I shifted from foot to foot, unable to stay still.

“So ...” Izzy drew the word out. “How’d you end up here?” She didn’t seem to be talking to anyone in particular, and for a long moment, nobody answered.

Finally, Chris cleared her throat. “Broke into a Supreme Court justice’s house.” All our heads snapped to Chris. She

shrugged.

“And you got caught how?” I found myself asking.

A smile grew on Chris’s face. “I was skinny dipping in the pool and missed the alarm.” She shrugged. “It was hot in Texas.”

Adrienne snorted, then laughed outright. Chris telling her story was the icebreaker we needed.

Jessen was quick to follow. “My dad is a clinically diagnosed sociopath. The government was constantly calling him to run tests and whatever, thinking he was going to snap and go on a killing spree or something equally ridiculous.” She paused and narrowed her eyes at each of us. “I traded my place here so they’d leave him and my mom alone.”

How the hell was I supposed to respond to that? Most of my knowledge of sociopaths came from *Criminal Minds*. I opened my mouth to tell my story when the door opened. The room, which had grown more comfortable the more we connected, went ice cold.

“Ladies.” The voice sent a chill of recognition down my spine. I’d never forget the voice that commanded me to get on a plane.

The next man who followed him into the office resembled Santa Claus disguised as a government employee. White hair, big belly, white beard, red cheeks. I half expected him to give us a cheery smile and a booming “Ho, ho, ho.”

A younger man with close-shaved nearly black hair stepped in and towered over the other two. He was dressed in what I thought of as a standard military outfit—hunter-green shirt, Army fatigue pants, and brown lace-up boots. A tattoo

sleeve of Captain America in action went all the way up one thick arm.

If Steve Rogers and Bucky Barnes had a baby, it'd be him.

He scanned each of us, the scowl on his face deepening. I knew contempt, and it was written all over his face. He didn't bother to hide it.

The man whose call had sealed my fate cleared his throat. "I'm not one for small talk, so I'm going to lay it out for you." He pursed his lips before continuing. "I'm Agent Brooks. This is Kingston Sazar." Kingston clasped his hands in front of him and gave a brief nod. "And this is Agent Sparks." Fake Santa stepped forward with a tight smile.

"You were all handpicked for this assignment for the different skills and specialties you bring to the table. If you've been paying attention at all during the last four years, you'll know our last commander in chief pissed a lot of countries off, reneged on deals, insulted leaders." It was impossible to miss, even for someone like me who didn't care about politics. It was all over campus how job offers were being pulled or offered relocation out of the country. Ships with US exports were being sent away because of embargoes. It was a disaster and people were starting to suffer.

"We have a new commander in chief, but we've lost the trust of our allies, and we need it back. That's where you all come in.

"You are now members of an elite black ops task force called the Ghost Unit. You will go wherever is deemed necessary and remove obstacles that our allies are unable to work around, showing them we're serious about regaining their trust and that we can and will support them. Completely

off the grid. No trail will lead back to your involvement or the United States government.

“Kingston will be training you for the next six months, helping you become masters of everything from hand-to-hand combat to guns and reconnaissance, and anything else you can think of. You need to become the best, there is no other option. Six months is not a lot of time, but it’s all we have. You fail, you die. Not because we’ll kill you, but because the people you’re going after will get you first. Let me be clear,” he said, giving each of us a long stare before he continued, “Ghost Unit isn’t some fun name we came up with. From the moment you walk out of this room, you will be a ghost. For all intents and purposes, the women who walked into this room will no longer exist.”

Agent Brooks slid folders across the table, and I opened mine. My eyes skimmed over a bunch of legal terms, snagging on the areas in bold. Eight years. If successful, we’d be released. The job came with pay. Not much, but living expenses would be covered.

“What about our family? I’m the favorite, and there’s no way my dad’s gonna let me disappear,” Adrienne said, shaking her head.

Agent Brooks glared at her. “You haven’t been read into the program, so you’re free to leave. I’ll inform the agents on your dad and brother’s case that their immunity fell through.” His gaze moved to Izzy. “I know you two came as a package deal. You’re more than welcome to leave with her.”

Neither Adrienne nor Izzy moved.

Agent Brooks nodded. “We have an approved list of family members you can speak to. All contact with them will be monitored. They’re currently being notified that you will be

unreachable for the next six months, because you're off doing ...” He turned to Agent Sparks—Fake Santa fit him so much better—who shrugged, then Brooks shook his head. “It doesn't matter.”

“Do we get vacation?” Jessen followed up. “Time to take care of ourselves and recoup?”

“Undecided at the moment. We will reassess the option after the first year. This job is fluid, but we need to put in the groundwork for it to take root,” Agent Brooks responded.

“And what if we don't want to sign?” I asked, my voice so low I wasn't sure anyone heard me.

Agent Brooks stood up straighter, tilting his head as his gaze went hard. “You should have thought about that before you hacked the United States Treasury. And then left a calling card like the arrogant little white hat you are. Breaking multiple federal laws that could identify you as a terrorist. Laws that come with hefty jail time.” The threat hung in the air, and Izzy sucked in a sharp breath.

“I'm actually a gray hat.” I instantly regretted correcting him, but I wanted him to know that I followed my own code. That I was the one who made the choice, good or bad.

“Let me be very clear. Not signing isn't an option, despite what Agent Brooks just suggested. That contract is a formality at best. You will be a part of Ghost Unit, whether you want to or not. Don't make this more difficult for yourselves,” Fake Santa said, sounding bored.

Kingston tossed a few pens on the table. I forced myself to grab one and held it so tight I was surprised it didn't break and spill ink everywhere. I scribbled my name across the dotted line, sealing my fate.

When I stood up, I glared at Agent Brooks, who only gave me an approving nod. He waited until each of us had signed our names. “Welcome to Ghost Unit, ladies.”

Happy fucking eighteenth birthday, Peyton.

Chapter Two

PEYTON

Ten years later...

IT WAS PITCH-BLACK OUT, clouds covering the light from the moon. Crickets were chirping, and a breeze swept through, ruffling the trees.

We couldn't have asked for a better night for the op.

“Drones up,” I said into my headset as I activated three drones and flew them high in the sky, stopping them once they were hovering over the mansion.

Three of the four screens lit up, giving me the night vision view with heat blobs that represented people in and around the mansion. The fourth screen showed a man watching TV in a penthouse an hour away.

Hunched over my keyboard, I wished I had more room in this van to move. The only thing I disliked about these missions was how condensed my workstation was.

Five heat blobs show up on screen, exactly where they were supposed to be. My knee bounced. Hands suspended over the keyboard, I waited to hit the keys to hijack the mansion's security cameras. The eight blank screens on the other side of my desk came to life with a single press of a key, giving me real time footage of what the security guards on this

massive estate were seeing. The switch happened so fast, the people watching would have no way of knowing that it was a recording from yesterday.

They were blind, and they had no idea. Amused at their incompetence, I huffed a laugh. It made my job easier.

I turned on my mic. “All clear. Wife in primary bedroom, one child in small bedroom in the east wing. Retraction on my count. Three. Two. One.” I started the timer.

We’d studied the schematics of the entire twenty-acre estate, gotten intel from the security team about how often the guards changed positions, and accessed the closed-circuit security feeds. The only piece left was confirmation of where our targets were for extraction, which I’d just provided. We had three minutes and four seconds to secure both the woman and the child, then get them out of the house and through the woods to the waiting car.

As though they had one mind, all five heat blobs moved at the same time. I kept my eyes locked on the feeds from inside the house, watching for anything that shouldn’t be there. The fact that he had cameras not only monitoring the public areas of the house but also all the bedrooms, including the main bedroom where his wife lay sleeping, played to our advantage.

He used those cameras to watch his wife, to make sure she was where he wanted, when he wanted. It made me want to lock him up and leave him for weeks, teasing him with food and water just out of reach. I wished we could wipe his miserable existence off the face of the earth, but he was too high profile.

I kept one eye on the man in the penthouse. Lyle Lowenstein, the scumbag husband who was responsible for our mission here tonight. He didn’t hire us, but if it weren’t for

his frequent and vicious abuse, we wouldn't have needed to extract his wife and child. His money and power granted him immunity. Mrs. Lowenstein had finally summoned the fortitude to file a complaint, only to watch the evidence disappear and the report get buried.

It had taken me less than an hour to dig up three complaints. A deeper search yielded five more. Eight times she'd found enough courage to seek help. Eight times she'd been failed by the people who were supposed to protect her and her child.

It made my blood boil.

If it wasn't for the private forum I'd created for social workers, so many more lives would've been lost. They needed a place to safely vent their frustrations over the bureaucratic red tape, and I needed a way to find the people who slipped through the cracks.

Some situations didn't call for an extraction and we were able to help without ever leaving HQ. Sometimes more extreme measures had to be taken.

This wasn't our first rescue mission, nor would it be our last.

The infrared bobs showed exactly where Izzy, Chris, Tyler, Adrienne, and Jessen were on the property. A guard turned the corner and headed toward the wife's room. I checked the timer, even though I didn't need it to know that he was early. He wasn't supposed to be there for another five minutes. According to our intel, the guards checked to make sure she was still in her room at every shift change. The numbers on the clock climbed, screaming at me that we had thirty seconds left before we moved to plan B.

“Position one, beware, guard early.”

“You gotta be kidding me, man,” Izzy muttered.

“Nope, hang on.” Literally.

“Not much of a choice.” Her voice was strained, and I didn’t need to check the drone feeds to know she was holding onto the tiny ledge of the balcony outside the primary bedroom.

My eyes flicked to the feed of the kid’s room, which was on the other side of the second floor. The guards never entered that room, but we were about to wake up a five-year-old and sneak him out his window and into the woods. There was a better than decent chance he’d scream and alert the guards.

“Go.” I barked the order more harshly than I intended. If there was one thing I hated, it was when our meticulously planned missions got shot to hell.

Static came through my headphones. “Targets A and B, secure.”

Another life saved from a dangerous situation. But getting them out of the house was only step one in the process. There was still a lot to be done—relocation, new identities, finding them the resources to start the healing process.

At least we were giving them the opportunity to live, a chance so many others didn’t get.

The timer went off, and I let go of the breath I wasn’t aware I’d been holding as my team moved through the woods. My drones hovered over the area, allowing me to ensure no surprises popped up.

“Not every mission is going to go off without a hitch,” Betty, our boss, said.

“I know. That’s why I had us create plans B through D,” I shot back.

“I’m just saying. If you let go of that perfectionist mindset, you wouldn’t stress out so much when something doesn’t go right and you have to pivot.” Betty leaned back in her chair, not that there was much room in the van. I was surprised that all my equipment fit, let alone an additional chair.

Betty pointed at one of the screens, redirecting my focus to where it belonged. I typed out the code to switch the camera feeds back to normal. “Mind your business,” I said, with no heat behind the words. I loved Betty. She was more like an aunt than a boss.

She was Uncle Wolf’s best friend and she’d pretty much always been a fixture in my life. I don’t know what I would have done if she hadn’t approached Ghost Unit with job offers for all of us.

I looked over at her. Eyes closed, head tipped back, her short hair hanging over the back of the chair. Next to Aunt Jeannie and Scarlett, she was my favorite woman on the planet. She’d brought me home, given my family a place to go.

“It’s hard to mind my own when you ladies want to play superhero for free all the time. Someone has to keep you levelheaded and me in the green,” she said, opening a granola bar.

“Whatever. We do paid work too.” I rolled my eyes. We’d made her so much money since she hired us two years ago that she could’ve retired and bought a vacation home in Maui. Betty wasn’t that type though.

“I’m aware. It just pisses me off more because you bring in too much dough for me to complain about the rest.” She huffed. “Savannah told me I had to be nice since we can finally go on that trip to Bora Bora she’s been begging me for.”

I rolled my eyes but stayed focused on the monitors. My favorite part of the entire mission was coming up. The guards would go to check on the woman and find her missing, along with the kid. And after they’d searched every nook and cranny of the ostentatious twenty acres, they’d get the joy of calling their boss and telling him his wife and child had disappeared.

I loved watching them squirm. We just needed to prepare for how the husband handled it. Would he go to the police, or would he hire his own investigators to find her? Probably the latter; Lyle had more money than he could spend in three lifetimes. But our team had zero concerns that he’d find his human punching bags.

They spent less time searching than I would have thought. Less than ten minutes after they discovered their snafu, the guards dialed their boss. Filled with glee, I watched Lyle throw a temper tantrum like a two-year-old who was told he couldn’t have any ice cream.

Chapter Three

PEYTON

BIRDS RUSTLED BRANCHES; animals skittered across the ground. A cool breeze rustled my hair. It was perfect. Everything I'd ever wanted in a home. A place where I could simply *be*. I sat in my Adirondack chair with my eyes closed and allowed the tranquility of the forest to settle over me.

The simplest moments were often the ones that took away all the stress of my job. Helped my mind decompress from work.

Once we'd decided to join Betty at Bridge City Security, we all searched for houses. Aunt Jeannie sent me the listing for this place, and I fell in love. It was run-down, but it wasn't *condemned* like Uncle Wolf had claimed during his walkthrough. After I'd already bought the place.

I'm pretty sure he named a few gray hairs after me. Then he went to work on making my home habitable. He got my vision, but I think my excitement was what finally broke him down. He was never good at denying me what I wanted.

I finally got to move in a few months ago, two years after he started. With how much I've been working, I hadn't had the chance to paint any of the rooms or set up more extensive security. I had the basics done, at least. The only rooms I'd

gotten around to setting up were the main bedroom and bathroom. The living room had a couch, but the TV was still on the floor. And that was next on my list of things to tackle.

Tires crunching down the dirt road had me sitting up straighter and reaching for my gun on the small side table next to me.

Car doors opened and closed. Whoever it was either thought I wasn't home or didn't care if I heard them coming. Feet stomped up the front steps, and I waited.

"Open up, Peyton," a voice I knew said, followed by fast, hard knocks on the front door.

"Either you let us in or we break the door down," another one shouted.

"Dude, they just installed that door like a few weeks ago," a third voice joined in. If three of them were here, I knew the other two were with them.

I contemplated running into the woods, but I knew them too well. If I didn't answer the door, they'd break in and hang out until I came back. Or they'd run after me. Neither option appealed.

I hung my head, resigning myself to answer the door when all I wanted was a few nights to myself. Apparently that was too much to ask for. Walking through the house, I set the gun on the island on my way to the front door.

The first thing I noticed wasn't my team, who also happened to be my best friends in the entire world, but the sheer number of bags piled on my front porch. Were they moving in and forgot to tell me?

Adrienne snatched up two bags and shoved the door open wider before strolling inside. Chris, Jessen, Tyler, and Izzy

grabbed a few bags each and followed her in. I closed the door and leaned my forehead on it, resolving to fight whatever it was that had dragged them twenty minutes away from their own houses.

I'd chosen my place in the woods for a reason. The rest of my team had moved into new townhomes all within two blocks of each other, but as much as I loved them, I needed my own space.

They were unpacking their bags when I entered the living room.

"What are you all doing here?" I didn't want company. I wanted to curl up and watch an action movie with fast cars that defied logic and physics. "You know I like to decompress after opps."

We'd been on a mission to prove ourselves since we'd gotten out from under the government's thumb, so back-to-back jobs weren't abnormal. Betty mandated a two-day recovery period after every field operation because she said it was necessary for staying in top form. This was the first time we'd gotten a seven-day break between jobs, and it felt like a gift from the gods. A gift I didn't want to share, not even with my closest friends in the world.

"You've been out here playing forest princess for three days. You're going out and having fun. No isn't an acceptable answer." Izzy planted her hands on her hips and glared at me.

"If I got sucked into it, so do you. I refuse to suffer alone." Tyler shoved a makeup bag into Chris's stomach. Chris doubled over and pretended to wheeze, and Tyler sneered at her. "Pathetic. I didn't even hit you hard."

Chris stood up straight and flashed a winning smile that Tyler ignored.

“We’re going to the Crow. It’s not like you won’t have a good time.” Jessen rolled her eyes, then focused back on her phone. A few seconds later, a remixed version of a Madison Beer song filled the speakers.

Izzy started to chant “Crow, Crow, Crow” over the music, and everyone else joined in. Izzy jumped on the couch, bouncing as she pumped her fist. They left me with no choice but to laugh. At least they wanted to go to my favorite bar. Way better than those hoity-toity places Adrienne always picked.

Adrienne held up a shirt I knew she’d end up wearing as a dress. Chris sang into her makeup brush while Izzy hopped off the couch and grabbed her blow-dryer.

Tyler was right. I didn’t have a choice. I was going out.

Hopefully none of my girls decided to shoot anyone.

A hard slap came down on my ass, making me shout. Izzy cackled as she sashayed past me down the sidewalk.

“That was not necessary,” I called after her.

“It totally was. Your ass looks hot in those pants. Practically begging to be slapped.”

Ten minutes in their company while we were getting ready was all it took for me to start having fun. To realize that maybe I needed to go out.

The outfit was what ultimately changed my mind. Adrienne had raided my closet and matched my new leather pants with the acid-washed Linkin Park shirt I'd made but had yet to wear. It was cut up and sewn back together on the sides, and the widened neck made it fall off one shoulder. And after stressing over my accessories, all of which were purchased by her, Aunt Jeannie, or Scarlett, she settled on a cluster of thick silver chain necklaces. My favorite shoes—a pair of spike-encrusted heels—completed the look.

It was an outfit my Aunt Jeannie and Scarlett would have been proud of. Then one or both of them would have asked to borrow it.

Jessen wound her arm through mine as we bypassed the line to get into the bar. Scowls and shouts from the people in line had me stifling a laugh.

“VIPs,” Tyler yelled back, because she always had to have the last word. Even with a group of people she didn't know and would never see again.

We went inside, and Shelly, our favorite server, waved frantically at us from across the crowded room. There was one table open, big enough for all of us, that had a reserved sign on it.

I sat down and scanned the crowd, getting a feel for the vibe. Crow didn't have a lot of the issues a lot of other places dealt with. Probably because the owner had a zero-tolerance policy on fights and anything else that could drag the night down. And they enforced it.

The place was a blend of bar and restaurant, with all that distinctive Portland weirdness thrown into the mix. Plants hung from the ceiling, tables were all different styles, plates and glasses didn't match, big wicker chairs were the height of

comfort. And best of all was the massive garage door that spanned from floor to ceiling. It was open, letting in the breeze from the Willamette River.

The waitress greeted us with a grin. “If it isn’t my favorite group.”

“Girl, you flatter me.” Adrienne fanned herself. Always so damn dramatic.

“Yeah, yeah. Save it.” She pulled out her order pad. “Have you gotten the chance to look at the seasonal menu?”

We all nodded, because like responsible millennials, we’d checked out the menu online and decided what we were getting before we got here. We ordered our drinks and every tapa on the menu, then sat back and enjoyed the music as it switched from dinner music to something people could dance to. The last bit of tension that had lingered around my shoulders finally faded.

Okay fine, maybe going out wasn’t the *worst* idea.

“I know we don’t talk about work when we’re out, but I have to ask. Are we seriously only taking local jobs for the next six months? Is that smart?” Izzy asked.

“Local to us is a two-hour plane ride. It’s not like we’re confined to the city and nowhere else,” Tyler said.

“We’ve busted our asses the past few years. This is the longest break between ops we’ve had since we started. Bridge City’s rates have tripled, and we’re turning down international work because we don’t have the capacity to do it. There aren’t enough hours in the day. We need to take time for ourselves. Or at least slow down. It isn’t healthy for us to have a few days to recharge before we dive into mission after mission.”

Jessen was right. For every job we took, we turned down eight more, and we were all on the verge of burnout.

“I’m exhausted,” Adrienne said, slicing her hand through the air. “And I have no time to spend all this money I’m making.”

“There’s a tournament coming up, and it’s local. I registered,” Izzy said like it was no big deal, but it was. She would have become a professional fighter like her dad if she hadn’t joined Ghost Unit. He’d moved his gym, Underground MMA, from Long Island City to Portland to stay close to her once she’d made this her home base.

Chris’s eyes lit up, and she bounced in her seat.

“No. If you act like that, I am not telling you anything more,” Izzy said, stopping Chris before she started. The way Chris’s face fell had me hiding my smile behind my drink.

I took in each of my friends, thankful that I had them in my life. Relieved that they’d come with me and restarted their lives here. If I could go back and change the past, I wouldn’t.

Our food arrived, and so many plates covered the table that we couldn’t put our drinks down while we ate. Jessen dug into her food but paused between bites to tell us about her last date. “I made another one cry, guys.”

I glared at Tyler after she smacked my back a touch too hard when I choked on my food from laughing.

“Oh, sweet dear Jessen, please tell the class what happened.” Izzy put down her fork and propped her chin in her hand.

A deep pained sigh came out of Jessen. “It was supposed to be drinks and light conversation. And then, you know, I asked him where he was at in life. Not like a therapist at all, I

swear.” Jessen pointed her fingers at each one of us, like she knew what we would say before we said it. “Just like, are you looking for a good time or something more? He shrugged his shoulders. There was this sad dejected look on his face. And like, how could I ignore it? So, I asked him what was wrong.”

My teammates covered their faces. Adrienne banged her head against the table. I gave Jessen a pitying look.

“It wasn’t like I went all therapist on him.” Her cheeks turned red. “I said that I was a safe space if he wanted to talk. By the end I learned he was only there trying to get over his fiancée leaving him for his brother. There were tears, and I recommended a therapist I thought could help him.” Jessen’s mouth twisted into a frown as she moved food around her plate with her fork.

“Stop doing that!” Izzy shouted, gaining the attention of the table next to us. One glare and a well-placed stabbing motion with a knife from Tyler had them turning back around.

“How do you always find the worst guys?” Chris said, patting Jessen on the back.

Izzy continued, not giving Jessen a chance to respond to Chris. “You do this every time. Stop letting those wounded faces get to you. Not everyone needs you to help them. It was supposed to be a date. A fun, flirty, maybe bring-him-home-at-the-end date. Next time one of them goes all dejected therapy case on you, pay the tab and run the other fucking way, Jess.”

Adrienne jumped in. “Izzy’s right on this one. It sucks about his fiancée and brother, but like, if he’s still so screwed up over it, he shouldn’t have been on a date in the first place. That’s shitty for the person he decides to go out with before he’s ready. Did you even do a background check on the guy?”

Tyler snickered. “Background check? I bet she thinks they’re being honest on their profiles when they put down that they’re six-two.” That had the rest of us laughing. “Get off the dating sites. Meet someone the old-fashioned way, like at work or something.” Tyler, the most anti-relationship human in existence, was giving out dating advice. Just how low had we stooped?

Adrienne rolled her eyes and took a delicate sip of her drink. “Right, Ty. Because we meet such wonderful men in our line of work.”

An old-school rap song came on, and Jessen practically drooped with relief when we all made our way to the dance floor. I moved my body to the rhythm of one song, then the next, laughing with my friends.

A cheer from the bar on the second level had me snapping my head in that direction. A group of men, all in button-down shirts with their sleeves rolled to their elbows, stood on the second-floor bar hooting and cheering as two guys chugged pitchers of beer.

“You can take the boy out of the frat ...” Adrienne leaned down and spoke into my ear, a laugh in her voice. “But you can’t take the frat out of the boy.” I dropped my sweaty forehead onto her shoulder and laughed.

Movement in the dark corner caught my eye.

I tried not to look, but like always, I couldn’t stop myself from glaring in that direction. Oh, goodie. Redemption was crashing my night. At least I didn’t stop dancing.

Four of the men from the motorcycle club stood in the corner of the second-floor bar, everyone giving them a wide berth so they didn’t have to share their space. I wished there

was a way I could kick them out or work out some sort of agreement that they'd stay away from my favorite places.

Colt—club name Grim Reaper, or Reaper for short—moved into the light to lean against the railing. He'd gotten his road name and head enforcer position a few years ago, after years of floundering to find his place. I was gone by then, but I'd heard from Uncle Wolf how perfectly suited he was for the role.

I let myself drink him in for three seconds. His long hair piled up in a bun on his head, his T-shirt stretched to its limits, his grown-out beard. His gaze was down, observing the dance floor.

Three seconds.

Our gazes clashed, and I couldn't control the snarl that marred my face. His lips ticked up into a small smile that I wanted to punch off his face.

Ten years. That's how much time had passed since that night. I'd worked through my issues, dealt with the broken heart, but I still couldn't control the visceral need to kick him in the nuts every time we were a hundred feet of each other.

Grabbing Adrienne, I spun us both around so my back was to Reaper and his club brothers. In an alternate universe, I would have run up and joined them, said hello, maybe even had a conversation.

But this was reality.

And in reality, they were all just a bunch of dicks.

Chapter Four

REAPER

SCREAMS ECHOED IN THE WAREHOUSE, making me wish I'd brought earplugs.

I stared at the mid-level dealer—Drake something—slumped in the chair in front of me while I wiped his blood off my hands. I didn't care what his name was, it didn't matter. These waste-of-oxygen motherfuckers were a dime a dozen.

I pressed my thumb around the two-by-two square of missing skin on his chest, causing him to squeal like a pig. The missing skin would leave a hideous scar, a permanent and unmistakable warning from Redemption Motorcycle Club. The only warning the guy was going to get. We believed in second chances. That was why we marked them first. We lived by our code, no matter who we had to hand those chances out to.

Like so many others, this jizzstain had come onto our territory and tried to sell drugs barely twenty feet from our weed dispensary. We'd gone through too much red tape getting the place up and running to let Portland PD find any excuse to shut us down.

Assholes, every last one of 'em. Didn't know when to leave well enough alone. Life would be so much simpler if

they'd just get with the program—they stay out of our way, we stay out of theirs. Then they could put their considerable resources to good use, solving the actual problems facing this city. Like this little motherfucker here who thought it would be a good idea to push some hard shit on a bunch of high-school kids.

I'd spent a decade earning my title for Redemption. Head Enforcer. Had a nice ring to it, and it gave me the power to act as judge, jury, and executioner when the situation called for it. Mostly it meant dealing with people like Drake who were stupid enough to sell on our block. It wasn't like our rules were a secret. Everyone in the Portland underground, from pimps to the fucking Mexican cartel, knew better than to sell skin or drugs within two square miles of Redemption property.

The dealer stared at me, like he was daring me to go further. And oh, I fucking wanted to. He deserved harsher punishment. I'd advocated for sending a stronger message. Wiping him off the planet, then going after his supplier. I was overruled.

My hand whipped out, quick as an adder snake, straight to the kid's throat. His eyes bulged as I squeezed his windpipe and spoke in an even tone. "Let's get one thing very fuckin' clear. You get one chance at redemption. You screw up, break our rules one more time, you won't be going back to your buddies to brag about your scars. By the time I'm done, not even your dental records will be enough for the coroner to identify you." Pulling the kid out of his seat, I shook him by the throat. "Do you understand me?" The wannabe thug gave a small nod, and I shook him harder. "I want to hear you say it."

"Yes. Got it," he choked. I threw him back into the chair with such force that it toppled to the ground, and he lay at my

feet, gagging.

Fucking weak-ass punk. He thought he could sell shit to kids that would get them hooked for life, but he couldn't take the beating that came with it.

As I walked out of the warehouse, my eyes struggled to adjust to the sunlight while my body was engulfed in the late summer heat August always seemed to bring around. It was a quiet evening, although Drake's pain-filled cries still rang in my ears, as if I should feel guilty for the beating I'd given him. Wasn't going to happen. I had one thing that I was guilty of, and it had followed me around like a dark cloud for the last ten years.

It took me less than ten minutes to make it from the warehouse to the clubhouse, not nearly enough time on my bike to dispel the impatience still flooding my system, but it helped some.

I beelined toward the two old men—Wolf, the president, and my dad, the VP—leaning against the bar, both holding a beer.

“It's done. Prospects are takin' out the trash and cleaning up the mess.” I kept my voice low, not wanting anyone to overhear us.

Wolf eyed me. “Is this an issue? Third dealer in the last few weeks.”

I mulled the question over and shrugged. “Not sure. They all seemed to think they could get away with selling on our block. Like they could make their mark by challenging us and living to tell about it. I don't think there's anything more to it though.”

Dad and Wolf exchanged a look, having one of their unspoken conversations that I hated. “I can make a call.” Wolf reached for his phone but stopped at the glare I sent his way.

I rose to my full height and tried to control the surge of rage that had lived in me for the last ten years and no amount of fighting could release. “Don’t need you to. I got it covered.”

Wolf quirked one eyebrow. “You sure? Seems like this is starting to get out of hand and you need some help.”

I bit back a snarl, knowing better than to give the Prez attitude in front of the brothers. “I’m good. Would be better if the club hadn’t vetoed my idea of sending a harsher message.” Unable to keep the bite out of my tone, I ground my teeth together, then continued more calmly. “I’m sending Sweetie and Joker out. They know where to get intel, if there’s anything to hear.”

I was proud of myself for not snatching the beer out of his hand and smashing it over his head. He’d make a fucking phone call. I knew who he’d call without him saying it. She left for eight years, then came back and acted like she didn’t know us.

She couldn’t even be bothered to thank us for rebuilding her fucking house. It pissed me off, even if I knew why she stayed away. I glared at Wolf, waiting for him to disagree with me or override my decision.

“If I want to call my girl, ask her for a favor, I will,” Wolf said, his menacing tone daring me to argue.

Was Peyton his girl? Yeah, he’d pulled her out from a hellhole masked as a castle and raised her. Loved her like a daughter. But in all the ways that mattered, the ways that

mattered to me, she was mine. She had been since that day on the beach.

A lot of time had passed since then. The timing was never right. At first it was because she was seventeen and underage. Then it was because I was an idiot and let people get into my head. It didn't help that she'd disappeared for so long. And we'd needed that space to grow into the people we were supposed to be.

She'd been back for a while, and I thought my chance would present itself, but she'd staunchly avoided everything to do with Redemption.

“Both of you need to take it down a notch,” Dad said. He turned to Wolf. “Stop picking at him just because you can. Technically if you want to use help outside the club, it needs to go to a vote.” He jerked his chin at me. “Stop getting so damn riled about her, son. Grow a pair and fix it. Or don't. Either way, stop this pathetic bullshit. Make a damn decision and stick with it.” He faced the bar again, bringing the beer to his mouth. “Put us all out of our damn misery,” he muttered, but I ignored it.

Wolf waited a beat before changing the subject. “Are we set for the next delivery?”

We had three deliveries scheduled over the next three weeks. “More specific?”

He rolled his eyes. “All of them. Update.”

I rubbed a hand over my face. Answering questions was one of the only things that agitated me about my position. “Botanist guy said Pete Davidson strand is good to roll out along with the others. I've got the schedule organized.” It took a while to get our weed distribution up and running, and the

club had almost gone broke in the process, but we were making money hand over fist now.

“And the other warehouse?” Dad asked.

“It’s getting shipped out tonight. I stopped by this morning to make sure everything with Tony was squared away.” We’d pulled back on most of our illegal business dealings, but we were still in deep with the smugglers. We had boundaries though. We stuck to stolen goods like antiques, maple syrup, and cigarettes. No guns, flesh, hard drugs, or animals. It cost us money that was ripe for the taking, but so many of our brothers came from violent, drug-filled backgrounds, and they didn’t want to be a part of creating another person’s hell.

“Good. Need it to be cleared out sooner rather than later.” Dad’s lip curled. “Hate working with that smug bastard.”

Wolf hid his smile behind his beer. “You only hate that guy because he hit on Scarlett.”

Dad grunted in response and shrugged. “You’d hate him too if he came onto Jeannie.” He wasn’t wrong. Redemption men were possessive of their women.

McMillan men did take that up a notch though. Peyton and I weren’t even together and I considered her my woman. Even after she disappeared to who the fuck knows where and came back ... different from before.

I’d made friends with the right people and knew more about her time away than anyone else, but not enough to satisfy my curiosity.

But all of that was just a distraction from the real problem. It was past time for me to apologize and make things right.

Peyton might ignore me, pretend like I didn’t exist, but she wasn’t going to have the option anymore. She’d run my

patience dry.

I wouldn't let her.

Chapter Five

PEYTON

DETECTIVE GRIFFIN MOORE smiled up at the camera, waiting to be let into my office. Where was Leanne? It didn't matter that he couldn't get access to anything, he wasn't supposed to be hanging around by himself.

He rang the doorbell again.

Not today, Satan.

He could stand there all day for all I cared. I wasn't going to let him in. I knew he was here to drop off a check from Portland PD because he'd made a big show of it in the lobby.

He was a decent cop, but he saw the world in black and white. I lived my life in shades of gray, so the one time I'd given into his interest and grabbed a drink with him, I'd known we were incompatible within the first ten minutes.

I closed the camera feed and sent Betty a message to let her know he was hanging around. I wasn't in the mood to deal with people, and the last thing Betty needed was me pissing Griffin off and straining our relationship with PPD.

My phone vibrated with a message from Aunt Jeannie, and I smiled at the GIF of Michael Scott screaming "It's happening." I needed to find time to drop off a bottle of champagne to celebrate her big win at work.

A body landed in the chair at the desk next to mine, and I turned down the rock-techno mix I was listening to. What was with everyone bothering me today? First Griffin, now Savannah, Betty's wife, only a few hours later.

“Wow, this is a hefty stack.” She studied the tall pile of paperwork like it would grow legs and chase her around the room. “How long do you think it'll be before Betty handcuffs Tyler to her desk to force her to take care it?”

I cackled, remembering the time Betty had done exactly that. “I give it two more days. She already told her she wouldn't get paid if she didn't do it. That was like two weeks ago.” I refocused on my monitors, but my eyes blurred. That was my sign to call it a day.

“I don't know how you're able to focus with that loud music on. I could never.”

I shrugged. “It's the vibe. The bass. I don't focus on the lyrics at all.”

Savannah shook her head. “Couldn't be me. I'd be operating on someone and stop to belt out the chorus of my favorite Taylor Swift song.”

I laughed at the mental image of her holding a surgical knife like a microphone while horrified nurses urged her to stop singing. Savannah Lake was one of my favorite people in the world. She'd known me since I was young, back when I was a little genius who was too awkward for words.

Betty was like Uncle Wolf, a silent protector. She was the one who taught me self-defense, how to throw a punch without

breaking my hand. But Savannah, along with Aunt Jeannie and Scarlett, had molded me into who I was now. From helping me feel comfortable in my skin to showing me how to be a woman who could take on the world. Without their influence in my life, I don't know how long I would have lasted in Ghost Unit.

I needed to make more time for the people who mattered. With that thought in mind, I started shutting things down for the day. "How've you been? It's been a long time since we caught up." The habit of only being allowed to talk to people outside the mission a couple times a year was still deeply ingrained. After two years, I'd gotten better, but I still had a long way to go.

"Things are good. I can't wait to get to Bora Bora and spend some quality time with Betty. I can't remember the last time we went away for two weeks. Must have been our honeymoon, which was fifteen years ago." The team was shocked when Betty told us last week that she would be taking two weeks over the holidays. She hadn't taken more than a few days since she hired us. "Anyway. I checked out your newest rescues. Both came back with a clean bill of health."

Relief swept through me. She didn't always come back with good news after completing physical and mental health evaluations on our rescues, and I'd been worried the Lowensteins would need more medical care than we'd planned for.

Savannah clapped her hands. "Enough about me and work. Betty mentioned that Detective Pretty Boy stopped by with a check. Did he check on you?"

I schooled my face into a blank mask.

“Fine,” she huffed. “I won’t ask about him. But have you been on any dates lately? Jessen has one tonight.”

I rolled my eyes, knowing I’d get the story of how spectacularly awful that date was come morning. “No. I don’t want to date. Wastes too much time and energy on someone who’s eventually going to leave.” My job came with long hours, unwavering confidentiality, and getting called out in the middle of dinner on the regular. Not many men were willing to put up with that lifestyle, and I wasn’t willing to put up with anyone who’d expect me to turn my life upside down to accommodate them.

“You worked hard today, Peyton. You should head home,” Betty said from the doorway, then turned to Savannah. “You ready?”

Savannah flashed her a loving smile. “Yes, my darling.” She jumped out of her chair and skipped over to Betty, who wore a tender expression that belied her boss-bitch persona. They laced their fingers together, and I bit back a sigh.

I loved witnessing Savannah’s effect on Betty. Even after twenty years together, they acted like newlyweds. Betty Lake was hard as nails, but Savannah softened her up in all the right ways. They balanced each other out.

“You coming with us?” Savannah asked. My stomach made a loud sound, telling me I’d skipped lunch again. Betty glared at me, but Savannah laughed. “Guess that answers my question.”

I grabbed my stuff and followed them out the door. Ten minutes later, we hit Prost Marketplace and each went to grab our preferred meals. After I finished paying, I found them saving me a seat at a picnic table.

Between bites, Savannah prattled on about a patient who was one of the crankiest men she'd ever had to deal with. Betty gave her full attention to the story, even though I knew it was probably the third time she'd heard it. For such a brilliant woman, Savannah could be forgetful, and it always amazed me that she'd not only graduated medical school, but that she'd been top of her class in every step of her education.

The relationships of the people who helped raise me after my aunt and uncle saved me from my parents' house were so different from the one I'd witnessed in my early years. Betty and Savannah, Scarlette and High, Aunt Jeannie and Uncle Wolf—they were all so happy and managed such healthy relationships despite the challenges of keeping necessary secrets and having to skip out on a moment's notice. A stark contrast from the toxic passive aggression and frequent silent treatment that defined my mom and dad's marriage.

Those three couples were the only reason I had hope for myself. They gave all of us—Jessen, Chris, Izzy, Adrienne, and me—faith that we could find what they have, a glimpse into our possible future. Not Tyler, though. She'd not only managed to avoid a single date in the twenty-nine years she'd been alive, she also had zero desire to share her life with anyone and thought love was a bullshit conspiracy perpetrated by florists and the mental health industry to make us all feel like our lives were incomplete.

Given what she'd gone through with her parents' divorce, no one blamed her.

Even recognizing that Tyler probably had a point, I couldn't help but be inspired to dream as I witnessed the love and joy radiating from the women across from me. Dream that someday I'd get my version of the white picket fence with the

loving man who took me as I was and gave me a life with two point five kids and a goofy dog.

For tonight, I shoved aside the voice that told me the man of my dreams simply didn't exist.

Chapter Six

PEYTON

"I PROMISE TO LOVE, honor, and cherish you. To always be honest, even when it might make you mad. To be your sounding board. To never go to sleep angry, and to always let you use my body to warm your cold feet. I never imagined myself falling in love, but now I can't imagine what life would be like without you. I want my days to start with you beside me and end with you in my arms." The groom in the video wiped away a tear.

What a load of crap. He said the words with ease, without having to look at the vows printed on the paper clutched in his hands. If only the bride had known then what she learned a few years later.

Betty rarely took divorce cases. She might have owned the firm and therefore had to focus on the bottom line, but she also knew that the women she'd hired needed frequent challenges. So, unless we had nothing good for us to sink our teeth into, she passed the tedious jobs onto another firm.

Tedious jobs like this one.

I'd finished combing through the documents, and it had taken time, more than I'd care to admit, but I found the paper trail. Off-shore accounts under the soon-to-be ex-wife's name,

where he was funneling the money he stole from his clients. He'd been careful to make it look like she was the one embezzling the funds. Probably thought that he'd ride off into the sunset with his mistress while the old ball and chain fought for her freedom in court. And of course the mistress was none other than the maid of honor at their wedding and her very best friend in the whole wide world.

Nothing chapped my ass—hell, all our asses—more than female betrayal. Sisterhood and family meant everything to us.

Maybe this was the perfect case for our team, after all. Bridge City Securities was in the business of saving women, and this time we'd get the satisfaction of seeing the man responsible rot behind bars. With a grim smile, I typed a quick note to the lawyer and attached the files, ensuring she had everything she needed to hang the cheating asshole up by his tainted dick.

It never ceased to boggle my mind how awful people could be to the ones they claimed to care about. My mind drifted to the Lowenstein woman and her son. Were they scared? They had to be. I hated not being able to check on the women and children we rescued, and I had to stop myself from asking Betty for the location of the safe house. It wasn't wise for me to get any more involved than I already was. The line had to be drawn somewhere. I was the one who found the cases, researched them, and brought the file to the team, and I had a part in every aspect of the rescue. I needed the boundary of not knowing where they were for my own sanity.

My alarm went off, the one I'd set so I wouldn't be late. I had plans with that I couldn't miss—for fear of my life.

Or something like that. As soon as I silenced the alarm, my phone rang, and I let it go to voicemail. I knew she'd leave a

message, which I wouldn't listen to. What was so hard about texting? I continuously told her to use talk to text. I'd even shown her how to use it, but she insisted on leaving me messages I'd never hear.

Out of habit, I performed a quick scan of my firewalls. I was the best at my job for a reason—I never underestimated the power of another hacker with zero fucks to give and enough desire to get into a place they knew they didn't belong.

Satisfied that all my files were safe and that the ethernet kill switch was still activated in the event anyone managed to get past my security, I shut everything down and headed to Leanne's desk in the lobby. When Betty realized the headache that came with hiring five women who'd never handled their own admin work, she'd brought in her niece to take care of all the daily tasks that went along with what we did. Whatever the hell that involved, I had no clue, and I couldn't be bothered to care. I waited for Leanne to gather her stuff so we could walk out together. Unless we were sleeping here, we always left in groups or pairs. In our line of work, we knew firsthand that we could never be too safe.

Thirty minutes later, I pulled into the driveway of the house I'd grown up in. As far as I was concerned, my life started when I was eight years old, the day I moved into this home filled with love and laughter. The first place I ever felt safe to speak my mind and ask questions. To be me. If Aunt Jeannie and Uncle Wolf ever decided to sell it, I would buy it in a heartbeat.

Coming back home was like being wrapped in a hug. I walked toward the kitchen, past the shoes strewn along the floor of the entryway and the photos that mapped out my life

from awkward adolescence until just before my eighteenth birthday when I'd stopped appearing in pictures.

A loud snort followed by two distinct laughs had me detouring to the living room where Aunt Jeannie and Scarlett McMillan were laughing so hard they hadn't heard me come in.

They sat on the couch, wearing what I thought of as their uniform—jeans, T-shirts, and thick black motorcycle boots. And to top it all off, their leather cuts distinguishing them as old ladies of patched-in club members. I was pretty sure they only took them off to shower and sleep. Those jackets were their badges of honor, a declaration of their positions in the club.

“Am I interrupting?” I asked from the doorway.

Both women tried to calm themselves, taking big gulps of air and wiping tears from the corner of their eyes.

“Peyton, baby.” Scarlett jumped up and made short work of the distance between us. She wrapped me in her arms, squeezing me. “It's been too long,” she said into my ear.

It wasn't that I didn't want to be around Scarlett. I loved her as much as I loved my aunt, and we grabbed lunch together on the rare occasion we both had time.

But for the past six months, it had seemed like Reaper was everywhere I went, and here was his mother, a reminder of the man I spent far too much energy hating. I hugged her back just as fiercely and reminded myself that I was too obstinate to allow that asshole to chase me out of my childhood home. “I know. Sorry, I've been busy.”

She let go and leaned back, staring down at me with a bright smile. “Come on.” She grabbed my hand and pulled me

to the couch.

They had the good manners to wait until I was comfortable before they pounced, both of them speaking at once.

“What have you been up to?” Aunt Jeannie always started the interrogation with an easy question.

Scarlette on the other hand ... “Have you had to shoot any kneecaps this week?”

My aunt gave me an apologetic look and answered for me. “You know better than to ask her about details. She can’t answer you.” Jeannie wasn’t wrong, but Scarlette asked different variations of that question every time she saw me.

“I know, I know. Doesn’t mean I can’t try to get her to slip. Anyway.” Scarlette waved her hand. “We have more pressing matters.”

“We do?” Aunt Jeannie’s eyes flicked to me, telling me she had no idea where this was going.

“Yes. We need to talk to Peyton about dating.” I looked at my aunt, but she didn’t seem inclined to come to my rescue this time, so I opened my mouth to shut this conversation down, then closed it again at the pleading look in Scarlette’s eyes and let her speak her piece. “I don’t know the details, but since you snarled at me like an agitated she-wolf the last time I suggested going on a date with Reaper, I’m assuming he’s off the table. I like him best for you, but I’ll compromise.” Scarlette pointed at me. “I have three *other* sons that I think you should consider.”

“What’re you planning on doing? Having them come in one at a time like some dating show?” Aunt Jeannie deepened her voice. “And here comes Nash. He’s housebroken and good with his hands. If you choose him, you’ll never have to worry

about that leaky faucet in the kitchen again.” She scoffed, and I bit my lip to contain my laugh.

Scarlette tapped her chin with her index finger. “I hadn’t put that much thought into it, but that’s not a bad idea.” Holy shit, she was actually considering it. Would either of them noticed if I got up and left? This was not what I had in mind when I came over for a visit.

“Why are you so hung up on her love life? Peyton’s happy. She doesn’t need a man to look after while she’s busy saving the world,” Aunt Jeannie said, taking the words right out of my mouth.

Scarlette’s lips pursed, and the telltale line appeared on her forehead, a sign she was ready to go to battle, and I decided to cut in before the claws came out. They were passionate women, so while they might not fight often, it could get ugly when they did. And I knew better than anyone how much deeper words could cut than any blade.

“Hate to break your heart, Scarlette, but dating is off the table. And it will be for the foreseeable future. When I do decide it’s the right time, it won’t be with a brother.” A McMillan brother or a Redemption brother.

Scarlette deflated, and I wanted to apologize for maybe hurting her feelings, but that would only encourage her to keep up this crusade. Neither of them knew what had happened between Redemption and me, and I decided years ago that it wasn’t their business.

No one needed to know about how I’d thrown myself at the guy I’d crushed on since I understood what it meant to have a crush. About how he’d kissed me back for a few perfect seconds. Then stomped on my heart and proceeded to make me second-guess every interaction I had with the brothers.

His hateful speech was confirmed when I came home from DC for the first time and not a single brother deigned to speak to me. And those words had stuck with me for a long time, far longer than I cared to admit.

The other brothers might be willing to tiptoe around your precious little feelings because they're scared Prez will rip off their balls, but I'm not gonna do it. Sooner or later you'll realize that we only put up with you because we don't have a choice.

Fuck Colt "Reaper" McMillan and the motorcycle he rode in on. The Redemption brotherhood could go to hell for all I cared. I'd made my peace with the past, and I refused to go back there. Not even for Scarlette.

A chorus of laughs, deep and familiar, filtered into the house from the backyard and drew my attention to the french doors. Through the glass, I could see Uncle Wolf and High, and I could just make out Reaper's dark brown messy bun in the chair across from them.

The last thing I wanted to deal with after a long day at the office was an altercation with Reaper. He'd made multiple attempts to corner me since I got back to Portland, and I'd managed to expertly evade whatever bullshit he wanted to spew. While I'd gotten past my fantasies of inflicting the kind of punishment only seen in the darkest recesses of Guantanamo Bay, that didn't mean I wanted anything to do with him. Making my excuses to my aunt and Scarlette, I got up to leave.

Chapter Seven

REAPER

MOM'S excessively loud squeal had everyone in the backyard peering into the living room to see what all the fuss was about.

Wolf got a soft half smile on his face, and that was all I needed to know who'd walked in. There was only one person who made him look like a leather-clad teddy bear.

When Peyton had first moved back, I'd thought it best to give her some space and let her settle while I waited for my opportunity. My hope was that she'd let bygones be bygones. Wishful thinking.

Two years went by, and it had become clear I would need a solid plan if I wanted to see progress. So I'd changed tactics and tried to get her alone, but it was like she had a homing beacon on me. She always managed to slip away any time I thought I was getting close.

Now I was on plan C—observe and gather intel. Learn everything there was to know about Peyton Linwood. Her coffee order, favorite food carts and pods, the days she went into work late, how often she went into Stumptown for coffee, her favorite ways to relax. And I hoarded every morsel of information like a dragon hoarding his treasure.

Then I'd sit at home and think about each thing. Memorize every morsel and puzzle out the girl I'd known and the woman I didn't.

One thing was for sure, Peyton was dangerous. She and her group of friends had all appeared out of nowhere, but they brought with them skills I thought were only found in movies. And now they worked for Betty Lake, a woman known throughout the Pacific Northwest for making the impossible possible. I recognized the bond they all shared because it was what I had with my Redemption brothers.

I liked that for her. Everyone deserved that kind of bond in their lives.

“Yo, you paying attention?” Midas snapped his fingers in my face.

I sneered at him. “Get your fucking hands out of my face before I break them.”

Boomerang stared at his sister the way he always did when he thought no one was paying attention, with a look of pride mingled with pain. I couldn't understand what went on in his head because he was always such a dick, acting like he couldn't stand to be in the same room with her. The only time he'd shown that he gave a shit about her was when he found out I had a thing for her.

Reminded of that night ten years ago, I clenched my hands into fists. If Boomerang and Midas had minded their own fucking business, maybe there wouldn't have been this distance between Peyton and me.

And maybe someday I'd stop blaming them and accept that the circumstances had been all wrong. She was too young, only a few days shy of eighteen. She'd needed time to find

herself. And the man I was then—the asshole I was then—he wasn't ready to be the man she needed. But I sure as fuck wasn't going to thank them for being the reason I drove her away all those years ago, even if I would have screwed things up with her anyway.

“Fucking pay attention, Reaper,” Midas repeated. “We were talking about the revenue from the dispensary. It's doubled over the last four months. And we got a license to start selling our strains out to dispensaries in other states.” He leaned back in his chair, smug as ever. Was the dispensary good for the club? Yeah, mostly because we made a ton of money from it. But I didn't care about the behind-the-scenes stuff. Wasn't my thing to wheel and deal like Midas and Boomerang. As head enforcer, I managed the safety of the transport and my brothers and let everyone else handle operations.

As subtly as I could, I angled my chair to give me a better view inside. It wasn't much, but I could just make out the flash of dark reddish-brown hair beyond my dad's head. I had to check myself, though. Nothing good would come of me throwing Peyton over my shoulder and demanding she listen to me. Or would it?

Dad was right. When a McMillan man met his match, there was no going back for them. I'd been the first of my blood brothers to fall.

I moved without thinking when she disappeared. Keeping my eyes and ears peeled for any sign of her, I hit the kitchen, throwing out the bottle of beer that had gone warm. The toilet flushed, and I knew exactly where Peyton had gone off to.

Lucky for me, the bathroom was off the kitchen. In a few steps, I was in front of the door, and when she opened it, I

pushed my way in and closed the door behind us.

After ten years, two months, and a handful of days, Peyton was finally standing in front of me. I might have jumped the gun, locking her in the bathroom with me, but desperate times and all that.

“Hey.” I stared down at her. Peyton was small physically, but she seemed to take up every inch of available space with her presence.

I waited for her to respond, to greet me in any way, but the fury etched on her face told me that wasn’t going to happen. I trailed my eyes down her body, taking her in.

Her hair was up, curls falling out of a bun held together by what looked like a ball-point pen. Not a stitch of makeup covered her flawless face, and I got sucked into her angry dark brown eyes for a moment before I continued my appraisal. Her skin was tan, and unlike most redheads, she didn’t have a freckle in sight. Her tight T-shirt and black jeans molded perfectly to her curves, and the black biker boots on her feet made me picture her on the back of my bike, those round breasts pressed tightly to my back. Forcing myself to focus, I grinned at her. “How’s your day been?” My second effort resulted the same way as the first, with a silent glare.

“The proper response is to say hello back, Peyton,” I said, trying to maintain what small bit of composure I had left before I walked out of this house with her over my shoulder.

“The proper thing to do is not lock yourself in the bathroom with me. What do you want?” she asked, her mouth tight.

Blowing out a breath, I scratched my jaw. “You’re a hard woman to pin down.” Wrong choice of words. For a second,

all available brain cells went to Peyton being pinned down by me, her face flushed, begging me to let her come. *Mind outta the gutter. Focus or you'll lose your chance.* “But since we’re both in the same place and you’re not running from me, I wanted to talk to you.”

“I don’t run. Not from anyone, especially not you. I’d have to care in the first place. And I don’t.” She crossed her arms, and the sight of her boobs pushed up over the neckline of her shirt stole my breath.

This woman was made to distract me.

“Oh, you definitely run,” I countered, ignoring the latter half of what she’d said. I refused to consider that she didn’t care about me. Not now, not ever.

“We were both at the same bar the other night and I stayed.” She shrugged and looked away.

“So you did see me.” I couldn’t control the smile that formed, then she made a noise that might have been a growl and made my smile grow tenfold. Fire lit behind her eyes, and I knew I was running out of time.

“Don’t deny it. You noticed me. But moving on. I wanted to talk to you about something. A long time ago, I said some really shitty things to you. I wasn’t in a good place, and I took it out on you. I’m sorry.” I rushed to get the words out before she could tune me out, and some of the heavy guilt that I’d grown used to carrying around fell away.

Step one, done.

Peyton looked at me like I’d grown a second head. “You cornered me in the bathroom to say you were sorry about something I stopped thinking about years ago?” She laughed. “Man, how entitled and self-centered can you be? Did you

think I've spent the ... how long has it been?" She crossed her arms over her chest and leaned back against the wall. "Did you think I dwelled on what happened?"

Maybe not dwelled. But yeah, I thought she thought about it.

"Get a clue. I let it go a long time ago. And I've barely thought about you since."

The words stung, but they weren't exactly unexpected. I'd agonized over what I said to her for years, and I knew it hurt her, no matter how she tried to play it off.

We were a couple of feet apart, but it felt like an ocean separated us. I couldn't take the distance. I needed to get to the second part, one that was almost as important as the apology. In two steps, I was back in her space, putting a hand on the wall on either side of her and caging her in. "Either way, you deserved an apology." I bent closer, and her fruity scent filled my nose. "Since you're over it, what're you doing—"

White hot pain dropped me to my knees. Gasping for air and cupping my balls, I glared at Peyton through the spots dotting my vision and found her smiling serenely down at me.

"I might be over what happened, but you don't get to corner me. The next time you think about trapping me in some room and turning those smoldering eyes on me, remember this moment. Leave me alone." Using the toe of her boot, she nudged my leg out of the way and opened the door.

"This isn't over," I wheezed.

Without looking back, she left me there on the bathroom floor. If I were a smarter man, I might have been deterred, but maybe I'm an idiot because her actions only fed my fire for her. I refused to consider that she wouldn't come around and

see how much I'd changed. Peyton Linwood was mine, and I would do whatever I needed to do to get her to see that.

The house was dark as I moved through it. Dark and silent, as it should be. Curiosity had me in its grip, tightening until I couldn't handle it and had to come in. I helped build the house; I should see the finished product.

Again.

At least that's what I told myself. I didn't make a habit of breaking into houses. Peyton's was the exception.

I glanced at the clock on the stove. 11:32 p.m. Where the hell was she, and why wasn't she home yet? Where'd she go after she kneed me in the balls?

I sank into the plush cushions of the massive couch and looked out the floor-to-ceiling windows. This was where I would soon sit with Peyton in my arms, staring out into the darkness and planning our future together.

The renovations had come out perfectly. I'd gotten my hands on the blueprints before we got started and made a few tweaks—an extra bedroom, bigger bathrooms, that kind of thing.

I'd covered the cost. Had to make sure the house Peyton and I'd be raising our family in, was what we needed. Wolf had my back and just waved her off when she asked about it.

Getting up and going into her bedroom, I inhaled the heady scent of black cherry, jasmine, and violet. At least that was the description I found online when I googled her perfume after the last time I was here.

Being in her room eased the impatient beast that had come to the surface at her absence from the house, but a quick peek into the bathroom had me pulling up short.

Bras. All different color bras draped around the room. The lace and frills and polka dots and bows filled my imagination with visions of her wearing them. I cursed when the question of who might have seen her in them popped into my mind.

Dammit. That suffocating possessiveness only ever came around with Peyton. I brought this shit onto myself, and I had to deal with the consequences, like the fact that she had been with other men. Like that dickwad Detective Griffin.

Lights flashed through the window.

Fuck. Peyton was home.

I jogged out of the bedroom and punched in the code on the security system my guys had installed, rearming the system before I slipped out the side door.

Far in the trees, flashlight on and pointed to the ground, I found the path that I'd worn into the ground over the past two years. It was the closest I could get to Peyton so I could learn more about her for when the time came.

Reaching my stump in the woods, I slowly sat down, trying not to agitate my balls.

They still twinged with pain hours after Peyton had taken me down. It shouldn't have been hot, and from anyone else, it would have pissed me off. With Peyton, it sent fire through my veins.

And now in the woods, on my favorite stump, the one that gave me the best view of her cabin, I took in everything I knew about Peyton.

It wasn't much. I had done a good job of staying in the background. I knew the big picture items. She liked to read and cook, and she'd majored in computers. I needed more. I needed to corner her, protect my balls, and get her talking.

A reaction is a reaction, whether it was good or bad.

Lighting up a blunt, I smiled at the house I had found the listing for and sent to Jeannie, knowing she'd forward it to Peyton. Even though it was falling apart at the time, I knew it was perfect for her.

A place for us to be together, once and for all.

Chapter Eight

PEYTON

I SQUEEZED MY EYES SHUT, and when I reopened them, stars danced in my vision.

Two hours straight of staring at my monitors had completely dried out my eyes. Normally that would be my only problem, one I could fix with some eye drops, a cold eye mask, and a twenty-minute break in my bedroom at HQ. Except whenever I closed my eyes for any longer than a blink, Reaper was there. Smiling, getting too close, smelling too good.

If I could, I'd knee him in the balls again for having the audacity to live rent-free in my head. Ten years. It took a *decade* for him to apologize. It shouldn't have bothered me so much though. I'd moved on from his rejection a long time ago. Barely thought about him while I was in the Ghost Unit or since I'd gotten back.

Lie.

Okay, so maybe I'd thought about him during my weak moments. It was a great first kiss before he went and shoved his head all the way up his ass. Whatever. I was over him. Despite how I was acutely aware of his proximity at all times or how his body eclipsed mine in the best kind of way.

Forcing myself to stop thinking about him and go take a break, I locked my screens, but my phone went off just as I stood up.

As did my computer. Alert after alert popped up on both monitors.

I slid back into my chair and pulled up the alert from the system I'd set up to notify me if anything popped up for any of the women we'd rescued.

The alert was from a news conference. I clicked the link and leaned back in my chair as a familiar smug face filled my screen.

“My wife and son are missing. Two weeks ago, they disappeared. While I was away for business, someone snuck into our home and took them. The police have been hard at work but haven't found any leads. So here I am, begging the public for any information you may have regarding their disappearance.” Lyle Lowenstein stared into the camera, the perfect embodiment of a distraught husband and father holding up a picture of his smiling wife and child.

What a sack of shit.

“Please, they're my world.” A phone number appeared at the bottom of the screen. “I'm offering a twenty-million-dollar reward for any information that leads to the safe return of my family.

“I speak now to the people who have my wife and child. Please give them back. They are my whole world.”

I snorted. Lyle was really selling it. The camera zoomed out, showing the men in uniform behind him. One I recognized as an FBI negotiator.

The chief of police stepped up to the podium and gave an update on the search, and I closed the window. No point listening any longer. There wasn't a shred of evidence for them to find.

Twenty million dollars changed things, if only a little. But Lyle was filthy rich, and we'd known there was a major chance he'd offer a reward even before we decided to help Mrs. Lowenstein.

For the last two weeks, I'd been monitoring his every move, from his phone calls to his google searches. The first week, he'd thought it was a kidnap for ransom, and he waited by the phone for a call that never came before calling in a private firm for help. The only firm that would take him on had fired him as a client yesterday. I hadn't gotten a chance to check what he was up to this morning, but it looked like the FBI had moved quickly once he made the call.

I sat back down and typed in the codes that granted me unfettered access to Lyle's life.

The national attention on the Lowenstein case was unwelcome but didn't worry me. We'd expected it and had contingency plans in place for every possible outcome.

What did worry me were the texts Lyle had received a few hours after his press conference. Messages from other numbers on my watch list.

Steven Pullbar, a highly decorated detective from Texas, and Chad Pearson, a lawyer from Oklahoma, had set up a meeting with Lyle. Like Lyle, they were stains on humanity

who thought it was their God-given right to take their anger and frustrations out on the women in their lives.

I sent out a message to the team, calling for an emergency meeting, and we all gathered in the conference room.

“Are you going to tell us what the emergency is, or are you going to stare at us?” Tyler asked.

I rolled my eyes and dove right in. “Lyle Lowenstein had a nationwide press conference asking for information about his missing wife and kid.”

“When?” Betty asked, scowling.

“A few hours ago, but we expected this.” I took a deep breath. “What we didn’t anticipate was that Chad Pearson and Steven Pullbar would contact him and set up a meeting two days from now.”

“Dammit. I would’ve thought they’d moved on by now,” Izzy said.

Adrienne threw her hands up and cursed in Italian. Tyler got that pensive expression that I recognized as her thinking up the best ways to kill someone.

Chris was the only one who didn’t have a reaction.

After I filled them in on the reward money, I asked if they could provide me with a list of all the stops that were made during the transport for the three women.

Everyone in the room went so still that I wasn’t sure they were breathing.

Betty broke the silence. “You aren’t going to like this.” She paused, eyeing the others before coming back to me. “Redemption handled the transports, and the Lowensteins are

staying in their cabin until we secure their permanent placement.”

The anger was a slow build in my system. So many questions hit me at once, and it was impossible to decide which to ask first. “I think I’m going to need you to explain, *in detail*,” I said in a low tone as rage made its way into my bloodstream and started to boil, “how fucking Redemption,” I spat the name out like a curse, “is involved.”

Tyler, never one to back off from a fight, took a challenging step forward. “We decided to outsource. You had too much on your plate at the time, and it was impossible for all of us to do our jobs and guard the house. Betty made a call, and Redemption enthusiastically offered to help out with the transport and safe house situation.”

That was a simple enough explanation, but it didn’t explain why I was the last to know about it.

“I don’t care that you’re mad. We didn’t keep it from you, we just didn’t tell you. And for the record, you never fucking asked,” Tyler said through clenched teeth. “We went through their security and beefed it up where necessary. The compound is locked down when they have a guest. Only brothers in and out, save for the wives of officers.”

“Your aunt doesn’t know anything, in case you were wondering,” Betty said, like that made any of this any better.

“Peyton,” Jessen said, pulling my attention from Tyler and Betty. “We kept waiting for you to ask. When you never brought it up, we let it go.”

“I didn’t think to ask because I didn’t know I had to. How the hell was I supposed to know you’d pull Redemption into our business?”

“We needed a solution, and we were drowning. We have to check out their final locations, organize transport, set up their lives.” Tyler talked fast, fury laced in every word. “It’s more than just paperwork and creating a life that’s searchable online.”

I turned and stared at the white wall, giving my anger a few seconds to simmer down. Men went to Redemption seeking the second chance they couldn’t get from society. They came from all different backgrounds, most of them tragic. It made sense that they’d help those who needed it. They understood the importance of a second chance better than anyone.

I turned back and let out a breath. “You know you should have told me. And you know that I never asked because I was already so involved in their lives. I needed a healthy distance. But you still should have known better than to keep this a secret.” I let my hang head for a moment. “Guess I better let them know what’s going on and figure out the routes they took to get back.” I swallowed down the sourness that filled my mouth. It was only a call to Uncle Wolf.

“I’ll drive,” Betty said and strolled out the door.

So much for a phone call. On an exhale, I trudged outside. Time to face the bikers.

Chapter Nine

PEYTON

TEN YEARS, two months, and five days since I was at the clubhouse. Not that I was counting or anything. The clubhouse of my memories no longer existed. The last time I was here, it was one story, the outside dingy and in need of a paint job. It was simple, because the men who lived there only needed the basics. A place to sleep, hang out, and party when the mood struck.

What was once the clubhouse was now a compound. The building in front of me had grown to two stories and extended farther out on the bottom level on either side. One side had an open garage-style door, which housed a massive gym. The picnic tables in the front were the same, but newer, and the entire clubhouse had been repainted. The changes helped center me.

New clubhouse, new club. I didn't know this club, or its brothers, and that solidified my resolve to treat them like unknown but welcome partners.

I got out of the car and headed toward the front, except I barely made it two steps before my team converged in a line in front of me. I was so focused on myself that I hadn't clocked them following Betty and me.

“You guys didn’t need to come.” But I was grateful they were here.

Chris huffed out a sigh. “Yes, we did. And not just because we never got the chance to explain to you one thing. We will always side with you, Pey. Always. But working with Redemption was the right call, and you know it.” Chris opened her mouth again, probably to keep pleading with me to not be angry with them.

It was time to put them all out of their misery. “I get it. If it was the other way around with one of you, I would have done the same.” I took a step forward. “I’m only slightly mad that it took this long to come out, and that’s partly on me for not asking more questions. But you don’t need to worry about me. I won’t be combative, promise.”

Tyler and Izzy narrowed their eyes at me but let me pass.

When we hit the concrete walkway leading to the front, my uncle opened the door, a frown on his bearded face. I wanted to tell him not to worry, to reassure him that nothing horrible had happened, but I held my tongue. Some stuff was better spoken about behind closed doors.

I followed him into the house, my team right behind me. It was hard to look around without turning my head, but I noticed the differences. The whole place was a lot nicer than it had been, with plush furniture on one side of the space and pool tables on the other and the extended bar in the middle. I followed Uncle Wolf, and it didn’t hit me until we reached the hallway where he was taking us.

Chapel.

The only people who were allowed in Chapel were brothers and the invited few. I was officially one of them. I’d

been curious about it when I was younger, and my imagination had run wild. Younger me would have been disappointed. The room was big but fairly plain, with dark blue walls that ate up the light. At the center of the space was a massive wooden table with the club's emblem etched in the center.

Uncle Wolf crossed his arms and tried to glare at me, but his gaze softened and he swiped a hand over his face.

“Hey Uncle Wolf.” I gave him a tentative smile, and with a sigh, he pulled me into his arms. The riot of emotions that had bombarded me for the past hour finally calmed. His hugs had been my greatest source of comfort my whole life. I wrapped my arms around him and squeezed.

He pulled away but stayed close. “Betty sent a text. What’s so urgent?” He jerked his chin at the girls. “And why’d you bring the cavalry?”

Because they knew coming back might be hard for me. Because they’re my emotional support people.

Thankful that he was letting me get right to it, I did. “Short story shorter. The woman hiding in your cabin is married to a rich guy. Rich guy went on television and did a PSA, offering twenty million dollars for anyone who finds them. It’s made national headlines.” I took a breath, then added, “Two other men, both connected to other women we helped rescue, reached out to him.”

“You’re fucking kidding me,” Uncle Wolf said, uncrossing his arms and putting them on his hips. “So what does that mean for us? Why’d you come all the way over here instead of calling?”

I elbowed Betty, annoyed because I’d wondered the same thing. “I need to talk to the guys who handled the transport.

And I need the phones they traveled with,” I said, listing my two areas of focus.

He gave me an apologetic shrug. “Peyton, sweetheart, I don’t deal with that stuff. When Betty came to me, I put it to a vote, but once it was approved, I put someone else in charge of the whole thing.”

“Reasonable. Who?” I wasn’t averse to working with another brother.

He grimaced. “Reaper.”

I was averse to working with *that* brother. “Is there a reason I can’t deal with you? You’re the president.”

Uncle Wolf sighed. “He wanted to be completely in charge of this. He knows more than anyone else. He’s the one responsible for planning the routes and everything. But if you need me, sweetheart, I’ll be around.” He lowers his voice so only I could hear him. “If you really don’t want to work with him, I can relay your questions and get back to you with his answers, but it will slow you down.”

So this was what it felt like when fate laughed in your face. *All right, Peyton, time to pull on your big girl pants.*

I scrubbed my hand over my face and let out a resigned sigh. “Go get him.” What else was there to say?

My friends quietly bickered while I fought off the memories bombarding me. I’d never been in this room, but I’d spent countless hours in this building, and the walls held dear so many moments from my childhood.

Playing hide and seek with kids my age. Holding a baby for the first time. Birthday parties. The tree outside where I used to do my homework.

In addition to the home I'd grown up in, this clubhouse was the epicenter of my childhood. And I couldn't stand to be here for more than a few minutes. When it got to the point where I swore the walls inched closer, the door finally opened, and Reaper's hulking form filled the doorway.

"Peyton." I ignored the way his deep voice washed over me and how his gorgeous shoulder-length hair shone even in the dim light. It wasn't fair for a man to have such glossy golden-brown locks. Asshole.

He didn't even glance at my team; he only had eyes for me. I slipped a blank mask over my face, refusing to give him anything. The other night in the bathroom had given him enough already. I shouldn't have reacted. Shouldn't have let him get to me.

I wouldn't make that mistake again. From now on, he would see only what I let him see—that I didn't care about him or Redemption.

"We'll just, um ..." Jessen clicked her tongue and gestured over her shoulder. My team filed out without meeting the glare I shot their way, leaving me alone with the one person I didn't want to be around.

I took a deep breath and slowly let it out, trying to find my center. To relax the muscles strung tighter than a bow string.

"Prez said you needed me," he drawled, crossing his arms over his chest and stretching his faded navy shirt to its limits.

I blinked. *Focus*. "Yeah. We have a situation with some of the women we've rescued. I need to connect with the brothers

who traveled with them and get a list of every stop they made.”

“What’s going on?” he asked, taking a step closer.

I forced myself to remain still and explain the situation in as few words as possible. When I finished, the pulse behind my eyes reminded me I’d forgotten to eat again, and I rubbed my forehead.

“You have a headache,” Reaper said, eyes narrowing.

“Focus,” I snapped. “I need all the guys who traveled with the women to come by the office sometime in the next two days with the phones they had on them during the transport.”

I needed to get out of this place, get some food, and put a cold compress on my eyes in a dark room.

“Stop by tomorrow morning,” he said, his eyes dragging down my body. His appraisal was slow and assessing, like he was trying to pinpoint other areas that were bothering me.

My neck, shoulders, lower back, and hips, thanks for asking.

“It’s easier if they come to me,” I countered.

“If you want to talk to them, you come here. It’s the only way I can guarantee you’ll get everything you need. You know they’ll never come to your office. Even if Prez demands it, they’ll drag their feet, which will only slow you down.”

I hated that he was right. The brothers would eventually do what my uncle demanded of them, but they’d make their displeasure known in the form of making me wait. These guys ultimately did what they wanted when they wanted.

Like stalking the woman they’d cut out of their lives with surgical precision ten years before.

“Tomorrow morning,” I said, giving in. “They better all be here or I’ll make you regret it.”

The pain was getting worse, blurring my vision. I needed to get out of here. I moved toward the door, giving him a wide berth.

Reaper’s smile reached ear to ear. “Looking forward to a wonderful partnership, Einstein.”

My snarl had him lifting his hands and taking a step back. “My name is Peyton. You don’t get to use a nickname with me. The only reason I’m working with you is to get what I need from your guys. We aren’t friends. The faster you realize that, the better it will be for both of us.” With that, I stormed out, barely resisting the urge to take another shot at his balls.

Chapter Ten

PEYTON

REAPER REACHED OUT, snagged the duffle bag from my hand, and led me into the clubhouse. I walked behind him, trying to not admire the way his bare back rippled, but I noted a few scars and the Redemption logo taking up most of the real estate.

That was new. Not that I cared. Or imagined where else he had ink.

He led me to the bar and turned to face me. The aroma of coffee filled the air, along with the scent of something delicious and savory that reminded me of my favorite breakfast cart, Fried Egg I'm in Love.

“Iced rose vanilla latte and a Smells like Protein Spirit, just the way you like it. Bacon, avocado, and holy aioli.” Reaper’s voice was rough, like he’d just woken up, and it sent a shiver down my spine.

“Yeah. Uh.” How the hell did he know my breakfast order on the rare days I got up early enough to beat the crowds at Pioneer Courthouse Square? It seemed like he was trying really hard to make me comfortable, but I didn’t know how to reconcile this Reaper with the man I once knew. I guessed assholes could grow up.

My stomach made an embarrassing groan, and his lips twitched. “Eat. Brothers won’t be awake for another hour or so. I’d wake them now, but you need food. Plus, they don’t need any extra reasons to be dicks when they wake up.” I wanted to demand that he wake them up because they’d be dicks no matter what. But I was too damn hungry to argue.

After I’d finished eating, Reaper escorted me to the Chapel and told me to let him know if I needed anything. After the glare I sent his way when he offered to help me set up, he hadn’t left his spot against the while. His eyes stayed on my back, making me hyperaware of everything I did. It made me move slower, afraid that I’d make a mistake, even though I knew how to do this set up in my sleep.

“We haven’t talked about how the runs are set up.” He came over and sat down next to me. I nodded for him to continue. “We get a call about the destination point, which is where we meet your team to complete the transfer. From there, we drive straight here, only making stops when absolutely necessary. It’s set up for two guys per run, with three groups in rotation.

“The men were picked for a few different reasons, mostly background and willingness to help. I don’t have to tell you that many of my men are honored to help these women get a second lease on life. Only two of the three teams handled the runs you asked about, and I talked to all of them last night, let them know what you wanted from them. I told them I didn’t care if they had to go off route, but that you needed to know everything.”

“Thank you for briefing them.” The fact the Reaper went out of his way to talk to them boded well. I just had to hope the brothers had woken up in a good mood.

Reaper had the same tells he’d had when I was sixteen and tried to follow him around without getting caught, and I could see that he had more to say. But whatever was on his mind, he didn’t have a chance to voice it before the door opened.

Four men filed into the room, all of them scowling. I only recognized two of them—Abraham, a legacy I’d grown up with, and Paul Bunyan, who was Reaper’s age and had prospected with my brother. The other two guys must have been new.

Reaper jerked his chin toward the guys. “Give her whatever she asks for. You’re not allowed to leave until she has everything she needs.” He looked down at his phone, then back up at me. “I was gonna stay but I have to handle something. If you need the bathroom, walk down the hall, hook a right, last door on the left.”

The instant the door closed behind him, the room went frigid. I took a deep breath. “You guys can have a seat. I’ll do my best to make this as fast as possible.” Adjusting the extra monitor hooked up to my laptop, I nodded at Abraham, who’d taken the seat across from me. “Let’s start with you. I need your phone, please.” *Calm, cool, collected. Nice.* “Which runs did you do?”

Without answering, Abraham shoved his phone across the table, and it slipped off the edge. My hope that this would be a quick, painless process crashed to the ground along with it.

I had the dates we'd grabbed the women. If Abraham wouldn't answer the few questions I had, he was only making it harder on both of us. I plugged his phone in and searched for each date, finding a hit with two of the three.

I doused the disappointment that was brewing in me. I couldn't let them get to me. Just like I couldn't force Abraham to remember that I'd spent three years tutoring him in math so he could graduate from high school.

Clearing my throat, I sat up straighter in my chair and looked at all four of the men. "Please don't make this more difficult than it needs to be. Where did you stop? Can you recall who you talked to? Every piece of information matters, no matter how trivial it may seem."

They stayed silent, the looks on their faces ranging from disinterest to outright disgust.

Well, I'd tried nice. Time to switch gears. "One of those women you helped save might be safe on your compound, but two of them are out in the world. They're rebuilding their lives, trying to heal from the trauma of what the men in their lives put them through. If someone remembers them, if the women were caught on tape and those men are able to find the footage, everything we worked so hard for could be at stake. I don't give the first fuck if you like me. But if you refuse to help me, you're not screwing me over. You're screwing the women you cared enough to help."

They stayed silent, but three more phones slid across the table. With a sigh, I accepted that this was the best I was going to get. Digging through their logs would take me three times longer, so I couldn't afford to waste any more time trying to appeal to their better nature. They didn't have one. But they

weren't allowed to leave until I had every last piece of data I could get from their phones.

After thirty minutes, I slid Abraham's phone back to him and moved on to the next one. They stayed, but never once opened their mouths. Not to talk to me or each other.

"Whose phone is this?" I asked as I plugged it in. A few seconds after the program started, a dialog box popped up telling me it was finished. Confused, I unplugged the device, reconnected it, and restarted the scan. The same box popped up.

Impossible. I navigated to the phone settings and immediately wanted to smash it against the table. It was a brand-new phone. The data showed it was activated last night.

"Where's the old one?" I asked.

Silence.

Unable to look at them a second longer, I stood up and walked out of Chapel, following the directions Reaper had given me to find the bathroom. Impotent rage blasted through my veins. Taking several deep breaths, I washed my hands and tried to calm down. I felt no better when I stepped out of the bathroom, but the sight of the leather cut hanging on the back of the chair in the bedroom stopped me in my tracks.

Reaper's room looked nothing like the one I remembered from the last time I was here. Long gone were the posters pulled from *Playboy* and *Maxim*, the messy unmade bed, and the discarded food wrappers littering the desk. The space was tidy, save for a small pile of clothes on the floor in the corner. Not ready to go back to Chapel and deal with the merry band of mute motorcycle men, I sat down at the desk and stared

blankly at the cup full of hair ties sitting on the otherwise empty surface.

As I stood up to leave, I paused, then looked at the cup and grabbed a red hair tie that was identical to the one I'd lost a few weeks ago. I didn't have time for a time-warping Target trip, and the asshole owed me for failing to get his men to understand the importance of helping me. Least he could do was replace my favorite ponytail holder.

All the effort I'd put into quelling my anger went out the window when I saw my duffle on the floor outside the closed door of the Chapel. I didn't need to unzip it to know that the guys had shoved all my stuff inside without caring what might break if the equipment wasn't shut down and disconnected properly.

Fuck this. Dealing with them wasn't worth the headache or frustration. Me coming to them was supposed to be the easier, more respectful option so I didn't have to hack into their phones and invade their privacy.

I grabbed my bag and marched through the clubhouse, ignoring the brothers hanging out in the common room as I passed them on my way out the door.

These assholes had to be kidding me.

Bikes surrounded my car, completely blocking me in on all sides. Why the hell would they trap me here if they so clearly wanted me gone?

I put my stuff on the ground and circled my car, noting the bikes I recognized, which were few, and the majority I didn't.

There was only one bike parked behind me, and I knew it was my brother's because *Boomerang* was painted along the side. He'd done away with his name, Ethan, when he came to

Redemption, too. But he left me behind a long time ago. Without bothering to look around, I grabbed the switchblade from inside my boot and yanked the wires out. After a few cuts and twists of the wire, the bike roared to life. I swung my leg up and over and straddled the massive seat. The bike was too big for me to handle, but I only needed to move it out of my way.

Boomerang ran out of the building and waved his hands at me, screaming words I couldn't hear over the noise of the engine. I jumped off the bike, and it kept going until it toppled over, engine still revving, a few feet from Boomerang. Continuing to ignore whatever he was shouting, I headed back to my car, ready to do the same to the bike that blocked my driver's side door.

I was reaching to pull the wires on the second bike when a large hand gripped my upper arm and jerked me backward. Bikes roared in the distance, but I was too focused on my asshole brother to pay attention to who was coming down the drive.

“Are you outta your fucking mind?” he screamed.

Bringing up both arms, I shoved him and broke his hold. He started to step back to catch his balance, but I snapped my leg out and kicked his foot, causing him to crash down to the ground.

“Screw you, Ethan,” I said, using his real name to really piss him off. “I'm fucking done with all you Redemption assholes. Stay the fuck out of my way, all of you.” I started to turn around but froze at his words.

“Look at you, walking away. Again.”

“Walking away again? What the hell do you mean by that? It was all of you”—I pointed at the clubhouse—“who decided to pretend like you didn’t know me when you passed me on the streets.”

“You left. *You* walked away, and we didn’t see you again. Didn’t hear from you. Not for fucking years. You moved back two fucking years ago, Peyton. Two years, and this is the first time you’ve been back.” I’d never wanted to punch him more than I did right then. And he was my brother, so that was saying a lot.

I might not have been able to call while I was in Ghost Unit, but I was allowed to receive messages. Not one of them reached out to me in eight years. And they’d ignored me for the past two. “I must have imagined being ignored then. Must’ve lost the messages the brothers sent asking me what happened or where I was. It must’ve been guys wearing fake Redemption cuts who walked past me on the street without so much as a nod.” All the hurt I’d fostered, not just from this morning or the last ten years, but from a lifetime of having my only sibling treat me like gum he had to scrape off his shoe, all that pain coalesced into one fiery ball of rage, and I had no hopes of reining it back in.

“It was me who was delusional, thinking you all liked me. Well, not you. You never even bothered to pretend, so I don’t know why you’re acting like I stole your favorite toy. But all the rest of your *brothers*, what the fuck is their deal, huh? It was on me to come back, and what? What did they want from me?”

I turned to our audience. Looked like most of the club had come out to watch the Linwood family drama taking place in the driveway. “What the fuck did you want from me, huh?”

Yeah, I left. But not a single fucking one of you thought to check on me. And when I came back, I tried to say hi, tried to take that first step, but you all chose to ignore me. I don't owe anyone here a goddamn thing. Not an apology, and not an explanation. If you wanted something from me, maybe you should have tried asking where I went. Or what I had to do." I hated the way my voice cracked on the last word, but I wasn't used to yelling.

I lowered my voice so only my brother could hear me. "I left for eight years, and I came back with a gun that I knew how to use on my hip and five of the scariest women I've ever met in tow. I started working for the most dangerous woman in the city. But you didn't think to ask where I went or if I was okay." Shaking my head, I blinked back tears. No way I was going to let them see me cry. "Some fucking brother you are. But then, you were never really my brother, were you, *Boomerang*? You've made it clear to me my whole life that you'd rather be their brother than mine."

Out of words, out of energy, and out of fucks to give, I spun around and snarled at the sight of Reaper holding the handlebars of the bike that had blocked my driver's side door. Dickface probably thinks he deserves my gratitude for giving me space to get in my car, but he was lucky I wasn't taking his balls with me in a jar after leaving me to the wolves this morning.

I climbed into my car and hoped the gravel spray from my tires took out an eyeball—any eyeball, I wasn't picky—as I hauled ass out of their driveway.

Chapter Eleven

REAPER

A TOOTH glistened in the pool of bloody saliva that landed next to my boot. Pure satisfaction swelled through me at the sight.

Boomerang's right eye was swollen shut, and his body swayed as he tried to bring his arms back up to block my hits. He was still on his feet, and I couldn't decide whether I was impressed or pissed about that.

"You touched her. Sorry isn't gonna fucking cut it." I snarled, thankful I had something, or someone, to focus my rage on. The scene I'd witnessed when I drove up earlier kept playing on a loop in my mind. Boomerang grabbing Peyton hard enough to bruise and screaming in her face. Who the fuck did he think he was?

After Peyton had burned rubber out of here, I went inside and started asking questions, giving myself time to get answers before I challenged Boomerang to an honor fight, as was my right as enforcer. But those answers had only led to a whole mess of other problems. Problems I'd deal with when I got done with this motherfucker here.

Boomerang wasn't the only one I had beef with, he was just the one I'd had beef with the longest. He'd gotten away

with treating Peyton like shit for too long, and he went way over the line today. I needed to send the message that I would kill anyone who hurt her, even if it was her brother.

I wasn't an idiot—I knew that Peyton could and would take care of herself. But that didn't mean I was going to let anything slide. Every member of Redemption needed to know that this shit wouldn't fly. They never would have pulled that stunt shit if I'd been here. And I should have fucking been here, but I was called away to deal with a situation that couldn't wait.

I'd taken note of all the bikes surrounding her car when I got back, and I had a list of the brothers I'd be dealing with before the night was over. They needed to prove themselves worthy of the cuts they wore.

What they'd done today was unacceptable. It wasn't only that they screwed with her, they also made it that much harder for her to cover our tracks. They went against the club by refusing to help her, and that couldn't be tolerated.

A punch glanced off my jaw, and I realized I'd stopped throwing punches and blocking. I shook my head and refocused.

Two swift hits to the body had Boomerang dancing back out of reach. Each breath came heavier than the last, a sign that he didn't have much fight left in him. But he was too stubborn to tap out, and I was too mad to let him.

He shifted his feet and came at me, fists swinging wildly. One fist connected with my arm, but it was nothing more than a sting. Another got me square in the face, jerking my head back. He grabbed my shirt at the collar, ripping it, but I twisted his wrist and elbowed him in the face, then stepped back.

Blood poured from his nose and the cut on his eyebrow, feeding the feral animal inside of me. If only Peyton were around to witness this. Would she cheer me on or be upset that her brother was bleeding because of me?

With that thought in mind, I decided to stop playing around and move on.

A jab and a cross had Boomerang falling to his hands and knees. Leaning down, I grabbed him by the hair and yanked his head back. "I don't give a fuck if she's your sister. Don't ever touch her again."

Boomerang snarled at me, but he was done.

I didn't need to permanently injure Peyton's brother, even if they didn't seem to like each other. They were still family, and giving her brother a concussion might not make for good pillow talk.

As soon as I was done doling out discipline, I was going to start asking some hard questions about my girl. All I knew was what Wolf had let slip a few years ago, that she'd worked for the government. I hadn't been able to get him to say more, and all my contacts would have gotten his okay before digging into his niece, so my hands had been tied. But I was breaking the binds. If I had to go to Betty to get answers, so be it. I knew what buttons to push to get what I needed.

The one thing that kept any hope alive was that Peyton wasn't indifferent to me. She might have gotten better at masking her feelings, but she still clocked my every movement.

I faced the men I considered family. They stood motionless, lined up shoulder to shoulder, shame radiating from them.

When Abraham caught my eye, it was the club enforcer who stared back at him, daring him to be next. I was aware of what he'd done, how he'd filled the newer brothers' heads with bullshit about Peyton and gotten them to disobey my orders.

“You all fucked up.” They stayed silent, knowing that speaking would only paint a bigger target on their backs.

I prowled the line, ready to pick my next victim. Abraham stepped forward and gave me a nod.

“You won't ever treat her that way again. She came to save your asses, and you threw it in her face.” I headed into the circle that had been painted earlier, in preparation for this. Wolf and Dad stood off to the side, presiding over the event and ensuring it was fair. I doubted they'd step in even if it wasn't. They'd completely missed the action earlier, but after I caught them up, I had to remind Wolf that handling this was my job. I'm pretty sure we would've been burying bodies if I'd let him handle it.

Abraham flew at me as soon as I entered the circle, and I dodged with ease. He managed to land one hit before he became my human punching bag. He fell too quickly and easily for my liking, but I had more brothers to deal with and a woman to get back to, so I'd take it and move on.

Abraham was slow to get up, but he nodded when I told him to fix it or turn in his cut. I nodded back and called for the next brother to step into the ring.

Chapter Twelve

PEYTON

I THOUGHT I was over it.

Convinced myself I was. That things might be weird, maybe awkward and hostile, but I could deal with it.

The clock mocked me when I tapped my phone. Twelve forty-seven, and no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't fall asleep.

My mind wouldn't stop going over every single shitty minute of my day. I'd known what I was walking into, but I still let them get under my skin. Maybe because it was the first time I'd faced them since I left ten years ago. I wasn't prepared to be flooded with positive memories of the men who'd been my family for so long. Wasn't prepared for so many positive emotions after locking down that side of me when I joined Ghost Unit.

Groaning, I got out of bed and shuffled to the living room. Maybe a change of scenery would help. Except when I curled up in a ball on the couch and stared out the windows, my anger only grew.

I'd never stopped being angry.

There. I admitted it. Thought it, anyway.

I was pissed at Reaper. Livid about how the brothers treated me. Hell, if I was being really honest, I was mad at myself for letting them ignore me this long. How I let them treat me like I meant nothing to them.

And I regretted leaving without saying goodbye. But until I'd walked into that room and saw the contract Agent Brooks handed me, I didn't know where I'd end up, what I'd be doing, or how long I'd be gone. There were so many unanswered questions that it didn't make sense for me to tell anyone what little I knew.

I thought there'd be time to apologize and let them know what happened. I never got the chance. And now ten years had passed, and every time I saw any of them, they literally turned around and walked away.

I may not have told them I was leaving, but they didn't give me the chance to explain either. It was one big screwed-up hamster wheel.

Then there was Reaper. Where did I even start with him? He said he was going to stay, but then he left me there with them, probably knowing what would happen. Why did he want to screw with me? I understood why the rest of them were mad, but he had no right.

My thoughts jumped to how he made me feel, even after everything. Whenever he was around, I still felt like that lovesick teenager, pining over a man who didn't want me. Even though he did seem to want me now. What the hell was that about?

For a moment I thought about calling Jessen, waking her up and unloading all this on her. It wouldn't be the first time I called her in the middle of the night when I had problems sleeping because something weighed on me. She was always

there, with her calm demeanor that could somehow stretch through the phone. She pressed for more information in a way that made me want to tell her everything. She was the team's emotional support human. I palmed my phone, thinking about where to even start.

It all went back to what Reaper had said all those years ago—I was a burden to Redemption. Just like I had been to my birth parents. Too much work. Too needy. Had to be careful not to upset the president's girl.

My leaving must have been a weight off their shoulders. No more pretending. That was what cut to the core. A wound that had scabbed over time but was still tender. Easy to tear back open if given the chance. After the day I had, that wound was oozing, reminding me what true rejection felt like.

When I found out I never had to go back to my parents, all I felt was relief. With Redemption there was only heartbreak.

The loud roar of an engine cut through the silence. To anyone else, it would have been indecipherable. But I knew that motorcycle. It had once driven up and down my block multiple times a day, and I'd heard every crank of the engine as it was being built.

What did he want? Couldn't he leave me to my spiraling thoughts? No, because he was a self-centered asshole. He didn't think about anyone but himself.

Jumping up, I untangled myself from the blanket and stomped to my front door. It crashed against the wall and bounced off after I yanked it open, and I crossed my arms over my chest, leaned my hip on the doorframe, and waited. Reaper climbed off his bike and stalked toward me, his steps eating up the ground between us.

The words to send him on his way sat on my tongue, ready to be unleashed, but they died when he came into the light and I saw the flakes of dried blood stuck on his beard. He had a cut on his lip and light bruising under his eye that would turn purple by morning.

With Reaper bloodied and bruised on my porch, a tenderness I thought long dead roared back to life. Called for me to take away his pain. To make his eyes twinkle with laughter. Something. Anything.

Stop. Who cares if he got into a fight? Figure out why he's here, and get rid of him.

Right. Focus. Get him talking, then get him gone. I had a first aid kit inside. He could talk while I cleaned him up.

No. No taking care of him. That wasn't my job. It never had been, no matter what teenage delusions I'd had. He no doubt had someone waiting at home to kiss away his boo-boos. The thought of Reaper leaving and sliding into bed with another woman snapped my mind back to focus.

Reaper was a large man, and he seemed to deflate in front of me the longer we stared at each other without speaking.

"Is he alive?"

"They," he corrected in a rough voice. "They are still alive."

"They?" I parroted back.

"Some lessons can only be beaten in. And sometimes a man has to hold people accountable and fix his mistakes by fighting for the only thing he has to his name." Reaper's words would be cryptic to anyone who hadn't grown up in the world we did.

“Like honor?” My heart raced as I waited for his answer.

“Exactly.” Reaper took one step closer to me, eyes never wavering from my face.

They. I focused on the word. He’d called out more than one brother tonight, brothers he thought had broken their code of honor. It was not only his right but part of his role as enforcer. Though enforcer challenges were rare, I knew how they worked, and they only happened when a brother leapfrogged so far over the line that the only other option was exile.

In all the time I’d lived with my aunt and uncle, it had only happened once.

Questions on top of questions filled my mind, each vying for the top spot. Finally, I just said, “Why?”

The unexpected devastation on his face twisted my stomach in knots. He took another step closer, putting us barely a foot apart, and pulled his hands out of his pockets, placing them on either side of the doorframe.

His heavy sigh ruffled the hairs at the top of my head. “How could you ask me that? Accepting my challenge was the least they could do to regain their standing in the club. You deserved better than that from us, Peyton.” Reaper’s eyes locked on my face like he was trying to see into my mind. “You were right earlier, what you said when you were screaming at us. We were dicks when you first came home, and we never got any better. The longer it went on, the harder it was to figure out how to bring you back. It was all true, and we should have realized how wrong we were. Instead, every single one of us, were complete fuckers.” He closed the last bit of distance between us. “I don’t have to ask if you’re okay,

because I know the answer. But I would do anything to make sure you never feel this way again.”

“Enforcer challenges seem a bit excessive if you ask me.” My mind couldn’t seem to comprehend the fact that he’d fought his brothers over *me*. But my traitorous heart leaped, completely ignoring the damage he had done to it and how long it had taken for me to stitch it back together.

Reaper let out a soft laugh. “That, Einstein, is why you’re mine. You don’t bat an eye at the violence inside of me. How I was born to solve problems with my fists. You don’t make me explain myself, or my choices, because you *understand* in a way no one else could.

“I know I said really stupid shit to you. I was pissed off and couldn’t figure out another way to tell you that it wasn’t our time yet.” He huffed a laugh. “I guess I could have just said it wasn’t our time yet. But I knew I wanted you then, even if I wasn’t ready for you. I wasn’t the man you deserved or needed back then, but I am now.” He licked the cut on his lip, and I balled my fist at the desire to trace it with my own tongue.

He cupped my face in his hand and pulled me closer, then brought his lips down, pressing them hard against my forehead.

“I’m sorry for all of it, Einstein. I promise I’ll fix it.” He angled my face up, and we stared into each other’s eyes.

Was he going to kiss me? Did I want him to? The answer was there, deep in my heart, hidden unless I searched for it.

His face descended slowly, and I clenched my fists so I didn’t reach out, needing to hold onto some semblance of

control. My eyes drifted closed, and his lips brushed mine—so lightly I was sure I imagined it.

“Get some sleep.” His lips brushed mine again when he spoke and sent a tingle through my body. I didn’t want him to go.

But I knew I needed him to leave. Reaper must have realized that too because he let go of my face and took a step back. His eyes locked on my face for several beats before he finally turned and went back to his bike.

Closing the door, I leaned against it and sank to the ground, not moving until the roar of his engine was long gone. And when I stood up, I shed the last fragment of anger I’d been carrying around.

After a long sleepless night, I needed coffee and peace. Peace that would only last until I went to the office, but a small amount of tranquility was better than nothing.

There was only one place to go: Stumptown Coffee in the Ace Hotel, with the soft music, plush couches, and a table at my elbow so I didn’t have to reach for my mug.

I shimmied as the burst of flavors gave my caffeine-deprived brain the boost it needed. The day before might have been shit, and what awaited me in the office made me want to pull my hair out, but at least I could start the day with a phenomenal cup of coffee.

I was halfway through my coffee when Abraham sat down across from me, along with two of the other guys from yesterday, whose names I still didn’t know.

So much for peace and relaxation.

The one who stood closest to me cleared his throat. “I’m Bob.”

I shifted in my seat and lifted one eyebrow. “Hey Bob.”

He shoved a chocolate chip cookie in my direction and shrugged. “Didn’t get a fancy road name.” He pointed to the name on his cut. “It makes sense, ya know, ’cause I’m shit at lying, so giving me a new name wouldn’t work too well. Sucking at lying was what got me locked up for two years. I couldn’t lie to the cops and tell ’em I didn’t know a robbery was gonna happen.” Bob snorted. “My college roommate. Heard him and his friend talking about it but didn’t realize they were stupid enough to do it. I should have known they would though. The dude was just that damn stupid. When the police came knocking, I tried to lie, and somehow got slapped with aiding and abetting.”

I couldn’t help but be charmed by him and the way he told his story, straight to the point and self-deprecating. It was hard not to crack a smile, but I persevered.

“What’s your name?” I opened my mouth to answer, but he continued rambling before I could. “Like I know you’re Wolf’s niece and Reaper’s, but like, when I asked, I was told I had to ask you.”

Abraham and the other guy dropped their heads in their hands, shoulders shaking with silent laughter.

I smothered the urge to laugh along with them and schooled my expression. “I’m Peyton. Could you, uh, maybe elaborate on what you meant when you said that I’m Reaper’s?”

Bob opened his mouth, but the other guy elbowed him and leaned forward. “Hi, Peyton. I’m Spade. Not gonna to tell you my life story if that’s all right.” The laugh lines on his face made me think he was the jovial sort, and his lanky build looked like it was made to wear a suit.

“Nice to meet you, Spade.”

His eyes softened and he grinned. “Honor to finally meet you, Peyton.”

What did he mean by finally? Before I could ask, a wide, callus-roughened hand slid a piece of paper across the table. One glance showed it was the information I’d requested yesterday.

“A list of all the places we stopped. It’s in order from the first pickup to the last.” Glaring at Abraham, I wished I could shoot laser beams out of my eyes. He flinched but didn’t look away. “You need this information to make sure those women stay safe, and it was shitty of me to delay that. Next time you ask me something, I’ll do whatever I can to help.”

That was as good of an apology as I was going to get from him. I’d known him since we were kids. Had spent countless hours tutoring him in math to ensure he could learn enough to graduate from high school, and his betrayal had stung more than most.

But I’d promised myself last night that it was time to move on. My lips twitched, and I said, “Your apology is a B minus at best.”

Abraham chuckled. “I’ll take it.”

When I walked out of the coffee shop, my steps felt lighter, like I’d finally shed the weight of resentment I’d been carrying around for far too long.

Chapter Thirteen

REAPER

WIND WHISTLED past me as I sped down the quiet highway.

It seemed like everything that could have gone wrong with this shipment had. Comms hadn't worked, and we didn't know which dock to find the ship or when it was getting in. Boomerang had exchanged words and nearly exchanged blows with one of the cargo loaders.

I couldn't shake the tension that told me something was off, but a bad vibe wasn't enough to cancel a run. Still, that feeling grew as we got closer to the warehouse, and I was paying more attention to my mirrors than the road in front of me. No one followed us, and we hadn't seen a single other vehicle, but that itch between my shoulder blades persisted.

I rode harder, pushing our convoy to max speed. I wanted this run over with. When we finally reached the turn off, I slowed to a stop. Spade, Midas, and Boomerang pulled up around me. I told them to follow me, then left Paul Bunyan and Joker behind with the boxcar, ready to get the stuff out of here if something popped off.

Call it paranoia, or maybe I'd watched too many crime shows, but I never let the goods near the warehouse until the area was checked and secured.

The floodlights were on, but the place was wired with motion sensors. Any animal technically could have set them off.

We turned off our bikes, and the silence of the night screamed at us. A twig snapped, and we froze, waiting for something else.

“No,” I said just loud enough for the three guys to hear me. “We leave.” I started to twist the key in the ignition when a gunshot took Midas down. Gunfire came from both sides of the driveway, and I threw myself to the ground, crouching behind my bike for cover.

“Got Midas behind my bike,” Boomerang yelled. It was a small blessing that the asshole finally did something right. “Right shoulder.”

I peeked over my bike, trying to find a target. I was a good shot, but I needed somewhere to aim, and all I could see were rapid muzzle flashes from the woods. I blindly shot at the darkness and whoever was hiding behind the trees like cowards.

The gunfire never stopped, but my limited ammo meant I needed to pace myself. Lights from the highway told me the boxcar had made it out before anyone realized it wasn't coming down the driveway.

As soon as I refocused on whoever was stupid enough to ambush us, men descended from the darkness. Corven, the president of Hell's Spawn MC led the pack, running at as fast as his pathetic fat ass could manage. Behind him were the rest of his morons.

I reached up, turned my bike on, and revved the back tire, kicking up as much dust as possible. I stayed low as I came

out from behind my bike and ran to tackle the first body I found. My eyes burned from the dust. Three well-placed punches and a slammed head to the ground later, the guy I'd tackled was knocked out.

And I had a second gun. I fired at anyone wearing a Hell's Spawn cut and took out two more.

"I'm out!" Spade held up an empty clip just as a guy snuck up behind him. I opened my mouth to call out, but he was already turning and knocking the gun out of the guy's hands. He dove for the fallen weapon and shot at anyone who wore a Hell's Spawn cut.

Boomerang held off three more of the assholes, keeping Midas between him and his bike as he dodged a punch and roundhouse kicked a man in the face.

Four guys ran down the drive from the highway. "It's gone," one called out, then all four converged on me with their guns pointed. Like they'd planned it, they all pulled their triggers, except nothing happened. Fucking idiots. Who the hell executed an ambush without bringing enough fire power?

Discarding their guns, they came at me, not bothering to take turns. I dodged, dancing out of their reach, and went back at them. A jab to the nose, a body shot, a kick that had one listing to one side.

They attacked with wild rage that made them miss more often than not. But I could only hold them off for so long. Every dodge and hit took more out of me. Far too soon I was flagging, my side aching from a well-placed hit, and my lungs couldn't hold enough oxygen.

Something slammed into the middle of my back, sending me sprawling face-first in the dirt. Pain radiated through my

body, and my arms shook when I tried to push myself up.

I needed to get back on my feet. A kick to the ribs stole what breath my lungs had left. Needed to make sure I made it out of here alive. For Peyton. Punches rained down on my kidneys. A photo reel of the life I wanted to build with her played in my mind. Our family, our home, our future. If I didn't get the fuck up right now, I would lose it all.

I caught the foot careening toward my face and gave it a sharp twist. A heavy thud accompanied the guy's wail as he crashed down next to me.

"Enough," someone called, and the constant blows finally stopped. "We have what we need."

Footsteps crunched, getting closer to me with every step. My body screamed in agony as I got my hands underneath me and pushed until I was on all fours. Taking a deep breath, I shoved myself up to my knees.

Corven leaned over me, his scarred face pinched in anger. I started to get to my feet, but he shoved me and sent me sprawling to my back.

His wide body blocked out the brilliance of the night sky above him. "Tell your president to come find me and to bring that bitch, Betty. I have some things he might want back." The last thing I saw before everything went dark was a black boot hurtling toward my face.

Chapter Fourteen

PEYTON

AN EAR-SPLITTING ALARM BLARED, and flashing red lights filled my bedroom at HQ.

I'd been sleeping here for two days, too nervous to go home. Afraid and almost excited at the prospect of finding him on my porch again. And if he didn't show? I wasn't ready to deal with the emotional fallout of that either.

To sum it up, I was being a baby back bitch and avoiding all of it.

Years of training kicked in, and I was up, changed, and sliding my boots on my feet in under two minutes. Downstairs, I found my team rushing around, everyone focused on their own tasks.

Tyler finished gathering what looked to be our entire armory and met us in the conference room just as Betty hit the button to kill the alarm. Everyone stood in a line and stared at me, but no one said a word. My stomach filled with lead.

Tyler cleared her throat. "We need to go help Redemption." She set her hand on the gun holstered at her hip. "They were hit by Hell's Spawn during a transport and ..."

She looked down for a moment, then back up at me. "Peyton, I

don't know how to say this, but they grabbed Boomerang and Midas.”

My knees buckled, but I grabbed the back of the chair in front of me and forced myself to stay standing. Taking a deep breath, I shoved my panic aside. I wouldn't lose my brother and cousin. Not when we still had so much shit to settle. “Okay. Fill me in while I'm packing.”

Betty gave me the rundown from the start of the run to the ambush. “Reaper was the one they left behind with the message,” she said when she was done.

He must have been going out of his mind with worry and guilt. I could only assume, because that was how I'd feel if it were me. Knowing Reaper, he would either shut down or go rogue. Neither outcome would help the situation.

I zipped up the bag containing all the gadgets we'd need, and Izzy showed me a satellite picture of an abandoned mansion nestled in the hills off a long country road. She swiped her finger across the screen and brought up the blueprints, which I committed to memory.

As I strapped on a vest I asked, “Why did they call us? This is club business.” I'd been out of the loop, but things couldn't have changed so much that Redemption was willing to bring in outside help, especially not to deal with a rival MC. Not that I cared much about MC politics at the moment. I was getting my brother and cousin back, and I didn't care who I had to shoot to make it happen.

“Corven specifically asked for me. He and his guys called several times last week, but I haven't been returning their calls. I wasn't interested in working with them, and there was nothing they could have offered to change my mind. Guess

they thought this was the best way to get ahold of me.” Betty jerked her head toward the door. “Rolling out in two.”

We found Uncle Wolf, High, Reaper, and ten other guys waiting for us at the rendezvous point. While the rest of the team went to swap intel with them, I launched my drone and snapped aerial shots of the run-down property. The acres surrounding the dilapidated mansion were overgrown, which made for good cover but meant it would be impossible to move quickly. Time was a luxury we were running short on.

I flicked on the infrared reader, and the screen lit up.

“Damn, the place is crawling with them,” Izzy muttered, looking down at her own screen.

“Did they bring their entire chapter?” Jessen asked.

“Probably.” Tyler’s expression was serene, the way it only got when she was on a mission.

“We surround them, use the tranquilizers to knock them out, and proceed to the house,” Betty pointed to the back door area and the balcony. “Here and here.”

Izzy muttered numbers under her breath, then looked up. “Can you get closer so we can get a count on the second floor? I can’t get a solid read.”

I dropped the drone closer to the house. “Looks like seven. Three sitting down, four standing and moving.” I focused on the three figures, as though the heat blobs could show me that Midas, Boomerang, and Spade were alive.

“I don’t fucking care. Why the fuck are we waiting?” Reaper yelled from the other side of the road. High and Joker

were in front of him, talking in low voices that did nothing to calm their brother down.

He'd been pacing back and forth along the edge of the road like a caged animal since we got here. I wanted to tell him to get his shit together. He was riling everyone up, and if he didn't shut up soon, someone would end up making a fatal mistake.

Tyler was already palming her gun, and I nudged her, shaking my head. She rolled her eyes but removed her hand from her weapon.

"How many on the perimeter?" Adrienne asked, bringing my attention back to the task at hand.

"Two on each side of the house. Left, right, and back. We dispatch those as quietly as possible, then converge on the first floor," I said, rotating the view on everyone's screen. "From there, we wait until we get the go-ahead to breach the targets' location on the second floor. The goal is to shock and injure but let them live."

"What the fuck? Let them live?" Paul Bunyan asked.

Before I could answer, Tyler stalked toward him and the two brothers next to him. "Leaving them alive is more efficient in the long run." She gave a feral smile. "And more fun. They have to walk around every day knowing that the only reason they're still breathing is because *you* didn't think they were worth killing. They get to live with the knowledge that they owe their lives to you."

"Living men come back for revenge," he retorted, and he wasn't wrong. Under normal circumstances, anyway.

"Sure, if they were only dealing with you guys. They made a mistake bringing our team into this." Tyler spun on her heel

and walked over to the van, grabbing her extra ammo and dart guns.

I took a step back from the team, needing a moment to breathe and get my head right. Between knowing that anything could happen to two of the most important men in my life and the group of amped-up men at my back, I was having a hard time concentrating.

Reaper's face caught my eye. For the briefest moment, his angry mask slipped and gave me a glimpse of the fear and guilt underneath. I wanted to comfort him, to tell him he had nothing to feel guilty about. But I wasn't ready for that level of intimacy with him. Instead, I shot him a look that said he needed to calm down. He gave me a tiny nod, then went over to his bike and waited.

Chris materialized next to me. "What was that?" she whispered.

"What was what?"

She snorted. "You know *what*. You. Him. Whatever you did to put the beast back on his leash."

I shook my head and muttered, "No idea what you're talking about," then walked away.

Betty reached out and grabbed the drone controller from me. "Head on down. When you're in position, we'll follow. Come in from the front. I got the mic, so you'll know when to breach."

Tyler headed to the edge of the forest, an excited glint in her eyes. "Time to unleash hell."

We filed in behind her and began our quarter-mile trek down to the mansion. Just before I lost sight of the vehicles, I

glanced back to where Reaper stood, staring at me. I sent him a small nod, then followed my team through the woods.

I needed to go get my family back.

Chapter Fifteen

REAPER

WOLF, Paul Bunyan, Dad, and I rode, with Betty driving expertly between us. She'd given us two instructions after Peyton and her team disappeared into the woods: let her take the lead when we got there. And stay out of her team's way. Done and done. We might have had egos the size of Texas, but we weren't morons. The women of Bridge City had far more experience with this type of thing than we did, and the only thing that mattered tonight was getting everyone out in one piece.

The road was long, the pavement cracked. We kept going until we hit the mansion, as if it could be called that. The place was big, sure. An oversized farmhouse style. What had once been painted white was now chipped and gray. Shutters hung on by a thread, and the bottom floor windows were boarded up.

We parked and climbed off our bikes in silence. Right on time, one of the double front doors opened. Corven stood there, and I realized how hard it was going to be to control myself.

His smile was slimy and victorious. Like he'd won. I couldn't wait to see that look wiped from his face when he realized this wasn't the triumph he'd expected.

“Welcome,” he called out and opened the other door. The unoiled hinges groaned loudly and then there was a cracking noise. Years in construction told me part of the door had just fallen off.

When we reached the porch, Corven turned around and walked inside, giving us no choice but to follow. There were men on the first floor, but we were moving too fast for me to get a good count. Three, maybe four, if the voices I heard were any indication.

I had no doubts that Betty, Peyton, and the others were capable of handling whatever it was they needed to.

But Hell’s Spawn lived by no laws. There were two kinds of motorcycle clubs. The kind of guys who liked Harleys and Indians, so they got together and rode on Sundays or some shit like that. That was about ninety-nine percent of riders.

The other one percent were like us. Like Hell’s Spawn. We earned our cuts, broke more laws than we followed, and lived for brotherhood and the open road.

Except Hell’s Spawn didn’t even have rules among themselves. No code, they just lived to cause havoc everywhere they went. Blood spilled and people died whenever they were involved. That was what worried me. What had me clocking every movement and doing my best to remember every face, just in case one of them got away unscathed.

We went up a set of stairs that I was surprised didn’t buckle under my weight. Corven led us into a room where three Hell’s Spawn members waited with smirks on their faces.

Midas, Boomerang, and Spade sat in chairs, their arms tied behind their backs. Midas's shoulder was bloody, his face too pale. Boomerang and Spade were in better shape with only a few cuts and bruises.

They were alive. That was what mattered.

"You're a hard woman to reach," Corven said, focused completely on Betty.

"Not really. I just didn't want to take your calls."

"I'm going to let that disrespect slide. I'd like to propose a partnership of sorts."

Betty rolled her eyes. Was she trying to poke the bear? Corven was barely sane on a good day.

"I'm sure you've heard about the twenty-million-dollar bounty on that rich guy's wife and kid." Corven paced in front of Midas, Boomerang, and Spade. "Twenty mill is a lot of scratch. Got me thinking."

"You know how to do that?" she shot back, and I wanted to pull her aside and make sure she understood who she was dealing with. The man didn't operate on all cylinders, and he could snap at any second.

He pointed at her, that oily smile appearing on his face again. "Good one."

I balled my hands into fists, envisioning how it would feel to break them on Corven's face. Damn good, I bet.

"Let's focus, though. I thought to myself, that's a lot of money. And then I thought of you and that team of yours. The two of us together could make a ton of easy money. You guys will be the brains, we'll be the muscle, and between us, we'll bring home the green. But then I called and called, and you

never called me back, so I did what I had to do to get your attention.”

“Everyone knows how close you are to Redemption.” The guy who spoke dragged a knife down Boomerang’s cheek, and blood welled out. “And that one of your women is related to these two.” He jerked his head in Midas’s direction, and I itched reach for my gun, to wrap my finger around the trigger and shoot him. I didn’t care about who he was or who would miss him. He’d signed his death warrant by mentioning my woman.

“We didn’t mean to make an enemy out of Redemption, but you gave me no choice. The things my club could do with ten million dollars.” Corven’s eyes glistened with madness and glee.

So. Fucking. Stupid. He actually thought he could use us to force Betty to work with him. Betty couldn’t be forced to do anything. And after eight years of being bossed around by government types, I’d bet money that Peyton and her girls were even less likely to cooperate.

“No.” As soon as Betty said the word, the atmosphere in the room shifted, the barely restrained violence growing so thick it was hard to breathe. “In case you were dropped on your head too many times as a child, I will spell it out for you. Blackmailing me and my team with our loved ones was a mistake.”

Corven sneered. “I will keep them as insurance until we get our money. I already made the call to tell that rich fucker we were going to find her. He’s on his way.” Dad tensed next to me, and Paul placed his hand on his gun, but Wolf stayed cool and calm as ever.

The three men went to stand behind Midas, Spade, and Boomerang and pointed their guns at my brother's heads.

Corven cocked his head and gave her a *gotcha* smirk. "You wanna reconsider?"

The wall to the right of us exploded, and the room filled with dust seconds before a flashbang grenade rendered me deaf and blind. Betty was the only one who'd known to duck and cover her ears.

The cavalry was here.

Squeezing my eyes shut, I crawled back toward where I thought the door was, and I was shocked when I made it out safely. My senses slowly started coming back to me. My ears were still ringing, and my vision was peppered with colorful spots, but I could manage.

I was still on my knees when Corven and another brother bolted out of the room, bouncing off the walls on their way out.

No fucking way. Neither of those assholes were getting away. Especially not Corven. I had a score to settle with that bastard.

I chased them out of the house, gaining on them with each step. By the time I caught up, we were almost to the forest. With one big heave, I tackled them both to the ground. We rolled into trees, throwing wild kicks and punches that mostly missed their targets.

I got one good connection, loving the way I smashed my fist into Corven's face. The other guy tried to kick me, but I was the better fighter and easily dodged it. A hard kick sent the guy flying backward into a tree, giving me enough time to scramble to my feet.

But not enough time to grab my gun.

Completely unarmed, I stared down the barrel of Corven's gun. My hand went to my holster only to find it empty. Corven got to his feet from where he kneeled on the ground.

I shifted on my stance, ready to throw myself behind the closest tree. "Don't fucking move," Corven growled. The other guy was back on his feet now too, shakily pointing his gun at my head like he'd never aimed at a person before.

"I've been waiting for the chance to put you and Redemption in their place." Corven's finger twitched on the trigger.

I bent my knees, but gunshots went off before I could leap. I braced myself for the pain and opened my eyes, wanting to see the world around me before I left it.

The two men still pointed their guns at me, but their mouths were open, their eyes wide with shock as their knees buckled, and they toppled face-first onto the ground.

I blinked and tried to understand what I was seeing. When I lifted my eyes off the bodies, Peyton was there, gun in hand, staring down at them. She walked over and kicked Corven in the ribs, snapping me out of my stupor.

I threw her over my shoulder and jogged back to my bike, all the while praying she didn't shoot me too.

Chapter Sixteen

REAPER

HOLY SHIT.

Holy *fucking* shit.

The words played in a loop in my head. There had to be a way to help Peyton out of the mess she'd gotten herself in. Where did I even start? I thought there was going to be no death tonight.

I might have had a problem with that decree at first, but when I pushed past my thirst for vengeance, I'd agreed with the reasoning. And it was all shot to hell.

Peyton hadn't only killed a Hell's Spawn member. She killed the *president*. He may have been psychotic, but he was their leader. There would be blowback.

Peyton wiggled on the seat in front of me, and I tightened my arms around her, making it harder for her to move. We needed to discuss what had happened and figure out how to handle it.

I pressed harder on the throttle, pushing my bike to go faster. My place was the closest, the house I'd purchased as an investment property but ended up moving into when I needed a break from the constant noise of the clubhouse. The twenty-minute trip took half that, and I waited until the garage door

was closed before letting her go. The second my arms loosened, she was off the bike and ready to fight.

Good. I was too. I was ready to go at her, scream at her for how stupid she was. Except all the events of the night suddenly crashed down on me. I hadn't rested since I came to, and all that aggression, all the pent-up energy I hadn't been able to release barreled to the forefront.

"Are you kidding me?" Peyton said, snarling as she ripped off her bulletproof vest and threw it to the ground.

"Am I kidding you? I think you have the roles reversed, baby. 'Cause the way I see it, you have to be *fucking* kidding me right now." I leaned over her, snarling right back. "I'm not the one who decided to go rogue and kill those motherfuckers, making a bad situation fucking worse." My voice rose until I was practically screaming by the end.

"You have a real funny way of saying thank you for saving your damn life," Peyton yelled back. Spinning on her heel, she looked around for a moment, then stomped to the door and yanked it open.

It banged against the wall so hard I was sure there was an indent of the door handle in my drywall. Watching her walk away—*again*—caused something to snap inside of me.

"Get back here," I shouted, following her into my house and slamming the door behind me.

"Fuck you, I'm leaving." She kept walking, not sparing me a backward glance.

Steeling myself for a fight, because there was no way I was letting her leave again, I raced past her and turned to block her path to the front door.

“You think you can leave? You think I’m going to let you go?” The toes of our boots touched, and we shared the same air.

“You ungrateful caveman. What the hell was that? Did you think you were being all white male savior by throwing me around? Forcing me on your bike?” Peyton threw her hands up but didn’t step away.

“I think I grabbed you and got us out of a situation that could have turned really bad for both of us if we were caught. Your team said no death. And you took out two of their members. Their fucking *president*.” I raked my hands through my hair. “I had it. I was going to duck behind a tree. Corven couldn’t shoot for shit. Everybody knows that.”

“Right. And the one time he figures out how to aim, it would have been when he had you unarmed and backed into a corner. And what about the other guy? It only takes one bullet to kill.”

“So you thought killing them was the better option? What happened to letting them live and making them remember, or whatever the fuck Tyler said?” Fear bled into my fury. Not for me but for Peyton and what this could mean for her. How this could affect her. “Hell’s Spawn won’t forget this. They won’t let it go.” I’d killed before and hadn’t blinked twice. It never occurred to me to feel guilt or remorse. When I killed, it was because a line was crossed so completely the only way to deal with it was death. “They might accept that they lost. They were idiotic enough to think they could force you into working with them. But they’re going to want to blame the death of their president on someone, and they have two options. They can go after Bridge City or Redemption, and they’re stupid enough to think they can win against both.”

Peyton scoffed. “Don’t think so highly of them. First, they came after us. We were only leaving them alive so they’d remember what we could have done if we wanted to.” She took a step closer. “We’ll regroup, figure out the next move. This is on me, not you. We’ll handle it so there won’t be blowback.” She took a step back and glanced around. I knew what she was thinking. Recognized that look in her eyes from when she kneed me in the balls in her aunt and uncle’s bathroom.

Peyton thought she’d get away again, but she would find that I was a quick study, especially with her. I’d memorized her tells. If I had to tie her up to keep her with me, that was exactly what I’d do.

She’d willingly walked inside my house. Willingly killed to protect me. Peyton had sealed her own fate.

“Stop trying to get around me. Get it through your head. You aren’t leaving until I let you.” *Which will be never.*

“Let me?” She snorted. “Seriously. What do you want from me?” She crossed her arms over her chest and started pacing. “Sorry I shot two people and saved your life. Don’t worry. It won’t happen again.” Stopping, she turned and clenched her teeth. “I’m the stupid one for going there and having your back. Should have let you fend for yourself.” Jesus, the sass on this woman.

She leaned in until our faces were inches apart. Her cheeks were flushed pink, from anger or from yelling at me, I didn’t know. I didn’t care. I wanted all her emotions, positive or negative, everything she could throw at me.

We glared at each other, neither saying a word. She licked her lips, and that small act was enough to break me.

I grabbed her face and mashed our lips together. In one step, I had her back against the wall. Continuing to move my lips over hers, I gentled the kiss.

I swallowed her tiny whimper, and when I went to pull back, her hand gripped the back of my head, keeping me exactly where I was. Whatever was left of my sanity cracked, and my hands skimmed down her body, cradling her ass and lifting her up. She wrapped her legs around my waist, and I pressed my harder-than-stone cock up into her.

The sound she made was music to my ears. Fuck, I was going to devour her.

I needed room to play with her, but my bedroom was too far away. The couch would have to do. I fell backward onto the cushions and positioned her knees on either side of my hips.

My hands went to the hem of her shirt and whipped it off over her head. "I thought you hated me," I said between kisses down her throat.

"I'd have to care about you to hate you," she retorted as she reached for my shirt, tugging at it until I helped her take it off. I ignored the sting of her words, knowing they were a lie. Peyton cared about me. Nobody killed for people they didn't give a shit about.

I flipped her onto her back and got to work stripping away the rest of the layers that separated us. When we were both down to our underwear, I paused to take in her body encased in a sensible sports bra and black cotton panties. Damn. She really was the sexiest woman I'd ever seen.

Pressing a hand to my dick, I willed myself to calm down. "Look at you." I pulled off her sports bra and sat back on my

knees as my fingers went straight to her pebbled nipples. “You are everything I could ever want.” Lust made my voice rough.

My mouth descended to her chest, and I sucked one stiff peak into my mouth, rolling it with my tongue. I licked and sucked my way down her body, kissing every tiny scar I found. I wanted to know where she got each one, learn about her through the places she’s been and the life she lived without me.

I slipped her panties off and continued exploring her, kissing and nipping up and down each leg as I hiked them up over my shoulders. With one hand, I opened her up to me and found her glistening.

“Is all this for me, baby?” I was hungry for a taste, but I needed her to talk to me. I forced my eyes off her pussy to look at her face. She needed to be with me on this.

Peyton’s eyes were blown out to black, her breathing heavy. Although I had all the evidence I needed, I wanted her to say she wanted me. I thumbed her clit, working it in slow circles, gradually applying more pressure. Her throaty whimper felt like a punch to the dick.

“Do you like seeing me kneel for you?” I brought my thumb to my mouth and sucked it clean, moaning as the taste of her detonated in my mouth. “You taste so fucking good.” I bent down and gave her one long lick, finishing off with a hard kiss to her clit.

Peyton made a breathy choking sound, and her legs tightened around my head. She needed to use that beautiful mouth of hers and speak.

“But baby, I need you to tell me where you need me. Tell me what you want.” My tongue lashed out, flicking her clit

once. Twice. Three times before I pulled back, even as my body screamed at me to keep going.

A hand gripped my hair, pulling at the roots, and pushed my head toward her heat. “I didn’t know you were such a tease.” A small teasing smile played on her perfect face. She pulled at my hair, forcing my head up and away from her. “If you’re not up to the task ...”

In one fluid motion, I pulled Peyton up and had her propped against the back of the couch, giving me the leverage I needed.

“Baby, let’s get one thing straight. You are never going to have anyone as good as me. And that’s fine because as of this moment, I am the last man who will ever fuck you.” Without giving her a chance to answer, I buried my face between her thighs and devoured her like a starving man eating his last meal.

Her back bowed as I sucked and swirled my tongue, and every moan she let slip only spurred me on. I pulled back and slapped her pussy. Her body jolted and she bit her lip.

“I want to hear every sound, baby.” I grazed my thumb around her clit, teasing it. “I’ve earned every moan and whimper. If I think you’re holding back, I’ll keep you on the edge until you give me what I want.”

I slapped her pussy again, and she gave me a tiny moan.

“Louder,” I demanded. Two more slaps, sharp and fast, and Peyton let out the cries she’d been holding back from me. Satisfied that she was ready to play, I slipped one finger inside and went back to my meal.

Her thighs gripped my head like a vise, like she was afraid I’d pull back again. I wouldn’t. I couldn’t. I was exactly where

I belonged. The place I'd dreamed about for years. I added a second finger and curled them upward, continuing to suck and nip her swollen bud. Her body moved against my tongue, riding my face as she came, and the sight almost made me explode.

While she fought to catch her breath, I grabbed a condom from my wallet and slipped it on before kissing my way back up her body. I sucked on her flesh, desperate to leave my mark.

Once I was all the way on top of her, I kissed her and guided myself into her with a slow, shallow thrust. Peyton looked down at where we were connected and bit her lip.

With one deep thrust, I seated myself all the way inside her and groaned. "Look at you." I pulled back and slammed home again, making her give me another sexy whimper. "Look at how well you're taking my cock." Leaning down, I sucked and bit her breasts, then pulled back and studied my handiwork.

It was more than I could take. I dropped my weight onto her and sped up. "You were made for me, Peyton. Made to take my dick."

She turned her head and our mouths clashed, our tongues tangling together. Pulling back, she caught my bottom lip between her teeth and bit down hard.

The one sliver of restraint I'd held onto stretched beyond its limit and snapped. I slammed my hips into hers over and over. Every whimper that fell from her lips was a plea. My hand found its way to her throat, collaring it, holding her in place, but she planted her foot on the couch and flipped us over until she was straddling me.

My cock pulsed at her show of dominance, and I wrapped one arm around her to keep her still so I didn't lose control and fill her with my cum. *Not yet.*

I gave myself a moment to adjust to how much deeper I was, then I let go and allowed myself to be mesmerized by the way her body swayed on top of mine. She was all I saw. All there was. Her curves, the way her hair framed our faces like a curtain, her short little puffs of air in my ear.

My hands roamed every inch of her silky skin, and she swiveled her hips, grinding down on me. Latching onto her nipple, I flicked it with my tongue, loving the way her molten heat clamped around me when I sucked hard enough to bruise. She threw her head back and moaned but never stopped moving.

I pulled her down, needing her as close as possible, and whispered my every thought and feeling into her ear. How beautiful she was. How she was meant to take my cock. How much I loved her sweet pussy. And when it got to the point of repeating myself, I picked my head up and bit the spot where her shoulder met her neck.

I would never forget the raspy scream that tore from her throat. My thumb slid to her clit, circling it the way I already knew she liked, and my arm went around her hips as I took control of the pace.

Peyton would come when I let her and not a moment before. She squeezed her eyes shut, her pussy fluttering around my cock. I stopped strumming her clit and tightly gripped her throat. "Open those pretty eyes for me, baby. I want you to watch me while you scream my name." Her eyes bore into mine, and their fire scorched my soul.

Using my grip on her hip and throat, I slammed her down onto me, harder and faster than before. Her nails raked down my back, and the sting only made me pound into her harder.

Still, she held my eyes, leaning forward as she came. “Reaper.” My name was a pained whisper tumbling from her lips. Her nails dug into my shoulders deep enough to draw blood.

I’d never witnessed a more beautiful sight than Peyton coming apart on top of me. Her body milked mine for everything it was worth, and I flipped her onto her back, rutting into her with a frenzy. Wrapping both hands around her throat, I shouted my climax to the ceiling as her nails scorched another trail down my back.

Still hard as a rock, I slowed my thrusts but didn’t stop. I’d waited too long for this moment to be satisfied so easily. I fisted my hands in her auburn hair and brought my mouth down to hers, pouring everything I had into the kiss. For the first time in my life, I made love to a woman, and as though our minds had melded into one, we climaxed together.

I should have known that my whole world would tilt upside down the first time I claimed Peyton, but I was not at all prepared for the emotions that crashed through me. I had no idea how long I stayed there inside her, planting lingering kisses all over her face, but I finally forced myself to pull back. “Gonna get you cleaned up. Don’t move.” I winked at her and walked into the bathroom on unsteady legs.

I was running the washcloth under warm water when I heard the front door slam shut, and panic hit me square in the chest. The thought of someone finding Peyton naked and vulnerable on my couch had me rushing out, ready to murder whoever had dared enter my house without knocking.

But when I reach the living room, fists up and ready to fly, nobody was there.

She fucking left. She ran out the door while my dick was still wet with the evidence of her pleasure.

Leaning against the wall, I laughed. Game on. She could run, but I would follow. I was chasing redemption, and when I caught it, Peyton Linwood would be my prize.

Chapter Seventeen

PEYTON

STUPID. Stupid. Stupid.

Why am I such an idiot? I'd let Reaper fuck me silly on his ridiculous bachelor couch. The best sex of my life was with the one man I'd built a barrier around and marked off-limits. Three orgasms in the span of an hour had wiped out all memory of every man who came before.

This had to be some kind of sick joke. I could practically hear the universe laughing at me. Adrenaline from the mission that had gone horribly awry must have driven away all my common sense. My judgment was clouded. That was the only explanation for what had happened.

I stood on Chris's porch and willed my breaths to slow. I had my training to thank for my ability to get dressed and out of the house before he could stop me. Unable to stop myself, I shot a quick glance at the house across the street and a few houses down. A sharp jolt of unidentifiable emotion kicked me in the ribs. Shoving that feeling all the way down, I forced myself to turn back around and enter the code that would let me inside.

I opened the door, and just as I went to close it, I caught sight of his silhouette standing in the open doorway across the

street. Slamming the door shut, I ignored the rational voice buzzing in my mind. *Pretending it didn't happen won't do you any good, Peyton. You should deal with this head-on.*

Yeah, well, you should shut the fuck up, Rational Peyton. I let out a frustrated scream, then damn near pissed my pants when the light turned on behind me.

“Look what the cat dragged in.”

I spun around and gaped at Chris, Jessen, and Adrienne on the couch. I must have been completely lost in my thoughts to have missed the sound of the movie playing. Adrienne stared back at me, a spoonful of ice cream suspended in the air halfway to her mouth.

No one would have guessed they'd just fought a battle against a motorcycle club.

When I didn't answer, Chris wiggled her eyebrows. “Cat got your tongue?” She clearly had a thing for cat clichés tonight.

“More like Reaper fucked her until her brain short-circuited.” Jessen tossed a handful of popcorn into her mouth.

I rolled my eyes. “Knock it off.” After kicking off my shoes, I sat down in front of the couch and laid my head back on Adrienne's knee. “When did you guys get back?”

“We left about two minutes after you and Reaper took off,” Jessen said. “We have some stuff we need to address, but we'll regroup in the morning.”

I turned around so I was facing all three of them. “Yeah, sorry about that.” I knew she was referring to the dead MC president without her saying it.

“You wouldn’t have done it if it wasn’t life or death. I saw the bodies. Pretty easy to guess what went down.” Chris shrugged and crossed her legs. “Two to one, guns out?” I nodded. “Reaper didn’t stand a chance. I’d rather have losses on their side than ours.”

Her validation melted the tiny sliver of guilt I felt for breaking the plan. It was us or them, and I picked us.

“We’ll assess, do what we need to and move on. You cut the head off the snake. We just need to chop the body up into parts.” Jessen shrugged.

“That analogy is gross.” Adrienne ate another spoonful of ice cream and narrowed her eyes at me. “Are you like ... okay?” she asked, cocking her head to the side.

“I’m fine,” I lied. I wasn’t fine, but not because of what had gone down at that farmhouse.

“And how’s Reaper?” Adrienne asked, not giving up.

“Fine. I guess. I don’t know.” Probably pissed that I’d hit it and quit it like a horny frat boy.

Pursing her lips, she dug a chunk of brownie out of the carton and put it in her mouth. “Your shirt’s inside out.”

I looked down and felt my face heat. My shirt was in fact inside out. That was when I realized I was missing something else. Underwear. They were somewhere on Reaper’s living room floor. I jabbed a finger at Adrienne. “Don’t talk with your mouth full, you vulgarian.”

The three of them fell into each other, laughing and high-fiving.

“Jerks. All of you. I’m going to bed.”

“Wait. Come back. We want details,” Jessen called out as I climbed the stairs.

“How big was his dick?” Adrienne shouted before dissolving into laughter.

“I need new, less nosy friends.” I muttered as I hit the top of the stairs.

“We heard that,” Chris yelled. “You’ll never escape us.”

Rolling my eyes, I stomped into the guest bedroom and changed into a T-shirt and sweatpants. I was asleep before my head hit the pillow.

“Everyone understand the plan?” Betty asked, sitting back in her chair. We all nodded.

“Good. Once we bury Hell’s Spawn so deep they can’t find their way back, I’ll let Redemption know.” She tapped her fingers against the table. “Nice idea to take out the leader. He wasn’t the brightest. A real vindictive piece of work.”

I groaned. “It wasn’t on purpose.”

“Right. Right. Had to protect your man. We get it.” Tyler’s lips ticked up at the edges.

“He is not *my man*. Don’t act like you wouldn’t have taken the shots.” I wanted to rage and was proud of how evenly I spoke. “Can we get over the minor slip in judgment? It was the adrenaline.”

I’d tried to deny that anything happened between Reaper and me. They’d laughed at me. It infuriated me that I couldn’t

get away with a single tiny lie with them. Okay, that's not true. But in this case, I wish they'd taken what I said at face value.

“Right, yeah. Of course, we'd never let one of us get hurt. Except none of us followed our childhood crush into the woods and proceeded to save him,” Chris taunted me.

“You still never answered my question. How big was his dick? Guy's a giant. Promise of the premise and all that.” Adrienne waggled her eyebrows, and I briefly considered shaving them off in her sleep but nixed the idea. Too simple for the Queen of Pranks. I still hadn't gotten her back from the office chair debacle three weeks ago.

Betty cleared her throat, and the rest of us snapped to attention. “You all have your assignments. Make sure that every man who wears the Hell's Spawn logo knows it was us. Tear them down so they'll never rebuild again.” She eyed each of us. “When you get back, we'll deal with whatever shit Corven put into play.”

Yippy. Couldn't wait to deal with the husbands.

Chapter Eighteen

PEYTON

IT HAD BEEN thirty-nine hours since I speed-walked away from Reaper. No running involved, despite what Adrienne had to say about it. I felt like that was an important distinction.

I wasn't nervous. Okay, maybe I was a tiny bit apprehensive about seeing him. Whatever.

It was easy to pretend it had never happened. Until I closed my eyes, and the events of that night started playing like an X-rated movie in my mind. Torture was the best way to describe what my brain was putting me through.

An elbow to my ribs brought me back to our current situation. We were following a prospect into Chapel, where every member of Redemption was waiting for us.

Was I worried about how they might respond to what we'd done? A little. But at the end of the day, it was our screwup—fine, *my* screwup that had forced our hand. That meant we'd needed to deal with Hell's Spawn ourselves.

We hadn't merely dismantled them, we'd pulverized them. And it was so much easier than it should have been.

Turned out that thirty-nine hours wasn't nearly long enough for my body to forget the pleasure he'd harnessed with

tongue, teeth, hands, and cock. The second I entered the Chapel, my body lit up like a Christmas tree.

His gaze was like a caress, following me as I walked into the room and lined up next to my team. He didn't bother to hide his concern, but it was quickly snuffed out by anger. Good. Anger I could deal with. Compassion? Not so much.

I so badly wanted to glare back because this was all his fault anyway, but this wasn't the time or place to handle our personal business.

Years of growing up in this life, witnessing how the old ladies dealt with their men had me checking myself. Not because I thought Reaper was mine. He wasn't. I didn't care about how easily their prides got bruised because that was their problem. Not mine. But it was ingrained in me to treat the patched brothers with respect, especially in here, their most sacred, official space.

I forced myself to look away from him and studied Midas. He looked a bit worse for wear with various cuts and bruises and the bandage peeking out from under his shirt. When I looked at my brother, I thought the scowl on his face was for me, but when I looked closer, I realized it was aimed at Chris. I glanced over at her, but she was looking straight ahead, her eyes trained on nothing in particular. *Huh. Wonder what that's about.*

My eyes were drawn back to Reaper. I'd never experienced anything like what we shared. That hunger, like he couldn't possibly get enough of me. It must have been the adrenaline. At least that was what I kept telling myself. It was a one-time thing. A mistake.

“So, what you're saying is they backed down?” Uncle Wolf asked, his skepticism clear. I hadn't paid attention to

what Betty said, but there was no need. I'd been involved in every step. It was up to me to ensure my family's safety.

Tyler snorted and tried to cover it with a cough. "They have a lot more to focus on than continuing their fight with Redemption." Her lips ticked up, Tyler's version of an all-out smile. "We also explained that we pulled the trigger, and your guys had nothing to do with it. So if they want retribution, they have our address."

I let myself preen a bit, remembering how we'd threatened them. Blew shit up. I hadn't had that much fun in a long time.

Uncle Wolf leaned back in his chair and looked over at High. They had one of their silent conversations before turning back to us.

"How did you convince them?" High asked.

"You want a play-by-play?" Tyler snapped, her attitude bordering on the edge of what was acceptable in Chapel. The brothers were clearly still angry and wanted blood, and she wasn't helping deescalate the situation.

Uncle Wolf lifted his eyebrows and nodded.

Before Tyler had the chance to open her mouth and start a war with her vitriolic sarcasm, Jessen jumped in. "Raids on their drug houses. Took all their goods and their cash." The large amount of money we'd obtained would go toward helping our rescue efforts, and we'd flushed the drugs. "All their drivers' licenses have been suspended, and half of them are currently sitting in jail under a fun variety of charges, like illegal possession of firearms, possession with intent to distribute, and selling fake scripts." She snapped her fingers. "Oh, and two of their clubhouses burned to the ground early

this morning. Crescent City and the one up in St. Helens on the Washington border.”

“Someone must’ve left a burner on,” I quipped. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Betty shaking her head. She should have known better than to send our resident pyromaniac to canvas the clubhouses. At least Adrienne had made sure they were empty when she lit the fuses.

“So zero blowback,” Reaper said to the room at large, but I knew the words were directed at me. “Not even for killing their president?”

“No blowback. Corven wasn’t well liked, if you can believe it.” I was aware of every movement Reaper made. From when he leaned back in his chair to the slow trail his eyes made up and down my body. His analysis was all I could focus on, and I missed whatever Betty said next. My palms started to sweat, and my body grew warmer. There were too many people stuffed into this room. I needed to get out of here so I could breathe.

Tension grew as Reaper glared at me, his furious gaze somehow seductive, until it was so thick I could taste it on my tongue. I was sure everyone in the room could. At some point my team had finished delivering the news, but I wasn’t paying the slightest bit of attention to what was said. Only that I needed to get out.

We filed back out of the room, and it took everything in me not to sprint out to the car and zip away. I made it as far as the main room before a thick arm wrapped around my waist and hoisted me against a hard body. One I could officially say I was intimately familiar with.

I was picked up like I weighed nothing, and the only thing that kept me from fighting back was my disinterest in causing

another scene to entertain the assholes of Redemption. That and my respect for club politics. Still, I glared at my friends as they stood by with various expressions of amusement on their faces. Chris waved at me as I passed her.

They were dead to me.

He entered a room, slammed the door, and tossed me on the bed. Standing sentry in front of the door, he stared at me, daring me to move him out of my way.

And I would, as soon as I was finished giving him a piece of my mind. I shot off the bed like a rocket. “How dare you fucking cart me around like that. I have enough respect for the brotherhood to know not to challenge you in front of them. Is it so hard for you to show me that same level of respect?”

He stepped forward, an apology shining in his eyes. “Peyton, I—”

Please, like he gives a shit.

“No. You don’t get to say a word. I don’t care what you have to say, what you wanted. It’s irrelevant.” I jabbed my finger into the center of my chest. “I am a person. I am not a fucking thing you can snatch up and cart around because it’s easier for you.”

His shoulders fell and he stared at the ground at my feet. “No, babe. I—” He shook his head. “You were walking away. We needed to talk.”

My stomach churned. I was such an idiot. All this time I thought he’d wanted me. I hadn’t considered that he thought it was as big a mistake as I did. “I get that you don’t want anyone to know. Don’t worry, no one will know you fucked your president’s niece, you have my promise.” I fisted my hands by my side. “But grabbing me? Showing that you have

no respect for me, my personal space, or what I want?” As I spoke, Reaper stood up taller, his expression unreadable. “Let me make what I want clear. Get out of my way before I make you.”

Reaper didn't answer, just kept staring at me with a look on his face that I didn't understand. When he didn't move, I stepped toward him, ready to force him.

Without warning, he sprang into action. One moment I was standing, ready to break a piece of him so I could run away and deal with him being embarrassed of me. The next I was on my back on his bed with his body between my thighs.

“You think I'm embarrassed?” I couldn't respond. What was I supposed to say?

His hands were still holding my waist, and he shook me. “Answer me. You think I'm fucking *embarrassed* that I finally had you right where I wanted you for years?”

“Yes!” I shrieked, and I opened my mouth to say something else, but Reaper effectively silenced me when he ground his hard dick against me.

“I screwed up,” he muttered as he kissed my cheek and slid his arm around my back. “Years I been paying for it. Years I been waiting for you.” Reaper kissed everywhere he could reach except my mouth.

“Fucking embarrassed.” He shook his head, his beard scraping my skin, making me want more. “Like I could ever be embarrassed of you.” Every kiss, every rough squeeze lit my body up.

A voice in the back of my mind tried to save me and told me to buck him off and walk away. But a louder, more insistent voice screamed at me to go for it. To let Reaper take

me wherever he wanted because he was the one who shut my brain off and made me *feel*.

The reckless voice won. I grabbed him by his hair and slammed my mouth to his. His lips were firm but soft. I wrapped my arms and legs around him, pulling him as close as I could get him. I loved the weight of him on top of me. Loved how big he was, that he blocked out the world around us.

We rocked, grinding on each other. He slid a thigh between us, and the seam of my jeans pressed against my clit, giving me pressure, but I needed more. My body begged for it.

I let out a pained cry, and suddenly I was straddling Reaper. He unzipped my jeans and shoved a hand inside my panties, rubbing against me with two fingers.

“Fuck, baby, you’re soaked.” He slipped those thick fingers inside me, and my head fell back as a low groan slipped past my lips. His other hand was at my waist, guiding me so I was bouncing on his fingers like I’d bounce on his dick. His palm ground against my clit, sending sparks of electricity through my body.

“That’s it. Moan for me. I want it all,” he said, and I could barely make out his words with the way my body lit up. Reaper never pulled back. His fingers slowly pumped into me as I came down. I fell forward, placing my hands on his chest to keep me upright.

I’d done it again. Dammit. I needed to get far away from him, his dick, and his freaking fingers. Sliding off him, I refastened my jeans and went to the door, but as I reached for the doorknob, I was yanked back into Reaper’s chest. He held me there, and I let him. Taking deep breaths, I fixed my hair into a neat ponytail and tried to calm my racing heart.

“There’s nothing to be embarrassed about. You think I waited ten years for you to not know what you needed? I know you better than you think.” He paused. “Space. You need space when something life altering happens. You always have. That’s why I didn’t chase you down when you first got back. I knew you needed time to adjust from wherever you were. But from here on out, I’m putting a time limit to how long you get to deal without me. I won’t make the same mistake,” Reaper whispered in my ear, even though we were the only ones in the room. “You’re all I could ever want. All I could ever need. It’s only ever been you.”

He let me go and took a step back, then reached around me and opened the door. “Come on, I’ll walk you out.”

I followed him silently, trying to make sense of his words and what I knew to be true.

Ignoring all the stares, I marched over to my team who waited patiently by the door, appearing bored, but I knew better.

We filed outside. Chris walked next to me. “So, you guys had a good talk?”

Everyone burst out laughing, even Betty, and I rolled my eyes as I climbed into the car.

Chapter Nineteen

PEYTON

THE LUXURY of a lazy morning could not be overstated.

When you had to be ready at the drop of a hat, every calm day was a bit more precious. Heavy fog sat close to the ground, and a good storm was the only thing needed for it to be a perfect morning at my favorite coffee spot in my favorite corner on the massive couch.

There was nothing pending at work, and we'd only gotten about three hours of sleep between the rescue mission and shutting down Hell's Spawn. So Betty, the magnanimous leader that she was, had let us sleep in.

Reaper appeared, as if by magic, and sat down so close to me that our thighs touched. Sipping his coffee, he played on his phone and ignored me the same way I was ignoring him.

After several minutes, he leaned back and stretched his arm out behind me. "You come here often?"

His casual tone threw me, and I stared down at the page I was reading, unable to focus on the words over my curiosity. What was he planning? I didn't look up and didn't answer.

Reaper cleared his throat. "I, uh." He paused. "I saw you walk in earlier." He leaned in closer. "You're the most beautiful creature I've ever seen."

I dropped my book in my lap and looked down at my leggings and baggy T-shirt with the words *Draco Malfoy is Daddy* written across my chest. Save a touch of mascara, my face was bare. The only thing I had going for me was that I'd showered, so at least I knew I didn't smell. Slowly, I turned my head and found our faces inches apart.

"Did you just call me a creature?" I enunciated each syllable carefully, like I was offended. I wasn't, but screwing with him was way too much fun to resist.

"Yes, creature. Creatures are like all living things." He shut his mouth, even though I could tell he wanted to say something else to defend himself. Instead of continuing, he stared at me hard, his jaw flexing. I turned back to my book to continue ignoring him.

"Will you go out on a date? With me?"

"I'm busy that day." The words were out of my mouth before I had a chance to think. Colt "Reaper" McMillan had asked me out on a date. And asked nicely. Did I wake up in some alternate universe? I discreetly pinched myself and winced. Nope. Definitely not dreaming. If only eighteen-year-old Peyton could see me now.

"I didn't say what day," he stated, bringing me back to the conversation I didn't want to have. Dating him would end in disaster and leave me with a broken heart. And he'd end up dead in a ditch somewhere, courtesy of the girls, with Tyler leading the charge.

"I'm busy that day too." I stared at my book without seeing the words. Maybe I should've considered his offer. But I couldn't. I refused to let myself go there. I had enough self-preservation left in me, not that it had graced me with its presence the last few times we were alone together.

“If you think saying no will send me on my way, you got another thing coming. I meant what I said. Been waiting ten fucking years for you. You’re mine. You’ve been mine for as long as I can remember. I don’t care how much or how long I gotta fight to get it through that head of yours.” His tone was gruff and left no room for argument.

“I’m not sure where the wires crossed in your brain, but maybe you should go see a doctor for it.”

“Were my wires crossed when I was buried inside you? When you were moaning my name?” He leaned in until his face was inches from mine. “Gotta say, I like the scratch marks you left behind. Reminds me of you every time I get a peek.”

I grabbed my bag only to have it snatched from my hand.

“You don’t believe me, that’s fine. We may have been apart a long time, but I still know you.” Reaper’s grip tightened around the handle of my bag. “Face it, Peyton. You’re a little weird. You have conversations in your head. You go quiet and then can’t stop talking and it’s hard for others to keep up. Your job is scary, but it’s cool because you love what you do, and I only want what makes you happy. Which, when you come to your senses, you’ll realize is me.”

Rage lashed at me so fast it almost knocked me off the couch. “Let’s face the facts. You aren’t worth the headache of teaching you how to be a boyfriend. I don’t have the energy or the inclination to date men who require training.” I let out a harsh laugh. “You aren’t worth it. Take that little crush or whatever you want to call it and run along.” I couldn’t control the words that spilled from my mouth. Everything he said was a lie. There’s no way he wanted me back then. Not with the way he treated me.

Reaper searched my face. The only thing he'd find was anger. Despite my best intentions, I couldn't shove down the emotions brought up by the memory of what he'd said to me. But the girl he rejected wasn't the woman sitting beside him.

I was different. Stronger. I saw the world through a completely different lens, and I believed him when he told me he was sorry for the stupidity of his youth. I'd been young and stupid too. I couldn't hold it against him, not anymore. I could forgive without forgetting. But forgiving him would mean I needed to start trusting him.

"I'm sorry, Pey—"

"I know you're sorry." I scrubbed my hands over my face and sighed. "And I told you I forgave you. I thought I had forgiven you. But I mean it this time. I forgive you. Let's both move on from our mistakes." I reached for my bag, but he pulled it out of my reach. I needed to get out of here, get away from him. "Give it back."

"Am I interrupting?" Griffin asked. Of course he'd show up at this moment. I couldn't decide if I was thankful or annoyed with the interruption.

"Detective Douchebag, can't you tell you're interrupting?" If I were in a better mood, I would have laughed.

Griffin said something, and I used the momentary distraction to snatch my bag from Reaper and bolt away. The two men called after me to stop, but I kept going. The two of them could have their little pissing match without me.

Chapter Twenty

PEYTON

I SPOTTED Betty walking into our office in the reflection on my monitor. She stopped, surveyed the room, then came straight toward me and knocked on my desk. I debated leaving my headphones on and ignoring her. I was in the zone. She could get someone else to work on whatever she needed. Anyone else.

Betty leaned a hip on my desk and flicked the plastic over my ear. Shit. She wasn't going anywhere. I pulled my headphones off and leaned back in my chair. "Yeah?"

Maybe I shouldn't have been so cranky, but I couldn't help it. Over the past week, my world had been flipped upside down. I couldn't stop thinking of Reaper, and I couldn't shake the dark cloud that loomed overhead.

"You're with me," she said when I finally gave her my attention.

I eyed the code that was finally coming together on my monitor, then looked back at Betty. "I'm working. Can't you take one of them?"

Tyler was at her desk for the first time in a month, but instead of handling the mountain precariously balanced paperwork, she had her chair leaned all the way back and was

trying to balance a pencil on her nose. Adrienne was one desk over, reading a book in French. I had no idea where the others were.

“No. Lyle Lowenstein’s going to be here any minute. I agreed to a meeting.” All three of us sat up straight at that. “Don’t know if he’s coming alone or not. I’d ask Jessen, but she’s up at State, interviewing that killer. Chris drove her.”

After saving the code, I followed Betty to the conference room, where we waited. One minute turned to two, and two turned to five. I stayed in my spot against the wall.

Footsteps shuffled down the hall, and Leanne’s voice carried inside the room just before she opened the door. “Betty’s waiting for you inside.”

My hands clenched into fists, and I had to consciously relax them as Lyle Lowenstein stepped into the conference room. Everything about him was carefully curated, down to the bags under his eyes. He was shorter than I expected. Smaller in general. Even in his tailored suit, hair combed just right with too much gel, and proud jut of his chin, he didn’t really have much presence. For all his bluster, I’d assumed he would fill a room with more than just his person.

Maybe he did and I’d simply grown immune to men with oversized egos.

“Thank you for meeting me on such short notice,” he began.

Betty shrugged. “I was in the office.”

If the muscle twitching in his jaw was any indication, her nonchalant attitude bothered him. “Right. I’m not sure if you’ve paid attention to the news, but my wife and son were stolen from me a few weeks ago.” *Stolen*. Like they were

objects that he owned and not people. “I had a tip from this area saying that ...” He paused and cleared his throat, like he wasn’t sure how to describe the call he’d gotten from Hell’s Spawn. “I got a tip that someone knew something out here. But it didn’t pan out, and I was told that you’re the best in the business.” Lyle eyed me, then must have decided I wasn’t worth his attention because he visibly turned away and focused on Betty.

“I’d like to hire you. I can offer two hundred and fifty thousand to start. Once you find them, you’ll get the rest of the reward money.” Lyle put his briefcase on the table, pulled out a folder, and slid it across the table to Betty. She grabbed it and handed it to me.

“I wish we could help you, Mr. Lowenstein. But we have a few other projects on our plate at the moment, and we simply don’t have the manpower for a job of this magnitude. Besides, aren’t you working with the Feds on this?” Betty asked but didn’t give him time to answer. “Once they get involved, we always back off. Professional courtesy, plus too many cooks and all that.”

He gaped at her. “You’re turning down twenty million dollars?”

“A lot of money.” She nodded. “But one thing you should know about Bridge City is that money really isn’t the most important thing for us. I’d love to help, but I can’t.” With a shrug, she stood up and opened the door. Leanne waited on the other side.

“If you’ll follow me, Mr. Lowenstein.” Leanne’s voice was soft, almost demure.

“This is a mistake,” Lyle sputtered, his face turning red.

“If we hear anything, we’ll let the Feds know. Promise.” Betty held the door open a little wider. It took a few seconds for Lyle to realize he was getting kicked out within minutes of arriving. I had to stifle the smile that threatened to break my mask of indifference. How often did people tell him no? Rarely, I was certain. And women in particular? Probably never.

“You’ll regret this,” Lyle said and stomped out of the room. Betty followed him and was back a minute later. Adrienne and Tyler followed.

“Well? What’s he got?” Tyler asked impatiently.

“Nothing.” I shrugged, and this time I smiled big. “All the file had was dead-end leads, police reports, and three days of whereabouts from before she disappeared. He’s paying two different firms, one in New York City and one in Chicago, to follow up on them.”

We all released a collective sigh of relief.

I was wrapping up for the day when I remembered that I hadn’t checked my message board in a few weeks. I adjusted my blue light glasses and promised my burning eyes and growling stomach that I would take care of them in five minutes. Bringing up the encrypted web address, I logged into the board I’d created for social workers to anonymously report abuse that had been overlooked by the system. The most recent message was posted less than twenty-four hours ago and caught my attention.

Help. I’ve done everything I can. Even a few things I’m certain are illegal. But she’s stuck. She’s scared. She’s

pregnant. She has nowhere to go. He's completely isolated her. He will kill her if she tries to leave. He got close once, and he has friends in high and low places.

I clicked the attached pictures and gasped. Looked like my eyes and stomach would need to wait. Fingers flying over the keyboard, I dug through everything I could find on this woman.

The post checked out. She had no living family members, no one to turn to for help. I sent out a message and went to the conference room to wait for my team.

“No,” Tyler said. “Absolutely not.”

“What do you mean, no?” My glare bounced off her like she was made of impenetrable armor.

“Do you need me to say it in another language?” Tyler pushed off the wall and leaned on the table. “Adrienne, how do you say *no* in Greek?”

“Knock it off,” Adrienne said, refusing to play along.

Tension was thick. So far, the only person to object was Tyler. Unfortunately she was also the loudest and hardest to convince once she set her mind on something.

When it came to missions like this, we all had to be a hundred percent on board, otherwise we didn't do it. Tyler's immediate refusal before I'd even finished explaining the situation made me want to throttle her. I didn't understand. She was the only one of us, other than me, who understood what it meant to be afraid of home.

I pushed harder, confident I could convince her. “She’s local, only a half hour drive. It will be a quick and easy case around the neighborhood. Validate what the paperwork says, then we come back and plan. We don’t have to do it tomorrow.” Everything we did was meticulously planned, which I totally agreed with. But sometimes we took too long and didn’t get there in time.

“It’s too soon. Plus, Lowenstein was just here. After our rejection, he’s probably going to be looking for a way to get back at us. He’s too aware of our presence,” Izzy chimed in. With two vetoes on the table, I knew I was about to lose this one. “We already have someone we can’t move because of media attention. We don’t even have a place to hold another. Sorry, but—”

Two loud knocks startled us.

Reaper loomed in the doorway, his attention locked on me. A hand shoved at his shoulder, pushing him further inside and revealing Boomerang behind him. The bruising on his face had started to fade, and he only seemed to have eyes for one person, but she didn’t acknowledge him. Midas stepped in and stood silently next to Reaper, his arm wrapped in a sling and bound to his body.

“Stopped by to say, uh, thanks. I tried before but no one let me up when I rang the doorbell,” my brother said, his scowl deepening. His eyes went to each one of us, giving us each a small nod to go with his words. He lingered on Chris, then nodded and muttered, “Christina.”

When he finally got to me, he tried to smile, but it looked wrong on his face. I couldn’t remember the last time my brother had given me a real smile. It didn’t really fit his surly personality, but what did I know? We barely spoke.

“What are you guys arguing about?” Reaper asked.

“We weren’t arguing,” I snapped.

“Peyton found another woman to rescue, but it’s been vetoed,” Tyler interjected. “There are a lot of eyes and ears searching for that tiny dick’s wife and kid.” She looked at me now, her expression softening as much as it ever did. “Izzy’s right, Pey. He has eyes on us. We can’t move with him around.”

“If someone needs help, we’ll make it work. It’s not like we don’t have more safe houses,” Reaper said. At least someone was on my side. I’d take it, even if it was him.

“No. There’s a lot that goes into extraction. This isn’t a simple snatch and grab. People pay attention in those nice suburban areas.” Izzy shook her head. “We have enough on our plate. Let’s just go through the back channels and see what we can do. There might be some strings to pull.”

“Someone needs help, and they found enough courage to ask for it.” Reaper’s tone had me standing taller. His determination was clear, but it was the fever behind his words that called to me. He’d always had a protective streak for people who needed help, and that streak was blindingly bright.

“We stayed hidden for years. You think we aren’t good enough to take on an Oregon suburb?” Logically, what Tyler and Izzy said made sense, but I couldn’t seem to let it go.

“Nosy neighbors are the demise of people like us. You’ve seen *Desperate Housewives*,” Adrienne joked.

“That’s enough,” Betty called. “You know that this is the one area I let you five be in charge. As per your contracts, I don’t have a vote, and this only goes through if it’s unanimous.”

All in favor, say yea.” She paused, waiting for someone besides me to say it. Nobody did. “All against, nay.”

Everyone cast their vote, and I was clearly the odd man out. With a sigh, I tamped down my disappointment. There were ways to do this without the team. Even if I’d never done it before.

Chapter Twenty-One

PEYTON

WITH ALL THE construction and traveling, setting up my home office had fallen to the wayside. That meant I was still working on getting everything hooked up instead of being elbows deep in researching the woman who needed my help. In any other instance, I loved setting up my equipment, but the clock was counting down and any time wasted was a hindrance.

The newest album from Bad Omens played over my speakers, low and undistracting in the background.

A shouted “Peyton. Open up,” was followed by two pounding knocks against my front door.

I couldn’t hide that I was home. All the lights were on and could be seen through the large windows. I paused with my hand halfway to the doorknob.

What was I doing?

With renewed anger, this time at myself, I swung the door open. And there was Reaper, in all his glory, scowling.

“Something you need?” I meant to come across bored, but it came out snarky instead.

He took me in, from my messy, lopsided bun to my threadbare tank top and yoga shorts. His throat moved, and I loved seeing him uncomfortable.

“Is that”—he swished his hand at me—“how you dress for recon?”

“I don’t have time for whatever mind games you want to play.” I leaned against the doorjamb. “State your purpose and leave.”

“I’m not playing games with you.” He huffed a sigh. “Can I come in?” Reaper took two steps forward, forcing me to either try to block him or step aside. I chose the latter, figuring I could use a break from organizing my setup. A good verbal sparring match would be a nice change of pace.

Reaper went straight to the living room, and I followed close on his heels. He made a circle, checking everything out before he faced me. “What do you know about this woman? Details? History? Schedule?”

His questions threw me for a loop. “A bit. This isn’t something we need to do recon for though. Tyler and Izzy were right. I can do ninety percent online. That’s where I spend most of my time.”

“Okay. Was there more that you need to do for research?”

I thought about it. There was a process, a plan. Checks and balances to make sure we had every angle covered. “In a way, yes. I did the background before I brought it to the team. The next step would be going in and setting up cameras, which Chris usually handles. The footage allows us to learn their day-to-day patterns and plan a time to grab her.”

“You have what you need here? Or do you need to sneak back to the office to grab stuff?”

“What do you mean?” I asked, confused as to why he was asking but also thinking about all the equipment I had in my loft. Cameras included.

“You want to go check up on this woman. I know you do. I’ll go with you, have your back. We’ll get in, set the cameras up, get out.”

My earlier reconnaissance had netted me the intel that they had tickets to a show in Portland that night. If we were going to do this, it had to be tonight. There wasn’t any guarantee we’d get another chance like this for weeks.

Except ... could I even trust him?

No. Maybe. He was there, offering me what I wanted because this mattered to him too. He’d made that clear in the conference room. And Reaper knew how to get shit done. Maybe we could work together. Just this once.

Plus, I wanted to prove my team wrong. Since when did we let one weak-ass man stop us from doing our jobs?

It was just cameras. A simple task. In and out. I’d done it before. Granted, Chris had helped, but I could do it.

I walked around the couch and stood facing Reaper. “Fine. We’ll do this together, on one condition.” He dropped his phone to the couch and gave me all his attention. “I’m the lead. You have to do what I tell you, when I tell you, how I tell you.”

“Done.” He looked so comfortable sitting on my couch. Sure didn’t take him long to make himself at home. “I like it when you get bossy.” He winked. “Now, go get changed so we can take care of business.”

I fidgeted in my seat, trying to push away the unease that had set in as soon as I got in Reaper's truck. I'd never gone on a mission without at least one other member of my team.

Betty had accepted our terms when we signed on to work with her. Sometimes she offered her ideas or wisdom, but she always took the backseat on this type of mission. With everything else, she was the coordinator. Our handler, the same way Kingston had been when we were in the Ghost Unit. Being without her was easy. Being without my team made me want to tell him to turn the car around.

"You good?" Reaper asked as he slowed and turned down the street that led to the neighborhood we were hitting.

"Yeah." *Lie*. I was freaking out. So energized I could run alongside the truck for an hour and not get tired.

"We could go back. You still have the option to do whatever else you were planning to do." I liked that he was giving me the option to back out, but I'd made my decision and I was sticking to it.

"No. The only way we turn back is if you decide you can't follow my lead." My tone left no space for argument. "If I say we leave, we leave. No matter what."

"I know. I said I was cool with you calling the shots. Just make sure you say them aloud and not in your head." I scowled at him. I used to do that when I was younger, but I wasn't sure I liked him remembering that about me.

It wasn't my fault I had conversations in my head and played out every possible chain of events so I could prepare

myself. The habit had mostly been trained out of me in Ghost Unit because we discussed every contingency aloud. Remaining in my head would have been detrimental to the missions and my team.

It was just past midnight, and the roads were empty. It had taken us ten minutes to get to our destination from my house. The small suburb outside of Portland was much smaller than I'd originally thought, but each house sat on a decent amount of land. The farther we drove into the subdivision, the bigger the houses got, though not all were finished.

“Slow down.” Reaper slowed to a crawl. “Not that slow. Like go fifteen instead of twenty.” He grunted but did what I asked.

We passed the house, confirming there were no cars in the driveway. All the lights were off, and the quick visual gave me a glimpse of the barren property that lacked a fence and any kind of landscaping. I directed Reaper to park several houses down, and he pulled into a lot that was still under construction. Anyone who saw his truck would assume it had been left behind for the night. Maybe Reaper had the instincts for this type of work after all.

I hopped out, pulled on my backpack, and met Reaper in front of his truck. “Stick with the plan. You’re the lookout. When I start installing the cameras, you hand me what I ask for and that’s it.” I’d gone over the installation process before we left, so he knew what I would need and when.

“Got it. I remember everything you showed me. Let’s go.”

We gave a wide berth to the other houses we passed, making sure we were too far in the woods to be picked up by any cameras. Reaper matched my pace and stayed blessedly silent.

Once we got to the house we wanted, I stopped and pulled a tablet from my backpack. The screen lit up, and I tapped in the code, then waited. The small handheld device I'd built had an antenna and acted as a beacon of sorts. It searched for signals of anything running off electricity or batteries within thirty feet. It kept scanning and gave no indication of cameras installed on the backside of the property as I moved forward.

Crouching down in front of the power box on the other side of the house, I took another small device from my pack and checked the wiring. Satisfied that everything was as it should have been, I grabbed my pliers and peeled back the coating that protected the wires from the elements.

"Hold this," I muttered. Reaper reached over me and held the pliers while I connected the tablet to the cords. The screen came to life, and I tapped the icon for the virus I'd designed and coded to reroute security systems. If the house had an armed system, this would ensure that we didn't trigger the alarm.

The only flaw was the amount of time it took to load. I hadn't had an opportunity to perfect the code, and I was irritated with myself for my lack of foresight. In this line of work, every second counted. The screen finally lit green, and I nudged at Reaper to let go of the pliers. Gesturing for him to follow me, I kept to the shadows and led him around to the other side of the house.

My heart raced from adrenaline, but with my head clear and movements sure, I swam down into the calm space in my mind that I reserved for missions.

I told him to check the garage, and he came back and shook his head. Good, no cars in the garage. My heart seized when I realized that he might have walked past a Wi-Fi

camera if they had one in the backyard for security. I slipped the Wi-Fi scrambler out of my pocket and pressed the button to turn it on just in case they had any. Even if the husband cared to review the footage, he'd only get an image of a big body. Hopefully he'd think it was a wannabe burglar.

Just to be sure there was no one in the house, I pulled out my infrared. I hadn't been able to confirm whether they had any pets, and a barking dog was a complication we didn't need to deal with. My team had made the mistake of not checking for dogs one time, and Izzy still had the imprint of Chihuahua teeth on her right ankle to show for it.

No heat signatures showed on my screen. Slinking toward the back door, I stayed below the windows. Reaper followed, practically crawling to stay low enough. It took me less than thirty seconds to pick the lock on the back door. Still in my crouched position, I waddled into the kitchen. Reaper reached my position, stood to his full height, and stepped farther into the kitchen.

His body went still as a rock. "Fuck," he muttered. Heart pounding in my ears, I slid my gun out of its holster, flipped off the safety, and placed my finger on the trigger. Had we missed something? Was someone home?

Leaning forward, I peeked around the cabinet and found what had made Reaper freeze. A camera. Trained on the backdoor, red light blinking, small antenna sticking up. A cord ran from the device into the wall. My brain stuttered, and I simply stared at that stupid blinking red light.

I'd been played. Set up. I recognized the camera—I had the same ones at my place. It had a memory card and didn't require internet access.

“Abort!” I whispered, then raised my gun and shot the camera. As it exploded into pieces, Reaper turned and ran out of the house. I followed, staying low until I reached the power box where I found Reaper waiting for me.

Without sparing him a glance, I snatched my tablet out of my bag and sent a static shock to any and all devices within a six-hundred-foot radius, rendering them useless for the next ten minutes. Like I should have done before we stepped foot on the property.

Stupid. So goddamn stupid. This was why I worked in the background. So careless, inexperienced screwups like this didn't happen. Berating myself the whole way, I sprinted back the way we'd come, with Reaper right behind me. By the time I flung myself into the cab of his truck, I was trying not to hyperventilate. And failing.

Reaper said something, but I couldn't hear him over the sound of blood rushing in my ears. My body shook with self-loathing so strong and deep I wasn't sure I'd ever find my way out.

When the truck stopped moving, I opened my eyes and stared at my adorable A-frame. I forced myself out of the truck but paused long enough to say “I'll take care of it” before trudging inside.

Who planted the cameras? How had they gotten into the discussion boards? So many questions and zero answers. For now.

I slammed the door, then tore off my shoes and threw them at the floor before marching into the living room. I needed a large enough area to pace and freak out.

I screwed up played on a loop in my mind. Reaper walked in through the side door and all my anger and panic reared its head at him.

“You,” I growled. “If it wasn’t for you, I wouldn’t be in this mess.”

Reaper jerked back and blinked at me, then without a word, he turned back around. I gaped at the empty space he’d vacated, unable to believe he’d just walked out, and almost exploded into a ball of fiery rage when he strolled back in with a beer in his hand.

He flopped down onto the couch and leaned back. “Continue. It’s my fault.” He gestured with the bottle, then took a long swig.

My jaw dropped. “What do you think you’re doing?”

“You need someone to take your anger out on.” He shrugged. “Have at it. I’m not going anywhere. You’ll realize that one day.”

“You’re—” I shook my head. “You’re just going to sit there and let me yell at you?”

“Yell, scream, whatever. I don’t care. I’m not leaving you alone to deal with whatever you’ve got going on in that head of yours.” His lips twitched. “Hell, I’m not leaving you alone ever.”

I resumed pacing, but my steps were slower. Steadier. With a few short sentences, Reaper had sucked the wind right out of my sails. Damn him. Now I had to face reality. He might have given me a nudge, but the dilemma I’d created rested solely on my shoulders.

I dropped down onto the cushion next to him and buried my head in my hands. “What am I going to tell them?”

A large hand rubbed up and down my back. “The truth.”

My team was going to kick my ass. And I deserved it.

Chapter Twenty-Two

PEYTON

I WAS FALLING. My arms flung out, and I hit something hard that grunted.

“Well, that’s one way to wake up,” a sleep-roughened voice said from underneath me. Two arms wrapped around me, pulling me flat against Reaper’s hard body that I was using like a bed.

I tried to pull away, but his arms banded tighter around me. “Where do you think you’re going?” One second we were lying down and the next he had me sitting up in his lap, straddling him. He made a low hum of approval, and the vibration went straight through me. My brain came online, and all my mistakes and what awaited me at work crashed down around me.

His lips trailed down my neck, a soft kiss followed by a suck. But I didn’t want soft and sweet. I wanted hard and angry so I could channel my rage at something other than myself. Reaper would know how to handle it. I trusted him that much.

My hands slid over his shoulders and into his hair, tilting his head back to me and biting his bottom lip hard.

With a hiss, Reaper whipped off my shirt and bra. The cool air kissed my skin, making my nipples pebble. His hands were everywhere. The calluses on his hands scraped my back, and a needy whimper climbed out of my throat.

“That’s it, baby. I want those whimpers. I want everything. Show me how mad you are.” His mouth found my breast, and he flicked the nipple with his tongue before biting it. A tingle raced down my back and I ground my hips down against him. A desperate cry fell from my lips before I could hold it in. “Don’t hold back. Never hold back with me,” he growled as he rolled his hips upward.

I clutched his big shoulders, fingers digging into the fabric of his shirt. The emptiness inside me was painful. I needed him to fill me more than I needed my next breath.

I leaned back on my heels and tugged at his shirt, trying to rip it off him. My nails scraped his skin, leaving angry red lines, and when the shirt refused to tear, I let out a strangled scream. Chuckling, Reaper pulled his shirt off.

I didn’t have the patience to explore and touch the way I wanted to. My hands groped between us, undoing his belt. He was faster and had me on my back with my jeans discarded across the room before I could blink. I used all my limbs to pull his clothes the rest of the way off, then shoved at his shoulders, forcing him up. Reaper fisted his thick length and slowly tugged a few times. A bead of pre-cum glistened at the crown, making my mouth water.

I needed him in my mouth or there was a chance I would die. I kneeled between his legs, forcing them open. His hand kept his slow, torturous pace. I swirled my tongue around the tip, then followed his hand all the way down to the base until he hit the back of my throat. My hand went on top of his and

we stroked his dick together as I bobbed my head up, sucking as I went.

“Fuck, baby. Look at you. You’re perfect. Fucking look at you.” His hand moved to the back of my head, pulling my hair and guiding me up and down. “I don’t know how I ever lived without you on your knees like this.” He pulled my hair out of my ponytail and wrapped it around his fist. “I want you to play with yourself, baby. Just your clit though.” I followed his orders, moaning as I swirled a finger on my clit.

“Yeah, that’s it. I want you to—” He hissed as I constricted my throat around him for several seconds, then worked him in and out of my mouth at a rapid pace.

I loved how undone he became. The way his body flexed as I pushed him closer to the edge.

Breathing heavy, he said, “Two fingers. Dip them inside.” I followed his instructions and my toes curled. Still, I needed more. My fingers were too short to hit the spot.

Reaper pushed to his feet, making me lean on my heels, and angled my head up by my hair. All I could do was hold his stare as he started fucking my mouth. His face was one of complete concentration, lips in a tight line, eyebrows furrowed. He moved faster, and I placed a hand on each of his legs to stay balanced. “You’re going to swallow everything I give you,” he growled. “Every fucking drop, Peyton.”

Warm cum filled my mouth, and I kept sucking and swallowing until he softened in my mouth, then I pulled back and kissed the head. Reaper stared down at me, a proprietary glint in his eyes, his chest heaving like he’d run a race.

Naked and on my knees, I licked my lips. He picked me up and threw me onto the couch. I’d never been so thankful for

having a giant couch until Reaper rearranged my body. Head down, ass up, with him kneeling behind me.

He massaged the round globes of my ass cheeks and groaned. “Fuck, baby. I’ve been dreaming about this pussy for so damn long.” His warm breath dusted over my skin as he trailed kisses up my legs and settled at the apex of my thighs. With a hard jerk, he pulled me closer to his mouth. His tongue made short, soft flicks, like he wanted to take his time.

When he sucked my clit into his mouth, I gripped the couch cushion for dear life. My moans filled the air, my body strung tight with the need to come. I canted my hips back, pushing my pussy into his face, but his mouth disappeared and I whimpered.

He gripped my hair and yanked my head up. My eyes locked on our reflection in the window. Reaper leaned down behind me, slipping a finger into me. Our eyes met in the reflection; his beard dripped with my wetness. I could barely breathe as he slowly pushed his finger in and out while he licked his lips.

My body moved with his finger, seeking more of him. A second finger joined the first, and I moaned his name.

“That’s it, baby. Ride me. Give me everything you have.” He curled his fingers and sucked on my clit, and my orgasm pulsed through me. I never wanted it to end, never wanted Reaper to stop touching me.

His fingers kept pumping in and out, curving each time to hit that spot I could never reach without help. He sucked long and hard at my clit. My body hadn’t made it down from the first before I was spiraling again.

When I finally pried my eyes open, I looked into Reaper's smug face reflected in the window. He slid a condom down over his length and rubbed himself up and down my slit. Unable to handle his teasing, I pushed back and took every inch of him inside me with one fluid motion. We froze there, his pelvis pressed against my ass, for a long moment.

"Fucking made for me." Reaper pulled out and slammed back in. "You're mine. You've always been mine." He said something else, but I was so focused on the sensations consuming my body to make out the words. He angled my head, forcing me to watch our reflection.

With a feral groan, he moved faster. The sound of slapping flesh filled the room. A finger traced down my spine followed by a series of hot, wet kisses. He bent over, his body completely covering mine, and put his mouth against my ear. "So many dirty things I want to do to you." He bit down on my earlobe, and my back arched as a harsh cry tore out of my throat. "Take all your anger out on me, baby. I can handle it. I'll take everything you got." His pace slowed as his finger stroked my clit, and I fluttered around him.

I needed more. Harder. Faster. So I took it, pushing myself back onto his length. He didn't move, simply let me use him until he snapped. Yanking my head up by my hair, he forced my back to arch and met my pace stroke for stroke. All the rage and fear coursing through my veins, I let it go, took it out on him and took what I needed. And Reaper welcomed it.

The force of my orgasm made me collapse. Reaper continued to pound into me, his movements growing erratic until he went still. Everything went dark.

When my eyes refocused, I found myself lying on the soft rug next to the couch with Reaper thrusting into me from

above. Completely losing himself in me. His lips were moving, and it sound like he was repeatedly chanting “Forever.”

A thumb circled my clit and my body tightened. His mouth went to my shoulder, biting down hard as he came, and the pain set me off once more.

Wrapping me in his arms, he held me tight while he caught his breath. I was safe, sated, and so completely blissed-out from orgasms. My body was floating on cloud twelve.

It took me a bit to realize I was floating, literally, because Reaper was carrying me bridal style through the house.

He set me on my feet and moved through my bathroom like he'd been here before, immediately going to the right cabinet for a washcloth. Once he was finished cleaning himself, he cleaned me with soft strokes.

I swallowed hard and dropped my head onto his shoulder, completely spent. He carried me to bed and climbed in beside me. I curled my body into his and fell asleep with his naked body warming mine.

At some point in the night, we reached for each other. He slid inside me, and our heavy breaths filled the room, our fingers laced together. I squeezed his hand as I came, a low groan came from him as he filled me and stayed there.

As fast as I woke up, I fell asleep. My body completely sated, with Reaper still planted deep inside me. But as I drifted off, I had one last thought—maybe tomorrow wouldn't be so bad if he'd be there with me to weather the storm.

Chapter Twenty-Three

PEYTON

“LET’S GO,” Reaper said, sliding out of the driver’s seat. When I tried to leave for the office this morning, he’d snatched the car keys out of my hand and said he would drop me off. I was too nervous to face my team to fight with him.

I’d called Betty while he was in the shower, and her silence after I explained what happened had spoken volumes. I knew I’d have to face the consequences of breaking the thing that mattered most—my team’s trust—but before she hung up, she told me she’d fill them in on the basics.

I got out of the truck and caught up to Reaper on the sidewalk. The clubhouse seemed more ominous than the last time I was there. “Why didn’t you drop me off first?” I hadn’t paid attention during the drive, but I’d assumed he was taking me to work.

He slowed his pace so I didn’t have to run to keep up. “I sent out a text last night for my brothers to be on alert but need to fill them in on details. Then I’ll drop you off.”

I should have thought of that, and the fact I hadn’t further proved the poor quality of my mental state.

Inside the clubhouse, brothers milled around, talking and listening to music like they were having a small party at ten in

the morning. One by one, they noticed me standing there and their conversations trickled off. By the time I was halfway through the room, someone had turned off the music and everyone was staring at me.

In my peripheral vision, I caught a fist flying toward me and ducked, but the punch wasn't aimed my way. The fist slammed into Reaper's jaw, snapping his head to the side. Another punch caught him in the stomach.

Boomerang followed up with a punch to Reaper's kidney. Reaper finally reacted, tackling my brother to the ground.

They rolled around, grunting and making poor attempts to choke each other out. I swallowed a laugh. It wasn't funny, but I couldn't help myself. I'd seen better grappling from toddlers.

Boomerang finally broke free and reared up, fist cocked. "I didn't get her away from our raving bitch of a mother so that you could get her killed. I told you to stay away." He threw a jab into Reaper's nose. Blood soaked them both, but neither seemed to notice. "What the hell were you thinking? She could've been taken. Targeted," he roared.

The fury behind his words triggered a part of me that I'd thought long dead. This uncharacteristic show of concern from my brother shouldn't have mattered. Not after years of thinking he tolerated my existence at best. But I found myself questioning everything I thought I'd known about our relationship as they continued to fight, their snarls and growls filling the air.

Boomerang put the full weight of his body into his next punch, and I winced at the force with which Reaper's head slammed into the ground. He lifted his head, his features hidden behind the blood coating his face. "Stop fucking hitting me, you shithead."

“I warned you what would happen if you touched her.” Boomerang got to his feet and rammed the toe of his boot into Reaper’s ribs.

The murderous expression on Reaper’s face had me taking a step back. I was about to witness how he kept the brothers in line. Starting with mine. Except just when I thought the tide would turn and he would put an end to the fight, he merely wrestled Boomerang to the ground. Reaper was fighting back, but he wasn’t giving everything he had. I could see the way he pulled his punches at the last second. He was letting my brother take his rage out on him, but I didn’t understand why.

I had to resist dual urges to walk away and insert myself by breaking them up. My feet were rooted to the floor, so walking away wasn’t an option. And I knew better than to put myself between two people determined to break each other’s faces.

Uncle Wolf and High walked through the door and stopped for a moment before jumping in. Their presence had the other brothers springing to action. Within seconds, Boomerang and Reaper stood facing each other, both surrounded by brothers and breathing heavily.

“That was the one and only time you get to hit me because of her,” Reaper said in such a low tone that I had to strain to hear him. “I let her go the first time because of you and Midas. That was a mistake I won’t make again. She was mine then and she’s mine now.” A smug smile pulled at his bloody mouth. “Get used to calling me family, brother-in-law.” He threw a wink at Boomerang, then strode out of the room.

I double blinked at Reaper’s insinuation. *I am going to shoot out his kneecaps.*

Boomerang stood in front of me, his face even more murderous than before. “Tell me he didn’t call me his *brother-in-law*.” He spat the words out like they tasted sour. “Did you marry that fucking idiot?”

I snorted. “No. Can’t you tell when someone’s trying to get under your skin?” His shoulders slumped, and he wiped a drop of blood from the corner of his mouth.

I sized him up, thinking back to the events of the past fifteen minutes. “You have two minutes to clean up and meet me outside by the picnic tables. Seems we have some catching up to do.” I crossed my arms and waited for him to respond, not about to let him get out of talking to me.

“Give me five.” He took one step and stopped. “Stay away from *him* while I clean off his blood.” The hatred pouring from him confused me. He’d always been angry at the world, like he couldn’t find a reason to be happy. To smile. But this went deeper than that, and I intended to find out why. For the first time in our lives, we were going to sit down and—hopefully—have a civil conversation.

As I got comfortable at one of the picnic tables, I chuckled to myself. I’d bet my whole ass that my brother had no idea what the word civil even meant.

With a beer in each hand, Boomerang joined me a few minutes later. He handed me a bottle and sat down across from me but stared into the trees over my shoulder. Just before I opened my mouth to speak, his eyes locked on my face. “Did you ever question how I got the nod to join the club?”

That wasn’t how I expected this to start. “First, how did you know what happened last night? I only told Betty, who said she was only giving my team the bare minimum.”

His face reddened and he looked away. “I uh—” He cleared his throat. “I was in a position to overhear that something happened with you and Reaper. I came straight to the clubhouse.” After a second, he turned back to me. “Let’s get back to what I asked. Do you know how I got my patch?”

“I want you to know that I’m going to dig and find out how you got that information. As for the club, I assumed that being a legacy—”

Boomerang shook his head. “Legacies are for sons, not nephews. I joined the old-fashioned way. Came in, told my story, hoped it was good enough.” Boomerang’s knuckles turned white around the neck of the beer bottle. “Do you remember what it was like living with them?”

He meant our parents. For the first eight years of my life, we’d lived in the same house in the same wealthy neighborhood. But unlike me, he was doted on. The golden child who could do no wrong.

I’d done everything in my power to erase those years from my memory.

When I didn’t say anything, Boomerang gripped the back of his neck and continued. “Right. So our mother is a vain, narcissistic bitch. Our father’s a spineless twat.” Leaning forward, I looked down and watched beads of condensation roll down the bottle in my hand. “Do you remember what they were like?”

I bounced my knee. “Not really, just how they made me feel. Scared and uncomfortable. Mother was ... mean.” I despised calling her that. She didn’t deserve the title. “I hated when the school called her because she’d get so mad and yell at me. Lock me in my room.” No matter what I did, it was never good enough.

He nodded but his expression was soft. “She hated you. She only wanted boys. You got the name Peyton because that’s what she picked out for her son and refused to change it.” Boomerang clenched his jaw. “She blamed you for everything. Said you sucked the beauty right out of her. And then everyone saw how smart you were and that’s all anyone wanted to talk to her about. Not about her, but about you.” The torment in his eyes nearly broke me, and I had to stifle the urge to lay a comforting hand on his arm.

“You being a fucking genius was what sent her over the edge. Any time I showed you affection, gave you a hug, let you read to me, she’d punish you. I’m not as smart as you,” he said with a self-deprecating smile, “but it didn’t take me long to catch on to what was happening. So I tried ignoring you. She still hated you, but as long as I ignored you, she mostly did too. I realized that the only way I could help keep you safe was to pretend you didn’t exist.”

His admission caused memories to flood to the surface. The loneliness of isolation. Being forced to eat in my room alone. Having no one to talk to about anything real and not being allowed to talk at all whenever we had guests. The time she’d realized that all my friends lived in the pages of my favorite books and had thrown them all away.

But never once had I considered what it was like for him. How being the favorite child wasn’t the boon I’d thought it was. How selfish was I that it never occurred to me that he was suffering too?

“Our father was no better. He let her do whatever she wanted and never protected you the way he should have.” He took a long pull from his beer, then looked up at the sky. “One night they got into a fight. Well, more like he sat there and

listened while she yelled and bitched about you. Said that she wanted to send you to this military school she'd read about. One meant to help troubled youth or some shit. Sperm donor didn't say a fucking thing. Didn't tell her she was crazy, that you weren't fucking *troubled*. Nothing.

“A few days later, I saw the brochure on the kitchen table. So I called Uncle Wolf.” He looked into my eyes, and for the first time I could remember, I could see that he loved me. I gasped, feeling like I'd been sucker punched. His call to Uncle Wolf had saved me, and I didn't know how to thank him for that after all these years. “Weren't you like twelve?”

He shrugged. “Yeah. I was too young to help you, so I called the strongest person I knew. The only guy who ever stood up to Mom and Dad. I knew he'd keep you safe, and it helped that he hated our parents. He and Aunt Jeannie stormed in, threw their weight around with a few of their friends, and got you out. Mom was more put out that bikers dirtied up her floor than she was about them taking you.”

“I remember her not hugging me goodbye.” Not that I'd cared, but it had stuck with me.

“They had to sign over half the construction company to Redemption for child support.” He chuckled. Nobody ever told me how Redemption had pulled that one off, and I smiled at the knowledge that Uncle Wolf had stuck it to our parents in a way that benefited the club they both loathed so much. “Aunt Jeannie really enjoyed that part. Threatened to tell Mom's little country club friends exactly what kind of mother she was if they didn't sign. Never seen her move so fast.”

I nodded but didn't know what to say after all of that. We sat across from each other, him sipping his beer and me

peeling off the label of mine, and for the first time ever, the silence between us wasn't uncomfortable.

"Why'd it take so long for you to talk to me?" I finally asked.

"I don't like talking. But figured I didn't have a choice after kicking your boyfriend's ass."

"You're right, you didn't have a choice. And I don't have a boyfriend, but since you brought Reaper up, maybe we should have a chat about that too." I raised my eyebrows.

Boomerang glared at me but gave in when I didn't budge. "Fuck. Fine. Whatever. Midas was in on it with me, so you better pull him in for one of these come-to-Jesus meetings too." He paused. I nodded and motioned for him to continue. "We, uh ... warned him." Tipping his head back, he stared at the sky for a long moment before coming back to me. "You're one of the most precious things I have in my life, Payday, even if I never showed it. I saw the way you looked at him. You deserved to live whatever life you wanted, not be stuck because you got involved with someone when you were too young. If you're looking for an apology, I'm not going to give you one."

I'd completely forgotten that he used to call me Payday, and him using the old childhood nickname now made me remember how much I adored him when I was little. How I called him "Eat" because I couldn't make the *th* sound, and how he was so patient when I made him play dolls or listen to me read *Matilda* over and over again. And now, he was being so sweet in his own misguided and deranged way.

"I was always going to leave for work, Eat." His head fell back on a laugh, and he elbowed me but turned serious when I continued. "I didn't have the option to stick around for what

might've happened.” Sipping my beer, I tried to find the right words to express what the past ten years had been like for me. “Reaper’s rejection hit hard, especially when the rest of you literally acted like I didn’t exist anymore. The things he said to me that day ... I thought I was the problem. That’s a lot of anguish you put me through with your misguided attempt to protect me.”

“Okay, fine. I should have told you to stay away from Reaper instead of the other way around.” He might not be willing to apologize, but I could see the regret in his eyes. “And yeah, we kept our distance. What can I say? We’re idiots. Uncle Wolf let it slip that you were working for the government, and Redemption isn’t known for being on the right side of the law. It made sense to keep away so you wouldn’t be forced to rat on us.” If I could have shaken sense into all the brothers, I would have a long time ago. Sadly, Aunt Jeannie was right—when the younger members put their heads together, things were bound to go to shit. “And, well, we were a little bitter that you worked for the Feds. Not that we knew exactly what kind of work you did, but still.” He brought the beer up to take a sip and paused. “Don’t call me Ethan. I’m your brother, but I’m not their son anymore.”

His explanation wouldn’t have made sense to anyone who hadn’t grown up in this life, but I had, so I knew he was telling the truth.

Ethan, the big brother who I still sometimes struggled to merge with *Boomerang*, stared over my shoulder. “Do I have to be nice to him?”

“Be nice to who?” The look he gave me made me giggle. Who knew having a brother could be so much fun?

“Dipshit,” he huffed. “The one who isn’t good enough for you. The guy I explicitly told to stay away from you or I’d make his life hell.” He pointed toward the clubhouse and snorted. “The asshole who’s watching us from the doorway like a creep. He’s a good brother, a great enforcer, but dammit, Payday, I don’t like him for you.”

“Let’s not get too hasty. I’m still deciding if I’m going to keep him around.” I put my chin in my hands, smiling.

He let out a resigned sigh and shook his head. “It’s cute that you think you have a choice.” He leaned close and lowered his voice. “That moron waited for you for years. You can fight all you want, but unless all those feelings you had for him back then went away completely, you’re a goner, kid.”

“Let’s table any discussion on my love life for now, please.” I finally had a chance to get to know the brother I’d always wished for but never thought I’d have. “Unless you want to talk about Chris and why you seem to get angrier whenever she’s around.” His scowl deepened, and I laughed.

We were walking back to the clubhouse when I dared to ask the question lingering in the back of my mind. “Hey, do they ever try to reach out?”

“Once, when I finished law school. I hadn’t spoken to them in years, but they showed up at graduation. I made it clear they weren’t welcome in my life.” My heart ached for him. For me too. Neither of us deserved the hand we’d been dealt as children. But we were both damn lucky for where we’d ended up.

Chapter Twenty-Four

PEYTON

I KNEW that I owed each member of my team their own special brand of apology. I gave myself one day to let their anger settle before taking on Izzy. She'd be good practice for the rest, and I knew just how to approach her.

It was four o'clock, and she wasn't at the office, so I knew she could only be one other place. Iron Maiden MMA, the gym her dad owned.

I'd gotten geared up in the locker room and found Izzy on the center mats, stretching. She eyed me as I approached. "You're teaching a self-defense class today, right?" I asked, but I already knew the answer. "Figured you could use an extra pair of hands. There's a big group in the locker room." I bounced on the balls of my feet, unable to contain my nerves.

"Fine. You can help," she said after a few seconds.

"Maybe we can go a few rounds after? It's been a while since we hit the mat together." I held my breath and waited for her to answer.

Izzy chuckled. "Yeah. I think I can fit in a few rounds in the ring." Her vicious smile told me just how much she was looking forward to it.

The girls filed in, and we started the class.

An hour and a half later, I was rethinking all my life choices. Particularly the one that had led me here this afternoon. Air left my lungs in a *whoosh*, and I forced myself to stay on my feet as I dodged Izzy's fist. Barely.

We were on our fourth ten-minute round, and I didn't know if I'd make it the full hour. A drop of sweat fell into my eye, blurring my vision for a second and making me miss the punch aimed for my right kidney.

Dancing back on the balls of my feet, I gave myself a moment to recover, then came at her again, throwing my full weight into every hit. My jab glanced off her face, but my body shot landed. Izzy's eyes flashed with feral delight.

Her dad cheered her on from her corner, yelling at her to keep at me, that I was weak on my right side. *Will he shut up?*

Izzy squared her shoulders and snapped her right leg out, sweeping me off my feet. She was on me before I hit the mat, but the bell rang, ending the round and the potential of her killing me in the ring. *For now.*

"She doesn't need you to cheer her on," I yelled. Or I tried to. I was breathing so hard the words came out jumbled.

A deep male chuckle came from my side of the ring, and it took me less than a second to find the source. Devin "Steelfist" Thompson, the current heavyweight champion of the UFC and Izzy's dad's pride and joy fighter—next to his daughter. "When she's on top of you like that, buck her off. Get your legs around her neck and choke her out," he coached. I turned, ready to take whatever advice he wanted to offer. He wasn't the defending heavyweight champion of the world for nothing.

“Get the fuck away from her, Jolly Green Giant. She doesn’t want to fuck you,” Izzy called out from the other side of the ring. Shit. I needed her forgiveness, and talking to the man she despised more than anything wasn’t going to win me any points. Looked like I’d just have to let her kill me.

“You get a coach in your corner, buttercup. Why can’t she have one in hers?” I shot him a glare, and he gave me an innocent smile in return. The guy loved riling her up, but I couldn’t let him. Izzy was one of the best fighters on the planet when she was happy. If he pissed her off ...

I may as well put my legs behind my head and kiss my ass goodbye.

“Get away from me. I’m already losing.” I shooed him away. Spitting out my mouth guard, I grabbed my water bottle. My hands were so sweaty I couldn’t twist the nozzle. Devin grabbed it from me and shot water right into my mouth. I snatched the bottle back and shook my head. “Go away, dammit. I don’t need you riling her up.”

He laughed like this entire exchange was the highlight of his day. He finally walked away, but not before he cast a glance back at Isla, a small frown marring his face.

The man had it bad for her. Too bad he didn’t stand a chance. Not with his history.

The gong rang, signaling the start of the fifth round, and nine-and-a-half grueling minutes later, I somehow had Izzy on her back, struggling to get her arm out for an armbar. The bell rang, but we ignored it.

Just as she got her arm free, hands reached in and separated us. We stood facing each other, sucking air and grinning. Izzy glanced over and saw who was holding her up,

and my grin got wider when she rammed her elbow into Devin's stomach. He doubled over, and I almost felt sorry for him. I knew how much that hurt, but the asshole had it coming.

Izzy spit her mouth guard at him and turned back to me. "You need more practice. Hanging around that big biker is making you soft. And stupid."

We both knew that was bullshit, but I let her taunt me. "Same time tomorrow?" Struggling to stay upright, I dropped an arm around her shoulders and gave her some of my weight.

"We're a team, Pey. Going off with Reaper was like going off by yourself. An unnecessary risk."

"I know. It was stupid, and it won't happen again." I wasn't above dropping to my knees and begging her. If she let me go, I'd probably be on the floor anyway. Might as well do something useful while I was down there.

Sighing, Izzy pulled me over to the bench. We both collapsed and she put her head on my shoulder. "Love you. You're the weird sister I never wanted. And I'm never gonna let the others forget that you picked me to apologize to first."

She really wouldn't, I thought, even as I tried to figure out my next move.

Food was Chris's love language, and anyone who spent more than ten minutes in her presence knew that.

Carrying her favorite meal from Bark City BBQ like it was a baby, I entered the garage where Chris spent the bulk of her free time. She was an engineer at heart and had a special love of building things. And taking them apart. She'd dismantled more than one bomb and had hotwired countless cars that got us out of a pinch.

She finished screwing a part into an engine, then turned and faced me. I got straight to the point. "I'm sorry. I was stupid and it won't happen again. I love you." Her lips pursed as she eyed the bag in my arms. "Food," I said, holding it out to her like an offering. "Figured you'd be hungry, and it's been a while since we just hung out."

Seconds yawned by. Finally, she moved over to the sink in the corner and scrubbed her hands and arms clean of the black grease that stained her skin. As she strode past me, she snagged the food and walked straight outside. I bit back a laugh and followed.

She was digging into her jalapeño mac and cheese with bacon chips when a roaring engine had me looking toward the road, and I caught sight of my brother driving by, his head turned in our direction.

"Does that, uh ... happen often?"

"Maybe?" She shrugged but continued to eat. "I hadn't really noticed." The tips of her ears turned red, and I narrowed my eyes.

"Is there something you want to tell me?" Boomerang mentioned he heard something happened with me and Reaper but never actually told me where. "Was he by chance anywhere near you when Betty called and told you what happened?" I asked.

She lifted her head but stared over my shoulder, a tactic she used when she was nervous and knew she'd spill her guts if she made it all the way to my eyes. "Um, well, he was at my place. He came to thank me for the whole rescue mission thing. You know, since I was the one who pulled him out or whatever."

Her cheeks blazed crimson, and I chuckled. There was a reason the team loved playing poker with her. Same reason she refused to play for money. “Christina Mendoza. Do you have a crush on my brother?” Her eyes went wide, and she shoved an entire slice of Texas-style brisket into her mouth, then motioned that she couldn’t talk.

When she finally finished chewing, she swallowed and inhaled deeply. “Let’s focus on the matter at hand, Pey. Thank you for coming here and apologizing. But I will hold you to your promise to never do it again. And thanks for the food.” I rolled my eyes but didn’t argue. If she hadn’t been trying to shut down my curiosity over whatever was happening between her and my brother, Chris would have tried to solicit a few more meals from me. I guess I could only be grateful for the opportunity to earn her forgiveness so easily.

Two down, three to go. This was going better than I thought it would.

It took me two days to get the bleach right, but it had turned out perfectly. After the first two shirts disintegrated, I’d almost given up. But I knew making her a copycat of the distressed, acid-washed shirts my aunt made for me was my best shot at earning her immediate forgiveness. I studied my handiwork. She was going to love that I’d used a T-shirt featuring the cover of her favorite album, Red Hot Chili Peppers’ *Blood Sex Sugar Magik*. I was almost sad to part with it, but I was excited for Adrienne to have it.

I parked in front of her townhouse and looked around at the cookie-cutter houses. I was the only one of my team who didn’t live in this neighborhood, but after spending eight years living on top of, around, and underneath five other women, I’d needed my space. My cabin offered the perfect amount of

solitude and tranquility after my time in Ghost Unit, and if I wanted chaos, I only needed to go to the office.

When Adrienne opened the door for me, her eyes went straight to the wrapped gift in my hands, and her face lit up. She pulled me inside and held out her hands in a gimme gesture. I couldn't even pretend to be offended because her reaction was exactly what I'd expected. After handing it over, I walked over to the couch and sat down, eager to see her face when she opened the gift. She didn't disappoint. Her squeal had me covering my ears, but I grinned when she threw off the shirt she was wearing and pulled the new one on.

"Lookin' good," I told her as she strutted up and down the length of her living room like it was her own personal runway. "I have a Salt-N-Pepa shirt for my next screwup."

She plopped down beside me and dropped her arm around my shoulders. "We all screw up, perfect Peyton." I rolled my eyes at the name my team used for me whenever I harped on going over the details of a mission for the fifth, tenth, and fifteenth time. "It was bound to be you at some point. Kinda obnoxious it took you ten years, actually." She giggled. "For real, though. I forgave you like an hour after you told us. It was just too sad. I couldn't hold a grudge with you looking like someone had stolen your favorite pair of Louboutins."

I laughed and let myself bask in the relief that I'd earned the forgiveness of another one of my sisters. "Thank you."

Adrienne pulled me into a hug, then pulled back and gripped both of my shoulders. "So, back to the important shit." She waggled her eyebrows. "Tell me. Are you getting the good dick? Is it big? Is the promise of the premise real?"

Scoffing, I gently shoved her away. "I am not answering any of those questions."

“Sure, sure.” She nodded hard. “But seriously, at least tell me how many orgasms he gives you a night?” Her peal of laughter reminded me how lucky I was to have such incredible women in my life and how stupid I was to risk losing their trust.

What had seemed like such a good idea at the time had come back to bite me in the ass. I’d thought that saving the two hardest apologies for last would give me the confidence I needed to deal with Jessen and Tyler. I was wrong.

Jessen was going to want to talk about *feelings*. The woman was tough as steel, she had to be to dive into the psyche of serial killers, and she wasn’t going to let me off easy. I mulled over my approach as I walked inside the police station that held all the county’s cold cases. Which had become something of an obsession for Jessen.

I signed in and headed down the stairs into the basement. The basement lights were dim, and the low hum of music carried down the rows of tall shelves containing unsolved cases. I found Jessen in her usual spot, at a large table with pictures and reports fanned out around her. She didn’t look up but the stiffness in her shoulders told me she was aware of my presence.

I sat down across from her. “Why do you do this?”

Jessen pushed a gruesome picture toward me and sighed. “Someone needs to remember them. All these cases ...” She gestured toward the countless file boxes stacked on the shelves. “The leads have dried up, detectives moved on. If I can help give insight that reignites the investigation on a single one, well, I need to.”

I understood what she meant. I really did. But we dealt with such ugliness, I couldn’t help but wonder how she

managed to stay sane when she spent all her free time surrounded by more of it. “I guess I thought maybe you’d rather spend your off time doing something a little less ... macabre.”

“It doesn’t bother me. I like it. What *does* bother me is when my friend—no, *my sister*—takes unnecessary risks and jeopardizes our work. And does it with a guy she supposedly doesn’t like.” Jessen leaned back in her chair and crossed her arms over her chest. I was struck with immense sympathy for any children she ended up having—the woman had a mom-look that could rival the best of them.

“You’re right. What I did was stupid, self-centered, and risky. I made a mistake. There won’t be a repeat performance. I’m sorry.” I swallowed hard and waited. After two solid minutes of facing her silent stare, I had to fight the urge to fidget.

Finally, she closed the folder and set it off to the side. “You like him.”

I winced and stared up at the dingy ceiling tiles. “Do we have to talk about this?” I asked. “Don’t you have a riveting cold case I can help with or something?” Anything to not talk about the emotions that swirled in my chest every time I thought about Reaper.

“You don’t have to say a word. I know you like him. What I want to know is why you’ve spent the last ten years carrying this grudge around like a security blanket.”

“That’s not fair.” I leaned forward. “He hurt me, Jess. He didn’t just cut me out of his life, he made it so I had nobody. Sure, I met you and the others not long after, but having my foundation ripped out from under me like that ...” I squeezed

my eyes shut and focused on breathing in through my nose, out through my mouth.

“I get it, Pey. I really do. But he’s older now. More mature. It seems like he knows how badly he messed up and will do anything to fix it.” She tilted her head. “Maybe it’s time you let him. But that means you need to accept that the Reaper you know now is a different man than the one you knew then.”

I told Jessen about how he let me rage that night, let me blame him despite it not being his fault, and how it reminded me of the dynamic between Uncle Wolf and Aunt Jeannie.

“He knows who you are, Peyton. Knows what you need.” She placed her hand over mine and gave me a gentle smile. “Let him in. Stop fighting it so hard. You screwed up big time that night, but we all know that you wouldn’t have gone by yourself. One of the reasons Tyler is so upset—have you made amends with her yet?”

I blanched and shook my head. “Not yet.”

“Oh, well good luck.” I glared at her, unamused. “Anyway. One of the reasons Tyler is so mad is because you went with him. You showed that you trusted him more than you trusted us.”

I opened my mouth, then shut it again when she held up her hand.

“Don’t argue. I’m right. We might have all voted against you, but that was official business. If you had come to any one of us and said you needed to follow up on that woman, we would have helped you. Because we love you. That’s personal. I know you know that. Tyler knows it too.”

“Got any advice on how to fix things with her?”

Her head fell back on a laugh. When she was finished, she looked at me and shook her head. “Sorry. You’re on your own with that one. As for Reaper, when he asks you on a date, say yes. Stop fighting it.”

“But—”

“Stop, Pey. If you let him, Reaper will make you the center of his universe. We all see it. It’s there every time he looks at you. Maybe this was the wake up call you needed to realize that your trust in him isn’t misplaced. Let yourself feel all the big feelings for him. He won’t make the same mistake twice.”

“And you know this how?”

Jessen shrugged. “I can read people. It’s literally my job.” She grabbed the file she’d been looking at when I walked in. “Before you go, will you take a look at this for me? There’s something about the blood splatter pattern that isn’t adding up.”

I glared at the armory door like it owed me money. I’d been trying to nail Tyler down for two days, and every time I thought I had her cornered, she slipped through my fingers like the goddamn ghost she was. I was prepared to lock us both in the armory, and I could only hope it didn’t come to that. I loved Tyler, but I’d be lying if I said that I didn’t save her for last because I was scared to face her.

Might as well get started. I opened the door, then fell back a step when I slammed into Tyler. Her face was annoyingly blank as she retreated into the armory, giving me space to enter.

Clearing my throat, I stepped inside and closed the door behind me. “I’ve thought about how to apologize to you a

hundred times. But unlike everyone else, you don't love anything but guns and shooting people."

"We shouldn't even be having this conversation. You knew better, but you did it anyway." Tyler leaned against the wall, arms and legs crossed, fury radiating from her every pore. "We're a team. Teams don't work unless they work together. Unless there's implicit trust. You broke that trust. You put us all in jeopardy."

"You're right." I nodded, ready to take whatever she needed to dish out.

"Is this something we should expect from here on out? You get a little dick and you follow it wherever it leads?" She could've frozen me with her cold tone and nasty words. Except I knew her. Knew all about her hangups with relationships, so her words bounced off me.

The dick isn't little. My lips twitched, but I knew better than to say that aloud. I exhaled. "No, Ty. One mistake was enough for me. It will never happen again."

Tyler's rage was like a physical thing, replacing all the oxygen in the room. "I'm not like the others. I won't accept your platitudes, gifts, and whatever the fuck else you've been using to win over the others."

No shit. Tyler wasn't known for her forgiving nature, and I had no idea how to regain her trust. We stayed silent, staring at one another. I didn't know what to say. *I'm sorry* wasn't going to cut it.

"I fucked up, Ty. That's all I got. If you want to punish me for it, I'll let you." Stepping forward, I lifted my chin. "But you know that nobody will ever kick my ass over a mistake harder or longer than I will." She quirked one eyebrow, as if

daring me to continue. And I had no idea what came over me, but I rose to her challenge and let out a humorless laugh. “But if you ever imply that I’m a weak-willed woman being led around by some dick ever again ...” Her forehead wrinkled, and the uncharacteristic menace in my tone surprised me too. “I will hack into every fucking device and electronic you use and make your life a living hell. You got me?” As soon as the words left my mouth, I wished I could call them back. But no. Fuck that. Tyler respected strength, and the only way she would trust me again was if I proved that I wouldn’t be jerked around. Not even by her.

She stared at me like a predator eyeing its prey. “You’re lucky Jessen forced me to sit down with her and talk through this shit.” She went silent, and I crossed my arms, waiting. When the corners of her lips twitched, I nearly blew my cover and wept with relief. “And if you hadn’t shown me that you actually have a backbone, this wouldn’t be over. Nice to see the badass Peyton I know and love. You really should let her out more. Have you figured out who was behind the message board?” she asked.

I blinked at her, my head spinning at the abrupt subject change. Was that it? I’d come in here expecting to take the first step and then spend the next several months letting her torment me. But I was way too smart to look a gift horse in the mouth. Knowing how quickly she could change her mind, I forced myself to focus on her question. “Not yet. I tore apart the message board, trying to trace the post back to its source but found nothing. I had to hit pause on the search while I made my rounds, but now that I’m done apologizing, I can devote my time to finding answers.”

She nodded. “I’ve been thinking about it. I know you want to use computers to find the person who set you up, but I think

we should go in the opposite direction. Keep all the alerts you have set up, but he's going to come to you. Think about how many men we've caught because they couldn't stay away. Snakes always show their faces at some point."

She wasn't wrong. Which sucked because I really hated waiting.

She must have read my mind because she said, "Waiting can be worth it if the prize at the end means removing another shit stain from the world." Just before she walked out the door, she turned and gave me a ferocious smile. "If he gets you hurt, I will remove every single one of his appendages and feed them to him one by one. And then I will let him live out his days as a helpless eunuch." With that, she left me alone in the armory to marvel at her imagination.

Chapter Twenty-Five

PEYTON

THE MAT WAS cool on my back. My body was too tired to move, to do anything other than lie there.

“That’s time, ladies,” Betty called out from the other side of the room. Izzy collapsed next to me, her arm thrown over her face.

“That was hard,” she said between breaths. I hummed in agreement. It was the best I could do. We’d just wrapped up an endurance workout that included running, biking, and a bunch of other bodyweight exercises. My arms felt like there were fifty-pound weights attached to them, and moving my legs was like fighting against a strong current.

Staying in shape was a matter of life and death. The difference between outrunning our target and losing them. Carrying a fallen teammate or leaving them to die. We needed the strength to beat someone whose aim was to kill us.

“Don’t forget to practice your pole work. We have that undercover op with the FBI coming up in a few weeks. One of you needs to make the roster for their new stripper,” Betty said as she walked down the line of bodies that had collapsed on the floor.

Twenty minutes later, the six of us were standing around the two poles installed in the corner of the gym.

“Hook your foot here.” I demonstrated wrapping my leg around the pole for Izzy.

“This is deceptively difficult,” she muttered.

“Of all the people, I would have expected Adrienne to be the one that knew how to work a pole,” Jessen joked as she stretched her hamstrings. Adrienne squawked but Jessen waved her off. “Your dad owns *several* strip clubs. Don’t pretend to be insulted.”

“Fair point.” Adrienne pointed at me. “It’s always the quiet ones, isn’t it?”

“Shut up. I saw a few YouTube videos, and Aunt Jeannie and Scarlett took me to a few classes when I was a teenager. To help with my self-esteem.” I spun around the pole.

A cough got our attention, and Leanne stepped in with a huge smile plastered on her face and two boxes and a bag in her arms. “Peyton, this was sent for you.” She only made it two steps before Adrienne intercepted her, grabbed the boxes, and ripped the first one open.

“La Perla!” Adrienne dropped the box and held up a satin emerald-green bra and matching panties. Jessen was next to her in the blink of an eye, opening the envelope that had fallen to the ground.

Peyton, be ready by 7 p.m. I’ll pick you up at the office.

I stared at the note, butterflies taking off in my stomach. I’d been on several dates, but none of them had ever put anywhere near this much effort into it. I was lucky if they’d made a dinner reservation.

Izzy had her hands on the second box, and she revealed a short black silk dress, just the right side of the biker-babe look I favored, leveled up with class. Chris whipped a pair of black satin platform heels from the bag.

“Wow. He really knows how to shop for you,” Jessen said, her eyebrows up at her hairline.

Adrienne’s fashionista eyes assessed the dress. “Yeah, your boy did really well. Quality shit. Guess the weed, construction, and smuggling business has been good to him.”

Jessen elbowed her hard and sighed. “So romantic. The effort he put into all this ... so thoughtful.”

Adrienne tapped her phone and squealed. “It’s five thirty. We have an hour and a half.”

Tyler groaned and got to her feet. “I’ll get my fancy diffuser.”

Everyone else sprang into action, running to their respective rooms for whatever supplies they thought I might need to get ready.

I stayed rooted where I was. A date with Reaper.

Don’t panic. It was just a date, right?

Twenty minutes later, I had scrubbed, shaved, and oiled my entire body while Adrienne called the time every three minutes. When I opened the bathroom door and walked out, my entire team had transformed from badass, take-no-shit combatants to a beauty squad. Even Tyler.

Jessen stepped forward, her face serious. “Before we start, I need to ask you if you’re prepared for this.”

I considered her question. Considered everything that had transpired between Reaper and me. “He’s not the same man

who hurt me,” I finally said. Then I tilted my head back and sighed. “And maybe I think he’s ...” I cleared my throat. “Attractive or something.”

Chris guffawed. “Or something. Did you hear that, guys?” The others started laughing too. “She thinks the guy every woman in this room knows is sex on a fucking stick is—and I quote—*attractive or something*.”

“I don’t know what’s so funny.” I put my hands on my hips.

“Peyton, we’ve talked about this,” Jessen coaxed, using her therapist tone on me.

“Stop it with that voice.” I jabbed a finger at her, which caused another round of giggles from everyone. “Are we sure I want to do this?”

“Yes,” Adrienne said as she laid the dress on the bed. “You’ve already let him have the milk for free, as my mother would say. You might as well get the princess treatment. I mean really, Pey. Look at this dress. And the shoes.” She picked them up and cradled them to her chest, rocking them like they were an infant. “Perfection. Who could have guessed he was capable of picking something like this?”

They were right. I was doing this. I *wanted* to do this. And getting ready with my friends was the perfect way to start the night. Not wanting them to give me crap about how excited I was, I simply muttered, “Whatever.” Then I pointed at Tyler and asked, “Do you know how to use that?”

She held the diffuser up higher. “I can kill you with this in fifteen different ways. Of course I fucking know how to use it.”

I did the only thing I could do. I sat down and let her do my hair.

Chapter Twenty-Six

REAPER

WAS this really *finally* about to happen?

Hell fucking yeah it was.

Peyton had needed space. Between the fight with her brother and her needing to come up with custom apologies for each of her girls, she'd decided to stay at the office. Which was fine by me. Gave me time to put a few things in motion.

First I dropped a few duffle bags filled with clothes at her house. Should I have asked first? I kind of did. And she told me no, so I did it anyway.

Next it was time to put my years of research to good use. Her favorite restaurant, the shoes that she loved but refused to buy herself, and her favorite lingerie shop that she stalked online but didn't order from. Knowing all the things that made her happy made planning our first date a lot of fun.

Fuck. A date. I'd never gone on one before. Seemed pointless when I was younger, then when I decided I wanted Peyton, she was the only one I wanted to take out to dinner. Or lunch. Brunch? I didn't care as long as she was across the table from me.

I stared at myself in the mirror, combing my fingers through my hair before I pulled it into a bun and left the

bathroom. I was at the clubhouse because it was closer to Peyton's office than my place. I reached for my cut hanging on the back of the chair, then stopped.

I wanted to be Colt with her, not Reaper, Redemption's head enforcer. She knew who that guy was, had been around enough to see the role I played within the club. But I'd never given her the man. By the time I'd figured out the kind of man I wanted to be and became him, she was long gone.

She'd missed the transformation from a kid with a chip on his shoulder to the man who knew what he stood for. What he wanted. And that man wanted Peyton more than anything else.

My dad knocked on the doorframe and stepped into my room. "Got a minute?"

"Yeah, but I gotta head out soon."

He closed the door behind him and studied my new jeans, new shirt, and neatly trimmed beard. "Date?" I nodded. "With Peyton?"

"Who else?" He was the one person who knew how badly I wanted Peyton. He'd been there the night Peyton kissed me. Had slapped me upside the head after I told him the horrible things I'd said to her. And then he sat me down and made me face what the hell was wrong with me and told me get my shit back in order.

"Fucking finally," Dad muttered, wiping a hand down his face. "I was wondering when you'd finally man up. Your mom was getting concerned. She talked about pimping your brothers to her if you didn't do something soon."

I stifled a smile. She'd threaten it, but she would never do that.

He came and sat on my bed. “Peyton’s a tough one, that’s for sure. Even before she disappeared. She won’t let you get away with anything.” His lips twitched. “I wouldn’t piss her off more than you already have.”

“I don’t think it’s possible to piss her off more than I already have.” I chuckled. Peyton had fire, but years of watching Dad deal with Mom had taught me how to handle her.

“Just be careful. It’s not good for your health to piss off a woman who has deadly aim.” He narrowed his eyes at me. “And don’t even think about kidnapping her like I did your mother. Peyton doesn’t seem the type to like that kind of shit.”

I laughed. “Wasn’t going to do any of that.”

“You’ve never hidden that you wanted her. I just hope you do a damn good job at convincing her to keep you around. If you need anything, let me know.” Dad stood up and clapped me on the back. At the door he paused and eyed the chair. “No cut?”

“No. It’s Colt tonight.” The missing weight of my cut was noticeable, but it didn’t bother me as much as I thought it might.

“Good choice.” He left, leaving the door open.

Second-guessing myself wasn’t something I did. I knew what I wanted and went after it.

But while I waited for Peyton to meet me in the lobby, every possible way things could go wrong tonight played out

in my head. Did I pick the right restaurant? Did Leanne find her a nice dress? Did she like the shoes?

With my hands in my pockets, I paced up and down the lobby, trying to burn off the excess energy coursing through me.

Thirty-four years old and I was going on my first date. My first date with the only person who mattered.

Clicking heels echoed down the hallway, and tension zipped up my back. Letting out a fast breath, I squared my shoulders as the heels click-clacked closer. A hard swallow, and I turned toward the hallway to greet her.

My mind emptied of every thought except one: *I'm the luckiest man alive.*

Peyton didn't walk. She strutted in heels like she was born to walk a runway. The sway of her hips hypnotized me. I wanted to stop her and make her start again but slower so I could memorize the movements. Her dress, held up by two tiny scraps of string that I wanted to rip off with my teeth, clung to her in all the right places.

Most of all, I noticed how she glowed. Light poured out of her, and I wanted to bask in it. There was no one more beautiful than Peyton Linwood. No one.

Her shy smile was like an arrow to the heart. I was such a goner. My lungs burned from holding my breath, and I gasped for air as she walked toward me. My every fantasy in one perfect package.

I closed the small distance between us, loving how the heels brought her almost to my shoulders. I gave her a soft kiss and pulled back. "You're breathtaking." Slipping my hand into hers, I laced our fingers together. "Ready?"

She nodded, and I pulled her toward the exit.

“Have fun, kids,” Chris called out. I snapped my head up to find Peyton’s entire team standing off to the side, watching us. The varied looks on their faces told me that they had mixed feelings about me, but shining in each of their eyes was the promise of a painful death should I so much as step one toe out of line. Staring back at them, I placed a kiss on Peyton’s knuckles to signal that I had no intention of fucking this up.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

PEYTON

WOW. Okay. This was happening.

We strolled along the Willamette River as daylight dwindled, the cool October breeze doing little to soothe my nerves. I wasn't sure I could speak with my nerves going off like they were. I'd faced dangerous, evil men pointing guns at my face and didn't bat an eye. Yet this date, one that had so far consisted of a car ride and a short walk, had me tied up in knots.

I watched him out of the corner of my eye. Something was different about him, and it wasn't only that he wasn't wearing his cut. The way he held himself, how he moved next to me. Keeping me close. Holding my hand, tightening it whenever it seemed like I might pull it back. Or maybe it was me. For years, being with him like this was my dream. The way his hand squeezed mine told me this was actually happening.

Reaper pulled me up to the hostess stand outside my favorite restaurant and wrapped his arm around my shoulder. "Colt for two."

Oh. *Oh*. That was what was different. He wasn't Reaper tonight. He was giving me Colt McMillan, the man. Uncle

Wolf did it with Aunt Jeannie sometimes, to remind her that she had all of him. The Man and the Biker.

I'd thought he would shed Colt and everything attached to the name once he got his road name. Most of the brothers completely ignored the name they were given at birth, but it seemed that wasn't the case for him.

The hostess tapped her screen and flashed a wide customer-service smile. "Your table is ready. Follow me please."

We followed her, weaving through the tables away from the loud open kitchen and bar and into the outdoor seating at the back. Fairy lights woven with vines allowed glimpses of the deep purple sky above. Once we were seated, the hostess handed us our menus and told us our server would be with us shortly before leaving us alone.

Not ready to break the silence between us, I scanned the menu. Everything they served here was amazing, and I had no idea how I would choose only one meal. I usually ordered a variety of items and shared with whoever came with me.

I eyed the patio exits, calculating the distance and how many people were between us and our way to potential safety. A habit so engrained in me that I didn't realize I was doing it until I started counting the people seated around us.

"Hungry?" Reaper asked. On cue, my stomach rumbled, and heat crawled up my cheeks. It was like he cast a spell over the night. Over me. This quiet, nervous person wasn't me. Not anymore.

"Good evening, my name is Manny, and I'll be taking care of you this evening." The server's voice snapped me out of my thoughts. "What can I get you to drink?"

I opened my mouth to order, but Reaper beat me to the punch. “I’ll take an old fashioned, bartender’s choice. She’ll have the 2018 de Ladoucette Sauvignon Blanc. We’re going to try every plate from the appetizer and entrée menus, so we’d appreciate you pacing them out.”

Every feminist bone in my body revolted at him ordering for me, but I kept my mouth shut until after Manny left with our menus. “I wasn’t sure I wanted wine.” I folded my arms across my chest. Sauvignon Blanc was my favorite wine, although the one he’d ordered was nicer than I usually ordered myself. Was I being petty and trying to start a fight for no reason? Yup, sure was.

Reaper scoffed. “You love Sauv Blanc, and that’s the best bottle they carry. And don’t start with the food. You couldn’t decide on one thing, so I saved you the trouble and ordered everything.”

He’d effectively snuffed out any argument I was about to make. I wanted to kick him in the shin just because I didn’t know what else to do.

I changed tactics. “So, how long have you been stalking me?” My tone was bland, like I was asking if he thought it would rain. Reaper choked on his water and I bit back a grin. It was nice to surprise him for a change.

“A few years. And it wasn’t stalking.” His face pinched like he’d tasted something unpleasant. “Just some light recon for when I finally got my opening.”

I blinked, then blinked again, certain I’d misheard. Reaper just admitted, rather smugly in fact, that he’d been stalking me.

“Did you think I was going to deny it?” He grinned. “I did what I had to do, Einstein.”

“But why?”

Manny chose that moment to drop off our drinks and the first round of appetizers. I dove into the food, hunger getting the best of me.

“Why what?” he said once we were alone again. “Why did I do everything possible gather all the info I needed to make you mine one day? Or why did it take so long to get here?”

“No.” My head spun. “Yes. I don’t know.” Taking a sip of my wine, I composed myself. “Why me? And I guess ... why now?”

“You understand my life and the way life is with Redemption. You accept every person the way they are and were always the kindest person in the room. You’re smart as fuck. You’ll support me, the same way you support your girls. And you’ll fight with me, when necessary, because we both know I can be an idiot sometimes.

“Above it all, Peyton, I trust you. When something good happens, you’re the first person I want to tell. When something shitty happens, you’re the person I want to talk it through with.”

My heart squeezed painfully as he listed off reason after reason why he picked me, and not one of them was shallow like I would have expected. But I didn’t know what to say. What could I say? Everything that came to mind seemed inadequate. “And the second question?”

“Why now?” I nodded. “I wanted to give you space. I know you need it, especially when things change and you need to acclimate yourself, so I didn’t press in the beginning like I

wanted to. I thought there'd be a signal at some point, to let me know when you were ready, but then you made it so damn hard to connect, avoiding me and the club. I didn't know what to do."

Glancing up at him through my lashes, I tapped the stem of my wine glass. "Okay. Um, is there anything else you'd like to put out into the open?"

His expression turned thoughtful as he swallowed a bite of food. "Yeah." He blew out a noisy breath. "Your place? I, uh, I kind of orchestrated you buying it. And I may have added some stuff to the blueprints while we worked on it."

I laughed, because I should've figured that one out for myself. "Were you the reason I got the house so easily? And why the bathroom ended up twice the original size? The bedrooms being flipped to the other side of the house?" I thought back to the construction and how I'd approved everything without much thought.

"Your bathroom was too small for me." He frowned. "Everything else was family planning."

I wasn't sure whether to be impressed by how he was able to infiltrate my life without me knowing or angry that he did it when he knew he wasn't wanted. But another part of me, the one that had a few loose screws, loved it. That part of me wanted to forget the past and move forward with him. Wanted to revel in how much time and effort it must have taken to find a place that was perfect for me.

Reaper had worked on himself. Made himself better before he came to me. Something deep in my soul clicked, and everything about us, about us being together like this, felt utterly and completely *right*.

There was one elephant in the room. And if Reaper was opening up, I was going to press a bit harder. “You trust me?” I asked, needing him to repeat it.

“There’s no one on earth that I trust more than you, Einstein.” He laced his fingers with mine on the table.

“My job.” I started and finished with those two words.

“I love your job. It makes you happy. You built a family.” He said that like it was so simple. “I’d never ask you to leave, the same way you’d never ask me to leave the club.”

“It’s dangerous. I sometimes can be gone for weeks.”

“Military spouses handle it. So can I.” He shrugged. “The club has no problem keeping me busy while you’re off saving the world. I’ll miss you more than life, but I know you’ll come back to me. You’ll never be far from my mind. Ten years, Einstein, and there hasn’t been a day that I haven’t thought about you. Worried about you. Missed you. At least next time you leave, I’ll be in our bed waiting for you to come back.”

His words rocked me because I knew they were true. The food was forgotten as I tried to think of more questions. I needed to know more, ask as many questions as I could. I was obsessed with learning more about him.

Somehow, I hadn’t seen what was right before my eyes—Reaper making plans to be with me, building his life with the singular goal of sharing it with me someday.

A flurry of what-ifs popped into my mind, but I shoved them aside. There was no use wondering if we could have been together sooner if I had only been willing to let go of the pain and anger of the past. I wasn’t ready then, but I was ready now. It was time to focus on what our future could be. Time to look toward the future he had worked to build for us.

Obsessed. That was the word that came to mind when I tore apart each piece of information he'd laid out. He was obsessed with me, and I was drunk on the rush of power that gave me.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

REAPER

AS FAR AS first dates went, I'd hit this one out of the park. Not that I had anything to compare it to, but I could tell by how relaxed Peyton was now that I had done everything right.

“Tell me about your friends.” It came out as a demand rather than a request. I wanted to know everything about her. If she cared about it, I wanted to know about it.

“What do you want to know about them?” she countered.

“Anything you want to tell me.” Anything to get her to open up. The women she spent the majority of her time with seemed like a good place to start.

Peyton sipped her wine, and satisfaction filled me knowing that I ordered right.

“Fine. They're all crazy.” I waited for more, but that was all she gave me.

I chuckled. “Yeah. I know that. Everyone knows that.” She narrowed her eyes at me. Shit. That sounded insulting. “Um, I mean like are they all from around here? Did you meet them at school?”

She shook her head. “Tyler's from everywhere. Her dad was in the military, and they moved around a lot. Izzy and

Adrienne are from New York City. Jessen grew up in the suburbs of Chicago, and Chris is from Texas.” Peyton’s face softened, and a small smile formed on her mouth. “We met at work.”

“Are they all as smart as you?”

That smile widened. “In their own way. We’ve been trained to do it all, but we each have our own area of expertise.” She stared at me expectantly, as though waiting for my next question. Jesus. You’d think I was trying to pry her teeth from her mouth with a pair of rusty pliers. What would it take to get her to talk to me?

“Come on, Peyton,” I prodded. “I want to know everything. Where did you go when you were gone? What else can you do? How did you get into this line of work? What’s your favorite part of your job?” She looked at me like I’d grown a second head, and I sighed. “Fine. Start simple. Tell me something about each one of your teammates.”

“You could always ask them.” I gave her a *you’re kidding me, right?* Look, and she chuckled. I’d be more likely to get a knee to the nuts than answers from them. Which was fine, I didn’t need to be their best friend. But they were the most important people in Peyton’s life, and she was the most important person in mine. It mattered, learning about the people she loved and understanding why she loved them.

“It was just a suggestion.” She sighed like the conversation was boring her, but I hung onto every word. “Izzy’s a fighter. She never backs down and pushes all of us to fight just as hard.” Her lips curved. “Jessen’s basically our mom. Or maybe our big sister. We go to her any time we need to talk. Adrienne, well, she’s the drama queen of our group. But she basically taught all of us how to be confident.” Eyes wide, she

shook her head. “I swear, she could stroll into a meeting with the president and walk out with the keys to the white house just because she believes she can.”

Pausing, she sips her wine and eyes me. “You sure you’re interested in hearing all this?”

Honestly, now that she’d gotten started, I was more interested than I thought I’d be. Watching her face while she spoke of them was like watching art in motion. Knowing she’d probably think I was screwing with her if I said that, I simply nodded for her to continue.

“Tyler is the most unhinged person I’ve ever known.” I snorted in agreement. Tyler was the only woman who’d ever genuinely terrified me with nothing but a smile. Like she could read my mind, Peyton’s eyes danced with amusement. “But she’s also probably the most loyal person on the planet. The few people she lets into her life are blessed with the knowledge that she would do literally anything for them.” I could see that. In fact, Tyler did kind of remind me of Spade. As dangerous as he could be, I always knew he had my back.

“And Chris is our heart. She brings the sunshine when any of us get lost in the dark. I don’t think any of us would have survived what we went through without her.”

Speaking of ... “Your brother has a thing for Chris.”

Peyton sat up straight. “I know! He drove past Buddy’s garage the other day while she was working on a car.”

“Yeah, that’s his car.” I wasn’t into gossip, but I’d do anything to keep that light in her eyes. Plus, it was the truth. The guy had it bad. I could empathize. “He bought some beater, then took it straight to Buddy’s. Guy’s paying top dollar for her to rebuild it from the ground up.”

“Does she know it’s his car?”

I shrugged. “You’d have to ask her.”

Plates came and went while we stuffed ourselves, and the conversation flowed seamlessly. Peyton answered every question I threw at her. Sometimes she answered vaguely, which was fine by me. We weren’t at the point where I could press for deeper answers. And I knew there were things she might not be able to tell me.

This was the first step. We had the rest of our lives. Dinner was almost over, but the night wasn’t. I was going to romance my woman all the way to bed, and we would finally be together without the world pressing in on us, without being fueled by adrenaline or rage. A night where I showed her how we could be together.

On my way back to our table from the bathroom, I stopped just outside the patio doors at the sight of a middle-aged bald man sitting in my chair across from Peyton. He was a big guy, that weird mix of fat and muscle some men got when they stopped hitting the gym as hard. I didn’t recognize him from the pictures Peyton had sent us with the dossiers on the rescued women, but my gut told me the guy had something to do with all that. Maybe it was the suit, or maybe I was paranoid from waiting for someone to make a move after falling into that trap a few nights ago.

I tried to read her expression, but she gave nothing away. She sat relaxed in her chair like she was listening to him tell a story. I slipped my phone from my pocket and dialed without looking.

The prospect I had waiting outside the restaurant answered, and I got right to the point. “About to throw a guy out of the restaurant. I want him picked up and brought to the

warehouse,” I instructed. “Wait to snatch him until nobody’s around.” Through the years, I’d learned to give that extra bit of direction to prospects. They were eager to prove themselves and didn’t always think.

I hung up and made my way to my table, waiting for Peyton to give me something. He leaned in, hovering over her like he was trying to intimidate her.

Enough.

I was practically breathing down the guy’s neck by the time he realized a monster lurked behind him, ready to rip him to shreds. His shoulders tensed, spine straightened. I bent down, grabbing the scruff of his neck until he winced. “I think you’re in my fucking seat,” I whispered in his ear. “Get up. Don’t make a scene.” I gripped his neck harder, enjoying how he winced.

He jerked out of my grip and stood, almost sending the chair tumbling to the ground. “Remember what I said.”

Rage burned fast and furious in my gut. I was going to kill this date-crashing shithead.

I pulled him away from the table, marched him inside and through the dining room, then shoved him over the curb, smiling when he tripped over his feet and face-planted in the road.

All my rage went from a burning inferno to a simmer when I got back to the table and found Peyton smirking. “Something funny?”

“Yeah. Gotta say, that was fun to watch.” There was more she wasn’t telling me, if the glint in her eyes was any indication.

“What did he talk to you about?”

“He warned me.” Her voice went low. “He said you were kidnapping married women, breaking into houses. That you’re a very dangerous man and I should be careful.” She took the last sip of her second glass of wine. “I asked him how he knew, and he said he caught you on camera.” She gave a light chuckle.

“Nice that he came straight to you.” I tapped the table. “My guys picked him up.”

“Good.”

Warmth filled my chest. Approval wasn’t something I sought. Except, apparently, when it came to Peyton.

When she ordered the double chocolate fudge brownie for dessert, I felt the last of my tension melt away. More food meant that the date wasn’t over or ruined.

Peyton waited until the server was long gone before hitting me with another one of her smiles. This one was more vicious. “Let’s make him sweat,” she said, and the only thing I could do was laugh.

If there was any question before if Peyton was meant for me, she’d just answered it with a resounding yes.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

PEYTON

I WASN'T UPSET.

I wasn't.

All right, fine. Maybe I was perturbed that our date, the best date in the history of dates, had been interrupted. I knew I should be grateful because the guy, who hadn't bothered to introduce himself, gave away his intel. Amateur.

But couldn't he have waited until we were done?

I tried not to berate myself for letting my guard down and being snuck up on. At some point during dinner, everything and everyone had faded away until it was like we were in a bubble of our own. I stopped watching the exits and counting the people around us. The noise dimmed to almost nothing. Conversation flowed between us in a way I didn't know was possible.

Maybe it was our shared history, growing up in the club and around each other. Maybe it was the way Reaper listened after he asked a question. His interest in my answers never wavered, and he accepted my vague answers when I couldn't go into detail.

His attention was heady and addictive. I wanted it forever.

As he turned down my long driveway, I hid my disappointment that the night was coming to an end.

He parked the car, and instead of waiting for him like I had earlier, I hopped out and marched inside. I didn't wait for him to follow. I knew he would.

I pushed the door open, leaving it for him to close, and headed to my room. I wanted to get the dress off. The longer I wore it, let the soft fabric brush against my skin, the more my frustration grew.

Reaper's duffle bag sat in the corner of the entryway, like he'd dropped it there and walked away without a thought. Giving it the evil eye, I reached back to find the zipper on the back of my dress, but my hands were slapped away.

"What do you think you're doing?" Reaper asked, his voice low. His hands, big and warm, went to my sides. His front pressed to my back, his body heat seeping into me. Goosebumps danced up my arms.

"I need to change," I said, knowing I should pull away, that we had a man to question. Instead I leaned into him more.

"You think you're going to wear this dress, torture me through dinner with your every move, tease me with that flawless skin I want to mark up, then deprive me of my right to take it off you?" The hands that had settled on my hips spun me around so we were face to face. "I want to see you wearing nothing but those heels and then I want to feel them digging into my back while you scream my name."

The light in my bedroom was on, and it made me want to cover up. We'd never been together with so much light. There was nowhere to hide from him. He took a few steps back, eyes

roaming over me like he hadn't had a meal in days and he was starving.

Why was I so nervous? It wasn't like this was our first time.

He toed off his boots and whipped off his shirt, then stalked toward me and unzipped my dress, letting it pool at my feet. He slowly spun me in a circle, his hands on my hips. A low growl came from deep in his throat as he stopped me to face him again.

I blinked. Then blinked again at what met me when I faced him. There was a tattoo on the left side of his chest, a tiny heart no bigger than my thumb with the letter 'P' in the middle.

How'd I miss that? I'd seen him with his shirt off before. I opened my mouth, but nothing came out. Like he could read my mind, he answered the question I was too afraid to ask. "I wanted a way to have you close while you were gone."

"When did you get it?" I asked, my tongue ungluing itself from the roof of my mouth.

"Six years ago," Reaper said, apprehension all over his face. I rolled my lips together. He moved fast. I was in his arms, my legs wrapped around his waist as he carried me the short distance to the bed and placed me on my back.

We went at each other the second my back hit the mattress. Hands and mouths on every inch of skin we could find. My body sought his like a moth to a flame.

We were panting, unable to stop kissing long enough to breathe. He slid into me, pulling my legs tight around his hips as I squeezed my eyes shut, loving the tiny bite of pain that came every time he pushed in. I slid my fingers into his hair,

pulling and angling his face to kiss him as I squeezed my legs around him.

Reaper pounded into me, all slow finesse gone. He angled his hips, hitting the secret spot, and I cried out, begging for more. “With me. Give me your eyes.” I opened them on his command, and his hand came up and collared my neck, giving it a soft squeeze. It was like an explosion went off, waves and waves of ecstasy rolling over me. Sparks danced behind my eyes.

When I finally came down, Reaper gathered me in his arms, pinning me under his body as we both succumbed to sleep.

Birds chirped loudly, making me whine as I tried to stuff my head under the pillows to drown them out. I rolled over to the other side of the bed where a body should have been. The sheets were cold, which meant Reaper had left a while ago.

I launched myself out of bed, snatched a shirt from my dresser, and pulled it on as I stomped down the hall.

“That fucking fuckface,” I muttered, heading into the kitchen. Coffee was required if I was going to kick the asshole’s face in. I pulled up short when I found coffee waiting for me on the island next to a steaming plate of cheesy eggs and toast.

Reaper leaned against the countertop behind the island and sipped his coffee with a smug smile on his face. I didn’t know why that enraged me more. “Hurry up. Drink your coffee and eat before you turn into a beast.”

I snarled at him and shoved toast in my mouth. It wasn’t that I became a feral beast when I woke up. I just wasn’t human until I had food and at least one cup of coffee in me.

Reaper's shoulders shook, but he hid his smile behind his coffee mug. "We have someone who's been waiting for us."

"I know," I said in between bites.

"Hurry up. I want to get this over with and move on."

The fog cleared from my brain with food and coffee, and it hit me that he'd made me breakfast. I opened my mouth to thank him, but he waved his hand to urge me to hurry, so I shoveled in the last bit of eggs and went back to my bedroom to change. A few minutes later, I emerged, ready to get that asshole to spill his secrets.

Reaper waited in front of the closed front door, and when I went to pass him, he wrapped my ponytail around his hand and angled my face to his. "Give me that mouth." He leaned down at the same time I went onto my toes. When we pulled away from each other, he said, "I would have done that earlier, but I didn't want to get bitten for the wrong reasons."

I laughed and shrugged as I followed him out of the house.

It was an easy drive from my place to the warehouse. I'd helped set up the security for that building, as well as all the other Redemption properties.

When we pulled up, I was unsurprised to find Midas, Boomerang, High, and Uncle Wolf were there, along with Paul Bunyan and Reaper's blood brother Joker. The door led into one big room, where the man who'd crashed our date hung by a hook from the ceiling like a pig ready for slaughter.

There was a pitcher of water on a small folding table a few feet away from him. I grabbed it, throwing the entire pitcher at him when I was close enough. It shocked him, causing his body to swing. He moaned in pain as his eyes fluttered open. I

smiled big, showing all my teeth the way I imagined a shark would if they could smile. “Morning.”

He spat at me. I shifted to the side, letting it land on the floor a few feet away. “That was rude,” I said, tilting my head at him.

“Everything’s on you, man. Tell us what we want to know and I’ll make sure to go easy on you.” Reaper set up at the folding table, laying out his knives.

“What’s your name?” I asked, sliding into the good cop persona.

He kept his eyes on the knife Reaper held up, inspecting it. “Stanley Philips.”

“Huh. That’s an unfortunate name. You know they say not to trust people with two first names.” I waved my hand. “Or something like that.”

When he didn’t acknowledge me, I went straight into the questioning. “Who’d you tell about the tapes?” Stanley sneered at me before focusing back on Reaper and his knives.

I got it. It was easy to dismiss me when there was a giant in the room playing with stabby toys. If he paid a little more attention, he’d realize that the scariest person in the room was me. I knew how to torture until it was a mercy to kill.

Reaper came up to me, knife in hand. “She asked you a question.”

“Fuck you.” The words came out breathless, like he’d just sprinted a mile. “I called Lowenstein before you grabbed me. He’s coming.”

“That’s fine. He was already hanging around.” I shrugged. “A few more questions.”

“I’m not telling you shit.”

Reaper let out a despondent sigh. “You hear that, babe? He’s not talking.” I hummed in response.

Reaper dragged a knife down the side of Stanley’s face, nicking his earlobe. “What if we cut off his ear?”

“No. Too much blood, not enough payoff,” I said. I could read the questions Reaper wanted to ask in his eyes. He wanted to know how I knew that. I shook my head, because I’d never tell.

“Fine. Eyelids.”

“It’d be easier to tape them open. The skin’s too fragile to cut the lids off, it’ll take forever to finish. Taping them open so he can’t blink will give us the same result.”

Reaper turned to face me, a flirty smile on his face. “Really? I’ve never cared much about how big a mess I make.” He leaned closer. “What else do you know about torturing someone?”

“Thumbs. Big Toes. If you want them to live but never have a moment where they aren’t thinking of you.” I took a finger and made a slicing motion at my thumb. “Tendons.” I pointed to my Achilles. “Can’t walk without that.” Reaper nodded, eyes going hot the more I told.

“For fuck’s sake, stop flirting while you talk about torturing the guy. It’s fucking weird.” Midas said.

Chuckling, Reaper swooped down and gave me a chaste kiss before he got to work.

He barely finished with the first thumb before Stanley started singing.

Everyone stood around the conference table, various levels of scowls on each of their faces.

I'd just finished relaying everything Stanley Philips, private investigator extraordinaire, had said while begging Reaper to stop. Thanks to the camera, he'd told Lowenstein that Reaper, and most likely Redemption, were involved. That was all he'd managed to pass on to the client before we grabbed him.

He was too busy sobbing to tell us much else, but I was able to grab all his electronics from his hotel. I'd find out easily enough if he was lying.

“Well then, guess it's time to move onto plan B,” Betty said, pushing off the wall. “Guess it's a good thing you guys have plans B-G to go through.”

I preened, pleased that I was getting the credit I was due for being so overzealous with preparations.

Chapter Thirty

REAPER

I WHISTLED as I walked through Bridge City Security's HQ until I got to the open office area. I leaned against the wall, bag of food dangling from my hand as I took in everything that was going on.

Numbers and letters that made no sense to me danced across a screen.

Peyton was hunched over her keyboard, fingers flying. Completely in the zone. Number and letter combinations showed on one screen, videos moving faster than normal on another. Punk music played low in the background. Minutes ticked by, and I stayed silent.

It was mesmerizing. I could watch her work all day.

Adrienne caught sight of me from across the room, narrowed her eyes, and called out over the music, "Pey, someone's here for you."

Peyton rotated her chair. "What?"

Adrienne pointed at me, and Peyton spun around in her chair. "How long have you been there?"

"Not long." *Not as long as I would have liked.* Grabbing a chair from one of the other empty desks, I pulled it up next to

her. “Food.” I pulled out the containers and slid them over. “You need to start taking better care of yourself.” It came out harsher than I meant. I’d followed her around enough to know how often she got lost in her work and forgot to eat. It bothered me to no end that her friends didn’t take care of her like that.

“Whatever,” she muttered as she bit into the sandwich I’d brought her. I pulled out my pocketknife, twirling it around my knuckles as I tried not to smile at how fake annoyed she was.

“What’re you doing?” I asked, staring at the screen with all the letters and numbers.

When she shot me a glare at me, the one that I recognized as “don’t ask,” I shook my head. “I’m not asking for you to tell me everything. Just curious to know what that is.” I shrugged, trying to play off how badly I wanted to know more.

“A virus.” She took a massive bite of her sandwich.

“What’s it supposed to do?” She rolled her eyes and shook her head. “C’mon, Einstein. I meant it when I said I wanted to know. I don’t care about specifics. But come on, explain this to me.” I was begging, and I didn’t care who heard me.

“It’s boring, but fine.” Peyton pulled up something and explained what she was building, what the virus was supposed to do, and how it could get into a system.

Her smile and excitement grew as I asked more in-depth questions. Thank you, *Coding for Dummies*.

“What’s your calling card?” I asked, not sure if I’d used the right word.

She scoffed. “Don’t have one. Don’t need one.” She went to lick sauce off her thumb, but I snagged her wrist and put her

thumb in my mouth, sucking it clean. Her eyes went wide, completely focused on my mouth.

“Why don’t you need one?” I asked as I let go of her hand.

“Wha—” She cleared her throat. “What?”

Satisfied at how flustered I made her, I kept myself from smiling. Peyton always wore this impenetrable mask, but I occasionally got raw, unfiltered emotions. Mostly when I pissed her off. I lived for those moments, seeing her knocked off balance. Reveled in making her stutter, short circuiting her brain.

“Calling card, baby. You don’t do that?” She shook her head. “Why?”

“First, because I need to be invisible. If I added something that told everyone who’d been in their system, they’d come looking, or try to compete with me or something.” She went back to her computer, tapping the keyboard to wake the screen up. “Ghosts are untraceable.”

Why was I always bringing these women food?

It was mostly my woman I was feeding, but I didn’t miss the hungry eyes on the food, or the narrowed eyes and skepticism when they saw it was me.

If there was one thing these women knew how to do, it was make a man think he was unwelcome. Probably worked on countless men. Leanne showed me to the conference room and told me they’d be there soon. Sure enough, less than a minute later one of them showed up, and then they were somehow all in the room, elbowing and jostling each other for food. I tried not to laugh. They acted like they hadn’t eaten in days and they’d willingly shank each other for a crumb.

I waited patiently. I'd come here with a plan. Communicate. It was the key to success with women, whether they were eight or eighty. I had a few things I needed to *communicate* with them.

Betty was the last to stroll in, taking her time to decide what she wanted. A hand reached out, and Betty grabbed it and twisted, making the woman attached to the hand squeal. Then she grabbed the entire container for herself and plopped down in a chair. Someone else growled like an animal.

I took a step back, wanting some space between them, the food, and me. Were they always so feral? Or were they just hungry? I wanted to find Peyton and ask if this was normal.

"Stop making that face," Tyler said. She scared me the most. And learning from Peyton that she was the fucking MacGyver of weapons had only confirmed my instinct to steer clear. Physically, she wasn't any different from the rest of the women in the room. They all had this vibe like they'd kill me, then dry my mother's tears at my funeral. But where the others occasionally turned that side of them off, Tyler never did.

"Yeah. You look scared. Don't let Peyton find out we chased you off because we're hungry," Izzy said.

"Peyton's the worst of us," Chris cut in. "Remember that time she tried to stab my hand for going for the last dumpling?"

"Maybe it's because she forgets to eat when she's working and none of her friends stop to remind her to take care of herself." Five pairs of eyes flayed me to the bone. Oh, shit. Fuck. What did I just do?

"Oh." Betty laughed, her eyes shining with glee. "This'll be good. Continue."

“I’ll let that snide little comment slide. And only”— Adrienne jabbed her finger at me from across the table —“because you buy great outfits.”

“He didn’t even buy it. He gave Leanne the money,” Tyler argued.

“I went and got the shoes.” I cringed at the whine in my voice, but Adrienne nodded her approval. At least one of them seemed to be on my side.

“Peyton means everything to me.” It was the first thing I could think of.

“Pretty shitty way of showing it,” Jessen, who’d been a silent observer until then, said. “From my near perfect memory, you weren’t even in her life until a few weeks ago.”

I ran a hand through my hair. “The person who deserved my apology for being young and stupid got it. But so was she. We had no business together when she was *under-fucking-age*. And I needed time to grow up.” My voice got louder the more I spoke, my frustration bleeding into my words. “You don’t think ten years of not having her is enough punishment? I fucked up. And then I made the decision to be a man I was proud of, so I could deserve her when the time was right for us. I didn’t want to be someone she thought she had to fix.”

The room was quiet, all eyes on me. I’d stared down hardened bikers. Killed and tortured men. None of that compared to the six sets of eyes that never moved from me.

Izzy elbowed Jessen hard enough to make her wince. “Did you listen to what the man just said? He got his shit together on his own. Told you. Men don’t need their woman to play therapist,” she muttered.

“It’s not like you’ve been far,” Betty said, bringing the conversation back.

“We know everything about you,” Chris added. “When and where you were born, elementary school friends, bank accounts, women you’ve had in your bed.”

“Or a lack thereof,” Izzy mumbled.

I shrugged. I’d almost be disappointed if they didn’t have all that information about me. I liked that they were protective over Peyton. It showed they cared about her. If they’d considered me a threat, I wouldn’t have lived to have this conversation with them.

“I don’t care that you know all that. And shouldn’t you all like that I didn’t touch a woman that wasn’t Peyton in the past four years?”

Tyler tossed something at me, and I snatched it out of the air and looked down. What the fuck? Why had she given me a bullet? That’s when I saw that there was a word etched into the side. I brought it closer and nearly shit my pants. My fucking name was on the bullet. She had literally given me a bullet with my name written on it.

“You can keep that one. I have others,” she said, deadpan. “And if you hurt her, I’ll make sure each one goes into the most painful spots I can find.” I didn’t doubt for a second that she meant every word.

“We have to leave. Sometimes we’re gone for a month. Or two,” Jessen said. “What happens when you’re lonely and a club girl offers to ease your loneliness?”

“How much do you know about the club?” We worked together, but I didn’t know if they knew our way of life. I waited as each one shook their heads. “We don’t have club

whores or sweetbutts or whatever weird name you want to come up with. That's sex trafficking. Enslavement. Too many of us have had to live a life of servitude like that. We don't and won't ever do that. And we don't cheat. It's an unwritten law. You don't do that to the woman who took you in, accepted your flaws and loves you. The men come to Redemption broken, needing a second chance. It's the ultimate disrespect to mess with someone who isn't our Old Lady."

They sized me up, like they were deciding whether to believe me or not.

"I'm here because I wanted to have a truce. You're her family, so it'd be easier if we got along, even if you don't like me." Would it be easier if they did? Sure. But I wasn't going anywhere either way.

"Aww, look guys! He's finally done it. His balls finally dropped." Izzy clapped, celebrating like she'd won a prize.

"About damn time." Jessen smiled. Everyone, save for Tyler, seemed thrilled.

What the hell had just happened?

"It was nice for you to try and be nice to us, but we don't care," Chris said. "If you're what Peyton wants, we support her. But if she decides she wants you dead, we'll help bury your body." I could understand why Boomerang liked her. She had this ... happiness that oozed out of her. He was a surly asshole on a good day. He needed a little sunshine.

"Thanks." I nodded, hoping they were warming up to me. I didn't want to be at odds with the people who Peyton cared about.

"Oh, and don't worry. We hid that both you and Wolf invested in Bridge City and gave Betty the start-up capital to

get us this place,” Izzy added.

“Prez let it slip that he was dropping cash for Betty and that Peyton was gonna work for her. She deserved the best place to work with the best equipment.” It was one of the easiest decisions I ever made. No way was I going to let Wolf be the only person to help give Peyton the life she deserved. Betty was more than happy to take my money and give Peyton everything she wanted.

When I left, I felt pretty damn good about what I’d accomplished. A few threats, a bullet with my name on it, and a promise to support Peyton. Not nearly as bad as I’d expected.

Chapter Thirty-One

PEYTON

THE COUCH WAS CALLING my name. That and a cold compress for my eyes. Something that would hold back the headache blooming at the base of my skull. Food, definitely food.

I ran through what I knew was in my fridge as I pulled into my detached garage and cut the engine. All my energy seeped out of me when the car shut off. I had to get out, walk twenty feet to the door, go inside the house. My body was sluggish with exhaustion. The bags under my eyes were like weights.

I registered that Reaper's bike and truck were parked in my garage, and some of my exhaustion lifted, replaced by excitement. He was in my home, waiting for me.

I liked having a home. A place for me that was always there. That I could count on. More, I liked that there was someone in it who liked me enough to want to be there when I walked through the door. Not once had I ever thought about what it might be like to come home to someone. I might have considered getting a dog, but that was it.

The lights were on in the house. My heart beat a little faster. What was he doing? Eating? Watching TV? Showering? I needed to know. I had to find out what he did in my home

when I wasn't around. It wouldn't be weird to creep in and spy on him, right? With that thought propelling me forward, I jumped out of the car. Instead of going around to the front door, I headed for the side of the house.

The door opened as I hit the last step, revealing Reaper in dark jeans, dark shirt, and his hair down in waves that would make a hairstylist jealous. It was his bare feet that had me stutter-stepping. So casual, so comfortable, like he was at home.

In a way, I guess he was. We hadn't spent a single night apart in almost a month. Not since our first date. And it hadn't occurred to me until now that we never spent time at his place.

"You wanna come inside?" he asked, his body somehow getting bigger in the doorway as he stayed put, blocking me from going inside. My lips twitched as I nodded. "You gotta pay." Not hiding his smile, he leaned on the door frame, arms hanging at his sides. Laughter in his eyes. I knew what he was doing. Playing with me. Teasing me. My poor heart flipped; my stomach did a weird flutter.

"And what kind of payment did you want?" I stepped closer until our bodies were almost touching and tilted my head back.

"A kiss." Going up to my tiptoes, I slid my fingers into his hair. It took the gentlest of tugs for him to lean down and meet me.

What I tried to keep as a quick peck turned into a passionate kiss the moment our lips met. He angled his head, moved his mouth against mine.

I was wrong earlier. So wrong. *This* was what I needed after a long day. Not the couch or food. Just him, being here

when I got home. Kissing me like he hadn't been able to breathe properly without me. Before I knew it, his hands were on my ass, lifting me up, pressing my back against the wall in the mudroom.

Our kisses were slow, like we had all the time in the world. His hands drifted up to my waist, pulling me tighter. My hands wound up in his hair, caressing his shoulders.

Being with him shut down my thoughts. My brain was always going a mile a minute. Counting, remembering, making lists of things to do. But now it was gloriously empty except for thoughts of him.

God, I loved being able to give him my total attention. Loved that I could focus on him. Loved him.

I love him.

The words filtered through my mind. Like they were normal. Like my world hadn't just been rocked.

When had that happened? I considered breaking away from him and running. I didn't think I'd be able to keep it a secret. I wasn't sure if I wanted to keep it a secret or shout it from the rooftops and wear a shirt with his face on it.

A loud beep went off in the house and Reaper pulled away. His hand cupped my face, thumb brushing over the apple of my cheek.

"Welcome home, Einstein," he whispered, then gave me a soft kiss on the forehead before closing and locking the door. I followed him back to the kitchen, where he was cooking before I came home, if the dirty pots in the sink were any indication.

I could count on one hand how many times I'd used the kitchen. The aroma of spices filled the air from the stove, and

my house had never felt more like *home* than at that moment, with Reaper moving past me, a wooden spoon in hand. My stomach produced a frighteningly loud noise, letting anyone within a six-mile radius know how hungry I was.

I'd accidentally skipped lunch. Again.

Reaper chuckled as he stopped the timer and stirred a pot on the stove. "Do you ever eat?" he asked, but his attention was on whatever he was making on the stove so he didn't catch my shrug. "Come here." Once I was within arm's reach, he lifted me up and placed me on the counter next to him. He moved like he knew his way around not just any kitchen but mine specifically. Like he'd cooked in here a thousand times before.

He opened a bottle of wine and poured until my biggest wine glass was more than halfway full, then handed it to me. Positioning himself between my legs, he placed his hands on my knees, thumbs rubbing the inside of my thighs.

The gentle motion lowered my stress. First a magic kiss, now magic fingers?

"How was your day, Einstein?" He stepped away and went back to whatever he was cooking.

"Fine. Got a new client, so I'm doing some work on that. Finished up Stanley Philips's computer, which didn't tell me anything I didn't already know. The videos came in from all the stops the brothers made." Reaper raised his eyebrows in question. "There's nothing that identifies them. There were a couple shots of the women from the back. The hats and clothes they changed into made it hard for me to identify them, which was good." I knew what I was looking for. But if anyone else watched the videos looking for them, they'd never be able to

tell who the women were. “We got the only copies and deleted them from whatever hard drives they came from.”

“Good,” he muttered. Cooking mittens on his hands, he bent down, opened the stove, and pulled out a big cast-iron skillet. A savory, mouthwatering aroma filled the room. My eyes followed him as he brought the skillet to the table, and my body got all warm and gooey.

It had place settings, flowers, candles. I didn’t bother to smother the butterflies this time.

He’d made seafood paella, my favorite meal ever. The entire scene caused me to think back to all the times Reaper had brought me food. The generic containers he’d used were the same as the food carts used, so I assumed that’s where he got my meals, but now I realized he’d been cooking for me all this time.

My mind swam with a mix of emotions. Happiness? Of course. But all that joy was tinged with anxiety. The fluttering in my stomach turned to knots. I knew he’d wanted this with me, a night for only us. Things I’d never thought possible before him.

Like a relationship.

But Reaper hadn’t wavered, not once. I wanted to ask him if he loved me the way I’d just realized I loved him.

I was too chickenshit to ask him.

I was so lost in my thoughts that I allowed him to pull me off the counter and guide me to the table. He kept quiet, clearly sensing my need for silence while I grappled with the fact that he knew far more about me than I did about him. The imbalance, my disadvantage of knowledge, unsettled me.

“You gonna clue me in to what’s going on up there?” He finished scooping food onto our plates and looked up at me.

A million questions bombarded me, making it hard to decide what to ask first. Throwing caution to the wind, I went with a statement. “You know a lot about me.” Mortification engulfed me, and I reached for my fork only to grip the edge of my seat for balance when Reaper jerked me closer.

I eyed him, and he shot me a smile. “You were too far away.” He slid the placemat with my plate and fork in front of me.

“Whatever.” But the word had no heat behind it. A moan tumbled past my lips at the first bite of food. It was good. Better than good.

“I do know a lot about you,” he said, and it took me a second to recall what I’d said a few minutes ago. “But not as much as I’d like to. I still have a ways to go when it comes to you.” He paused to take a bite before continuing. “But I’ve learned your favorite foods, that you snore when you’re especially tired, and you hate mornings.”

“That’s more than I know about you,” I confessed. I’d only recently started to pay attention, and even then, I was tentative. I had no real experience getting to know a man I was intimate with. I’d dated, and I’d had sex, but my lifestyle hadn’t lent itself to serious relationships. The temptation was there, to use my skills to dive into his history, but it didn’t seem right to take the easy route. I owed him the courtesy of putting in the effort the way he had with me.

He grabbed my hand and placed a lingering kiss on my palm. “Ask me whatever you want, Einstein.”

So I did. I hammered him with questions. By the time we were done eating, I knew that his favorite sport was rugby and his favorite color was red, which he said as he curled a lock of my hair around his finger. I laughed when he told me his favorite golden girl was Sophia because she took no shit and he could picture her wearing an Old Lady cut, giving the guys a run for their money. I wasn't at all shocked to find out that Led Zeppelin was his favorite band, but I had to hide my surprise when I learned he loved to read fantasy and sci-fi, his favorite author was Brandon Sanderson, and the best book he'd ever read was *Dune*.

He held nothing back, and I envisioned each fact like it was written on a piece of paper, then filed it away in a folder with his name on it.

All too soon, the food was gone.

"You asked me a lot of questions. I have a few too," he said, shifting in the chair and widening his legs.

I motioned for him to go ahead.

"I won't ask where you disappeared to. I know you can't answer that. But I want to know what happened. Why did you leave so suddenly?"

He'd opened up to me so completely, the least I could do was offer the same unfiltered honesty. "I hacked something I shouldn't have." Heat rose to my cheeks. No matter how much time passed, I still felt shame when I thought back to that stupid mistake. "I was young and arrogant. Left a calling card."

Reaper turned in his seat to face me. I could have left it there, but I wanted him to know the whole story. "I had a hard time making friends in college, mostly because of the huge age

difference. But then I aced the classes and screwed up the curves, which only made me more popular, as I'm sure you can imagine," I said with a self-deprecating laugh. "When I got an invitation to a hacking party, I thought maybe ..." I shook my head. "I was so stupid. I thought it was my opportunity to make friends. Anyway, the guy hosting the party challenged me to hack something really hard." A heavy mix of emotions swirled in me. Sorrow that I'd been too lonely to see through the assholes, disgust with myself for not knowing better than to do what I did.

"While I was hacking, the others were playing Minecraft. I didn't know they'd only invited me to make fun of me and trick me." Young, stupid, and lonely. But I'd come to terms with that night a long time ago, once I realized I wouldn't have found myself without my team. Without the training I'd gotten from Ghost Unit, no matter how brutal it was.

"So that's why you don't leave a calling card." I nodded. "What did you hack?"

I winced. "I can't say. But my options were to get locked up for domestic terrorism or become property of the government by working for them." Jail or no jail, it was the easiest and best decision I'd ever made.

"I'm proud of you, Einstein. You made a mistake, but you faced the consequences head-on and became one hell of a woman because of it."

Shocked speechless, I simply watched him clear the table. When he came back, I still hadn't thought of a way to respond, and all thoughts of my past vanished when he lifted the dome from the plate he set down in front of me.

"Is that—" I gasped.

“Donnie’s red velvet cheesecake. Your favorite.”

“I’m surprised you didn’t try to make this too. You’re an incredible cook.”

He chuckled when I shimmied in my seat at the first bite of the best red velvet cheesecake in the world. “I was a single guy who didn’t want to live off takeout until you came back.”

“What if I didn’t come back?” I hadn’t meant to ask it, but I wanted to know.

“Would’ve hired Betty to find you. She would’ve dragged you back, for both me and Wolf.” Simple and to the point. So very Reaper.

I finished my dessert while Reaper told a story about Paul Bunyan and how he got his road name. By the end, I laughed so hard I was crying.

We washed, dried, and put away dishes side by side, maneuvering around each other like we’d been doing this for years. As Reaper pulled me down the hallway, I noticed all the little pieces of Reaper around my house. Seeing our stuff mingled together, the way I’d dreamed about when I was younger, made me giddy. My heart filled with joy at how right it felt to have him here taking care of me, even though I didn’t need it.

Later, as he fell asleep with his body tucked close to mine and his arm growing heavy around my waist, I accepted my fate.

I loved this man. Loved him so much my heart hurt. I’d given him my heart the day we first met, when he guided me out of the woods without letting go of my hand.

But just as I drifted off to sleep, a dark sense of foreboding settled over me. The other shoe was bound to drop soon. No

one got everything they wanted. Good things, especially things as perfect as this, never lasted.

Chapter Thirty-Two

PEYTON

"YOU'RE GOING TO BE OKAY," I said as I rested a hand over the beleaguered, frightened woman in front of me. Tallulah Lowenstein's eyes glistened with unshed tears as she watched her son play with Hot Wheels on the floor next to us.

I'd finished explaining how we were going to remove her from the Redemption cabin to the new safe house. Guilt weighed heavily on my shoulders. My stupid decisions were causing Tallulah more hardship than she'd already endured. She was shaking like a leaf and kept taking measured breaths to calm herself, and the stark fear emanating from her ripped me apart.

Tallulah got up and busied herself in the kitchen, making a cup of tea. Her eyes strayed back to the little boy making *vroom* sounds, and her small smile was full of hope.

If she hadn't had her son to push her to leave, would she have been brave enough to reach out for help? I made myself some tea, whatever was in the cabinet, and leaned against the island next to her.

"There is something you need to know." Tallulah swallowed, her fingers going white around the mug in her

hands. “My husband isn’t a good man. Not just because of what he did to me. There’s so much more than that.”

She pushed off the counter and paced the tiny kitchen. I didn’t know what more I could do to let her know she was safe. I wasn’t good at consoling people. The right words never came fast enough, and what Tallulah needed was comfort and reassurance. I should have asked Jessen to tag along. “Yes, I know that. We know that.”

“No. No. You don’t get it.” She stopped in front of me, her eyes frantic. “He was born into money, but he always thought of himself as some kind of mob boss. He started laundering dirty money through his real estate holdings, and when that wasn’t enough, he got in deeper. He holds their drugs in his vacant buildings.”

Drugs and money laundering? None of that popped up in any of the research I’d dug into. We didn’t even have surveillance photos with anyone connected to organized crime. Was this another thing I’d missed?

“I met the guy who connected him with the cartel, Luis Cabrera. He works for Lyle, in distribution.” A man’s face flashed in my head, a vague memory from the intel we’d gathered on him before we rescued Tallulah. I grabbed my laptop and fired it up, and a few seconds later I was staring at Luis Cabrera’s profile. Age thirty, had started at Lowenstein Holdings six years ago and quickly moved up the chain of command. My initial search had nothing connecting him to drugs, but he hadn’t seemed important enough to dig deeper.

I flipped the screen around, and she nodded. “That’s him. He came to the house a few times after Junior was born, when Lyle was spending more time at home. I heard them talking

about drugs and a house near Mobile.” Her shoulders sagged. “I’m sorry I’m not able to give you more information.”

“Thank you. What you gave me is all the direction I need.” I laid a hand on her forearm, giving it a gentle squeeze that I hoped she found comforting. “What you’re doing is brave. It’s scary, going against him, but we’re here to help and protect you. You have a hardened group of motorcycle-riding, hell-raising club brothers who are honored to help you.” Tallulah gave me a tiny nod. “It takes resilience and guts to do what you did. To find the courage to leave and then do it. Do you know how many women never get the chance to find their courage?” Women in domestic violence situations rarely made it out. It was either death or jail when they finally had enough and snapped. “You did the right thing. We won’t let anything happen to you, I promise.” It was a promise I’d die to keep. Everyone on the team would, without hesitation.

Her body shook, and I pulled her into my arms, rubbing soothing circles on her back as silent tears dripped onto my shoulder. After a while, she pulled back, wiped the tears off her face and gave me a watery smile.

“Thank you. Thank you so much.” She got up and headed to the bathroom.

I was at the door when she got back into the main room. “You know your instructions?” Her affirmation was so soft I barely heard it. “Good. I’m going to research what you told me.” I opened the door and headed to the clubhouse.

The brothers had set me up to work in Chapel. It was better I stayed close to Tallulah, helping with her sense of security and easy to find in case she remembered more information. But not so close she would think I was hovering. I sent out the alert and waited as my team joined the call. Once everyone

was on screen, I relayed the new information Tallulah had given me.

“How did we miss this?” Tyler asked, frustration in her tone as she rubbed her temples. Tyler abhorred screwups and incompetence.

“Because we investigated their lives, we tracked his movements, but we couldn’t bug everything. There were no large cash deposits in his accounts. No photos of Lowenstein with anyone suspect.” I’d been scratching my head over the same question. We all did research on him and not one of us found connections. Luis Cabrera was a common enough name that three different ones had popped on Mexico’s most-wanted list, and since he didn’t seem like a key player, I hadn’t given him any additional attention.

“Shit happens, ladies. You know that,” Betty said. “Let’s move on to the bigger picture and focus. I want everyone to reach out to their contacts. Figure out if he has the pull Tallulah says he does within the cartel. Find which cartel it is. Feed everything back to Peyton. Is she ready to get out of the safehouse and move to the new location?”

“She’s scared but ready as she can be.”

“Good. We go ahead as planned and pivot where we need to. This isn’t the first time we’ve had new information come to light. Send us a picture of this Luis guy,” she said, then left the call.

“How is she doing, really?” Jessen asked.

“She’s terrified.” I shrugged. “She knows that he’s not going to stop looking for her.”

“At least she told us.” A scowl marred Tyler’s face. “She could have gone on silent the entire time, not telling us that the

asshole had connections to some crazy cartel people.”

That was true. It wouldn't be the first or the last time someone we rescued withheld vital information. Sometimes they weren't even aware we should know. We could tap phone lines, track movements, but it still left us blind in spots. There was only so much research we could do without tipping them off that we were looking into them.

“Let's get to work,” I said and ended the call.

Chapter Thirty-Three

PEYTON

IT WAS my first night off in weeks, and I intended to take advantage of it. After I'd showered, I lotioned my skin until it glowed, then put on silk and lace lingerie. Studying myself in the mirror, I admired how the deep turquoise of the camisole top complemented my skin and hair, and how the tiny but luxurious shorts showed off my legs. I silently thanked Adrienne for the suggestion while I finished doing my hair.

A million butterflies took off in my stomach, beating wildly.

Just open the door, Peyton. What's the worst that can happen?

My brain immediately created no less than three different scenarios, all of which made me want to crawl in a hole and hide. I shoved those thoughts away. I might have dressed differently, but I was still the same. The man waiting for me was the same one who'd spent the last month in my bed.

Reaper sat propped up by pillows, his hair wild and loose around his shoulders. The blanket pooled at his waist, revealing his muscular torso.

My mouth watered. I wanted to lick him. Wanted him to tell me every dirty thought that came to his mind, then show

me. I stood there watching him for a few seconds. He looked up from his phone and his surprised expression turned ravenous.

He crooked a finger, beckoning me to him as he slid the blanket off. I shook my head to stop him from getting up and kneeled at the foot of the bed. On my hands and knees, I crawled up the bed. With his eyes glued to the gap in my top, he licked his lips.

My body vibrated with desire and anticipation. I grazed his hard cock as I climbed up his body, making him hiss. He grabbed my ass, hauling me the rest of the way up. I placed my hands on his chest, enjoying the quickened heartbeat under my palms. I made tiny circles with my hips, little shocks zipping up my spine. His head fell back against the headboard, and he gripped my hips, forcing me to stop.

Lust filled his eyes when he brought them back to me. Lust and something raw, so deep it was like his heart stared back at me. Unable to handle the emotion, I bent down and kissed him.

When I pulled away, sucking in air, my body felt painfully empty. I needed him more than I'd ever needed anything.

His hand traced the delicate lace strap at my shoulder. "I'm going to get you more of these. One in every color." Reaper moved his hand down my body, cupping my breasts through the fabric and playing with my nipples before bending his head and sucking them through the fabric.

I let out a breathless moan. His callused hands slipped under my top, and went up, not stopping until my top was off. Faster than a man his size had any right to be, Reaper had me on my back, his impressive form hovering over me.

He crushed his lips to mine, and I kissed him back with ferocity, my hands roaming everywhere I could reach. We ripped off each other's clothes, his body covering mine in the most delicious way.

I loved that he was so much bigger than me. How, in his arms, I was delicate. Delicate, feminine, soft. All words I'd never thought described me. I loved that he brought out a side of me that I didn't know existed. Everything but the two of us fell away. Time lost all meaning. He took his time pushing into me, and I pulled him closer, needing more. Slowly, almost lazily, he thrust into me, lacing our hands together and pulling them up over my head. His eyes blazed with emotion, and I didn't need him to speak the words aloud because I felt them in my soul. The depth, the sheer vastness of his love, threatened to drown me.

Reaper never stopped his slow movements. Not when he bent down and shoved his face in my neck, and not when I wrapped my legs around him and pulled us tighter together, making us both groan. Our breathless panting filled the air. The slow build started, until I was right on the edge. He kept me there, never changing his pace.

I said, in the most pathetic voice, "Please."

Reaper knew what I meant. He moved sharper and harder. Waves of ecstasy rolled through me, building in intensity, until my back bowed and I was squeezing my eyes shut.

Reaper's groan and muttered curses followed soon after, and he collapsed on top of me, careful not to give me all his weight. He nuzzled my neck, staying where he was as our breathing calmed down.

He rolled off me and lightly slapped my ass. "Don't move." The bathroom sink turned on and off, and he came

back to me. The cloth was warm as he cleaned me up.

“Soon we’ll talk about going without the condom. When you’re ready.” He kissed my stomach. “All my tests came back good. That was a couple months ago. But I haven’t been with anyone in years, so there aren’t any surprises.”

“Years?”

“Almost four years, yeah.”

I opened my mouth, but no words came out. I simply lay there, stunned, until a siren pierced the silence as my phone rattled against the nightstand. Jolted to attention, I snatched my phone and opened the message.

Row row row your boat.

Sophia Pullbar was the only person who had that code, and she knew to only send it out in a life-threatening emergency.

A switch flipped in my brain. Instinct and training crashed into me. I ran to the walk-in closet and threw on clothes. This was bad. The fact that it had been sent out to me meant that everyone else was away, doing something that they couldn’t get pulled out of.

I was the backup’s backup. I was the last resort tonight, and I was getting called in.

Boots in hand, I walked out of the room and to the hallway closet where I kept all my guns and ammo.

I was pulled back. “Wait. What the fuck? Where are you going?”

“Got a call. I have to go. Don’t know when I’ll be back.” I said, mind halfway on the road and what state I might find Sophia in. I shoved my feet into my boots as I grabbed what I needed. Two gun holsters, knives, tasers.

“I thought it was your night off. And you’re going alone?” He sounded more frustrated than mad. It was the frustration that threatened to unravel me, an emotion I knew he’d feel over and over again when I had to hop out of bed at a moment’s notice. I got it. It was tiresome. Annoying. Interrupted moments and lonely nights. When we stayed on different military bases, it was something the spouses commented on. And our lifestyle involved a lot more last-minute disappearing acts with no communication.

Panic gripped me in its clutches, making it hard to think beyond the pain of us ending before we really started. This was the first time I’d gotten a call out, and we were already fighting about it.

“This is my job. I love it. It’s unconventional. Dangerous. This isn’t the first call out I’ve had to drop everything for. It won’t be the last.” I shook my head, snapping on my holster. I should’ve been halfway out the door. Should’ve been driving away.

“I get that, Peyton. I just don’t get why you have to go out alone. It isn’t safe. Fucking slow down for a second and make a fucking phone call to your team.” He fisted his hands at his sides, still naked.

“This is the job, Reaper. It’s not common that we do shit alone, but it happens. I was supposed to have a night off. They would’ve kept the line closed if anyone else was available to take the call. It’s procedure.” If someone was scheduled to be off, they only got messages when everyone else had marked themselves as busy in the system.

I finished grabbing all my equipment, disappointment and heartache settling in my stomach for what I had to do. “Maybe

we shouldn't do this. You're mad that I have to leave, and that's valid. But—"

"No fucking way. You're not using that pathetic reason to break us up. I understand your job. I love that you love it. *I love you*. I accept everything that comes with loving you. I'm not thrilled to have our night cut short, but that's fucking fair of me. But don't tell me I can't ask questions. I respect that there are things you can't tell me, but something is off here. You need someone to watch your back. Call anyone. Wake Betty up at least." His jaw worked, the muscles feathering as he seemed to war with himself. "I won't ask to come with you because I know you'll say no." He waited a moment for me to disagree. I didn't. My heart was too busy trying to escape my body.

"You keep getting ready. I'll make the calls." He demanded, snatching my phone out of my hand and dialing the number. I waited as he hung up and dialed the next number down.

Reaper hung up, and repeated it, waiting for someone to answer. No one did.

"Fine. Have it your way. No one answered." After a moment's hesitation, he slid my phone in my back pocket with one hand and tilted my face to his with the other, giving me a soft kiss. "Come home safe and in one piece. I'll be waiting for you."

He'd shut down the argument before I was ready, but instead of fighting a losing battle, I nodded and left. As I flew down the driveway, I stopped myself from checking the rearview mirror. I had to focus and everything at home only served as a distraction.

Twenty minutes. That's how long it took me to get to the abandoned barn we had told Sophia to meet us at. It was smack in the middle of where we were and where she lived, off the road and hidden by the woods.

I checked my phone for the seventh time since I'd gotten in my car. Both my calls to the office had gone to voicemail, and I'd sent out an alert to let the team know I received the message and was heading out for a retrieval. Twenty minutes and nothing back. And now there was no cell coverage. They weren't coming, and even if they answered now, it would take too long for them to get here.

Eyes open. Listen. Control. There were a hundred different reasons Sophia would have sent that message. All of them boiled down to her being terrified. Even if she wasn't in danger, I needed to keep my cool.

I ignored the gnawing at my gut that had become harder to dismiss with every mile I put between Reaper and me.

Something was off, I knew it the moment I pulled up. I'd been on enough missions to listen to my gut. My instincts led me to pause and scan the woods beyond the barn, but I didn't see anything out of the ordinary. I swallowed hard before getting out of the car, closing the door so it made no sound. I had my gun out, pointed down but ready to shoot if I needed to.

The barn creaked, trees and leaves shaking from a heavy gust of wind. I stayed low, going around the barn on the tree-lined side to figure out what was setting my off my internal alarm.

A feminine whimper came from inside the barn.

“Sophia.” I spoke just above a whisper. Another whimper answered me. I pushed the door open hard, causing it to swing and hit the wall. From the spot that gave me the best coverage should someone shoot, I waited.

The whimpers were louder now, the sobs growing closer. I took three steps in the door, gun at the ready, head on a swivel to find her.

It was dark, but the roof had enough holes in it that there was some light coming in from the full moon. The barn used to hold horses, five stalls in total on one side. A figure, thinner than I remembered, stepped out from the third stall in.

“What’s the—” White hot pain lanced from my left shoulder down the rest of my body. I dropped to the floor, convulsing, trying to push the mind-bending pain away to figure out what was happening.

Sophia dropped to her knees, body heaving with uncontrollable sobs, mouthing something that I thought was an apology. It didn’t matter anyway, not when two figures stepped out from behind her.

Lyle Lowenstein and Chad Pearson.

The pain ebbed away enough that I recognized Steven Pullbar walking around my body. He held a taser in his hands, the cords of which were connected to my shoulder.

The asshole had the audacity to wave at me before pressing the button to send more electric shocks through me.

I was going to fucking murder him.

And I was going to enjoy every second.

Everything went black.

Chapter Thirty-Four

REAPER

TEN MINUTES. That's all I could handle. I started counting the moment Peyton's taillights left my sight. Then I was on my bike, racing to the other side of the city.

What the fuck were they doing that they didn't answer the damn phone? I was about to break their goddamn door down and find out.

Fifteen long, painful minutes later, I pulled into my spot on the side of the building. Fifteen minutes, which meant that Peyton had been gone twenty-five. I was keeping time in my head, so I knew what to scream at them.

I stomped up to the door, putting in the code that Peyton had made for me so I could come into the building without constantly being buzzed in.

Peyton shouldn't be doing anything by herself. What kind of goddamn friends, or team or whatever she thought of them as, were unreachable when shit got dangerous?

I couldn't think of anything happening to Peyton. Never. The thought made me nauseous. I knew she had a dangerous job, and like I told her, I accepted it. As long as she came home to me in one piece.

I wasn't sure what I was more frustrated about. Peyton thought she could break us up or her friends not having her back. I snorted to myself. Definitely her friends. Peyton would learn the hard way that she wasn't going to get rid of me.

I hit the doors and was surprised that the lights were on. I pushed the door open so hard, it crashed against the wall, no doubt leaving a dent behind.

Everyone was standing around, not the least bit rushing to get ready or anything. All five of them. Betty, too. I counted twice as I told myself not to flip over a table and roar in their faces. Tyler leisurely walked into a back room that I knew was their armory.

Peyton was out there, alone, facing who the fuck knew what and they were just *fucking standing there*. Red edged my vision as I tried to rein my temper in. Tried and failed. "Are you fucking kidding me?"

Everyone swung around to look at me. Each face had its own version of amusement mixed with shock. Still no one jumped into action like I wanted.

"While you all stand around, doing fuck knows what, Peyton is out there. *Alone*. She's walking into something she might not walk back out of, without backup because she thinks you all are fucking busy. Yeah, you look real fucking busy." My anger was a living, breathing thing inside me, rattling its cage to unleash on these women.

The tall brunette, Adrienne, opened her mouth, but I snarled at her. "No. You don't get to speak. You should wipe that smirk off your face and go out and help my woman. Instead, you're all here fucking partying."

"Partying?" Chris said.

“What do you call this?” I waved my hands at them. “Peyton’s out there blind. No one at her back. She’s off handling some emergency call because you were all too busy to answer. She could be walking into a goddamn trap. Or worse.” I would not consider what *worse* could mean. “Some fucking team you guys are.” I was going to hate telling Peyton her friends weren’t really her friends. Not like she thought they were.

“Location confirmed,” Izzy said. She pulled off headphones, telling me she probably hadn’t caught what I said.

“Everything’s ready to suit up,” Tyler said as she stepped out of the armory. She stopped when she noticed me. “What’s he doing here?”

“Shh.” Jessen waved her hands at the two newcomers. “He was doing so well. Don’t interrupt him.” She gave me her full attention. “Go on.” She encouraged me like she was a school teacher and I was some shy student.

This shit was making my head pound.

“What fucking game are you playing at? Why aren’t you going after her?” I was at a loss. I had no idea where she went. It was turning me inside out at the thought that she was hurt, or worse.

“Well, after her tracker sent the alarm, it took about two and a half minutes to get into the system to triangulate her location,” Izzy explained.

“Let me know when you’re done pandering to his fragile male ego.” Tyler spun on her heel and went back into the armory.

“Let me get this straight.” I tried to take a deep, calming breath but it only gave me time to grow more enraged. “You

know where she's at, what's going on, and you haven't left yet? What the hell are you doing?"

My voice echoed in the cavernous space, and I reminded myself that Peyton loved these people.

"You were having a moment. I find it's better to let you yell, get it all out, and in the end you'll come back and listen better." Jessen's voice was so matter-of-fact that it bordered on condescending. Another knock against them. Was Peyton so lonely that she settled for these people as her family? Had Redemption driven her to these extremes?

Tyler muttered something and pulled on a vest. Her movement spurred everyone into action. One second everyone was standing around, the next they were armed to the teeth, helmets and vests on.

"You wanna go with us?" Betty asked from the side.

Fine, maybe they weren't as bad as I first thought when I showed up.

At least I hadn't called them bitches out loud.

I gave her a nod, then sent out a text to my brothers for back up.

Izzy walked up to me. "If you're coming, fine. But you need to keep up. I'll fill you in while you get ready." She handed me a knife. "Peyton was taken. I guess taken is relative, since she hasn't moved from the designated meeting point, but we confirmed that there are five bodies in the barn. Don't ask how we know that." Izzy crossed her arms over her chest, shaking her head. "One of the women sent in an emergency message. We can only assume that she was found and those dickface husbands are using her for bait. Something

happened that set off Peyton's tracker, letting us know she was in danger."

Tyler poked her head out of the armory. "Are we going to let him talk to us like that?"

Jessen shoved her back in the room, muttering words I was too far away to catch.

I furrowed my eyebrows, unsettled as I wrapped my head around what Izzy had said. "You have a tracker on her?"

"We all have one. It constantly checks vitals and can be set off if something happens like too much blood loss or major changes in heartrate." She left me and joined Tyler in the armory.

Chris approached me with a bulletproof vest, gun, and holster in her hands. A timid smile on her face, she pushed the stuff at me. I waved off the vest, but grabbed the gun, holster, and extra ammo.

"I'm sorry." Her voice was low and tinged with sadness. "It's my fault. Peyton was supposed to have the night off. I thought I rerouted everything so she wouldn't get any calls, but I forgot about her backup phone. We all have one, and those kinds of emergency messages get sent to both." I thought about where Peyton's main phone was and remembered she'd left it in her bag in the kitchen, a place she wouldn't have heard it go off. During our argument, I'd never once thought about where that phone was, which only served to piss me off ... at myself. "The call came in while I was changing clothes. If one of us answers the call, the phones stop ringing. And because Peyton can get obsessive, constantly calling to ask what was going on when she has off, I blocked her number for everyone. That's why we didn't answer your calls."

Chris wiped a hand down her face. “Amateur mistake. So fucking stupid. I thought I was doing the right thing. But don’t worry. Peyton’s been in plenty of dangerous situations before. She knows what she’s doing. They took a big gamble, not knowing how many of us would show up. The husband’s must have a plan, we just won’t know what it is until we get there.”

The new information did nothing to ease the knot in my gut.

The women filed past me, kitted out, without sparing a glance my way. I followed, determined not to be left behind. I had brothers waiting for my call once I knew where we were going, not that we’d need the backup. Still, I wanted my brothers ready, just in case.

“All right ladies, place your bets,” Betty said as she turned on the car and guided it out of the garage.

“Twenty says she’s out of whatever they bound her with and making them rue the day they were born,” Adrienne called from the back.

“Fifty on her taking out one of them,” Chris countered.

Tyler doubled down. “Hundred says one’s already dead.”

Their confidence went a long way toward calming my panic, but knowing she was up against the type of men who would burn the world to the ground to get their way kept me from sharing their absolute conviction.

“I’ve got a cool ten grand for anyone who backs off and lets me kill one of those motherfuckers with my bare hands.” With that, I sat back and tuned out until we arrived at our destination.

Chapter Thirty-Five

PEYTON

AWARENESS SEEPED INTO ME SLOWLY. A dull throb beat at the base of my skull, and I had to swallow the groan that crawled up my throat.

My butt was numb and my head listed uncomfortably to the side, the cold metal chair making it easy to slump forward. All the memories of what was happening slammed into my blank brain. Text. Barn. Surprised by the husbands. Tasered. Blackness.

My body was growing tense the more I woke up, going rigid. I willed myself to stay limp, for my body to stay as it was for a bit longer, ignoring my discomfort.

I kept my eyes closed and focused on my other senses, pushing past the low throb in my shoulder from where the taser prongs got me. Air was old and stale. Soft crying came from someone close to me. But that was the only noise I could find. I didn't need to open my eyes to know who was behind the sobbing.

Still, I waited a few more moments before I let my eyes flutter open and sat up. They'd kept us in the same location. Not that I needed the confirmation, but these guys really weren't the brightest crayons in the box.

At least we were in a place I knew backward, forward, and sideways. Knew the way through the surrounding woods and all the possible escape routes.

Shifting in the chair, I tried to stretch myself out. They had taken my gun, backup ammo, and taser, but a roll of my ankle told me they hadn't grabbed the knife I hid there.

I pulled at my hands that were bound in rope behind my back. My fingers traced the knot, searching for its weak points. My legs had nothing holding them down.

First not tying up my legs, then keeping us at the barn. The mistakes kept racking up for them.

How long had I been out? That answer would determine how I got us out of this mess.

Choked, ragged gasps caught my attention. It took a moment of searching the darkness to find Sophia a few feet away, her hands covering her face and shoulders shaking. Her head hung down, hair fanning around her face, chest moving up and down.

She wasn't tied down, yet she stayed in her chair. She was too afraid to move, and those assholes knew it.

"Are you okay?" I asked and her head flew up, eyes wide. Tears dripped down her chin.

"Me?" she croaked.

"Yeah. Did they hurt you?" I asked, keeping my voice low but calm. I had to take this conversation quickly but delicately.

"Steven, he uh, he hit me. But other than that, I'm okay." Her voice was barely above a whisper. Her arms wrapped around herself, trying to keep her tremors at bay, and she

hiccupped. I leaned toward her, spotting the slight redness on her cheek.

I was going to kill that fucker. But if I was going to get us out of there safely, I needed her to be calm. To trust me. Which meant I had to stop her crying.

“I need you to take a deep breath for me, then let it out. Like this.” I demonstrated what I wanted her to do, and after the first time, she followed my lead. Her hiccups slowed, then came to a stop.

“Okay. You don’t need to tell me what happened.” I had a feeling that her talking about it would set off a new wave of tears, so I went a different route. “Do you want to be here?” In any other case, I would’ve assumed she didn’t. But this wasn’t an ordinary case. The man had abused her, both mentally and physically, for years. That kind of trauma didn’t go away overnight. For some, it never went away. But if she was falling back into making excuses and protecting Steven Pullbar, then I had to know.

I could force her, but her kicking and screaming wouldn’t do either of us any favors.

“No.” Her voice was louder, stronger. Full of piss and vinegar that told me she was hell-bent on not being a victim anymore. I could get behind an angry woman. Could use that anger to get her to focus. “I called him to tell him to leave me alone. To go away. That we were done, and he’d never see me again. It was stupid. I shouldn’t have done it.” Her voice trembled.

“Bet telling him off felt nice.”

“So good,” she whispered. She’d made a mistake, but it took courage to call the one person who’d hurt her above all

others and tell him off. I couldn't be mad about it.

"I'm going to get us out of here." I pulled at the rope that tied my hands together. They didn't budge. I traced them again, shoving fingers into holes and pulling. It wasn't a difficult knot to unravel, mostly because it was poorly done. I just needed time to do it. Time I wasn't sure we had. "No matter what, when I tell you to run, you run. Don't look back. I know it's hard, but whatever happens, you're going to be okay." I winced as twine from the rope embedded under my nails. I opened my mouth, but a door opened with an ear-piercing squeak that made me wince.

I failed to note that sound earlier when they opened the door. Like I failed to consider that Reaper was right, and I was walking into a trap. As much as I hated being wrong, him being right made it so much worse.

Three men walked in through the side door, one after the other, all wearing grim expressions.

Good, we could all be annoyed together.

Steven made a beeline for Sophia. It took so much control to not lunge in front of her, protect her. Not that I'd be able to do much since my hands were still bound.

A second finger joined the first, giving me more strength to pull the knot apart. *Almost there.*

Lyle and Chad stopped a few feet away from me.

"Lyle, we meet again. Can't say I ever wanted that to happen. How did that early budget meeting go with the board?" I cocked my head to the side and gave him my best mocking smile. Did I fabricate meetings on his schedule, cause issues with board members, and generally make his life

unbearable because he showed up in mine? Yeah, I was petty like that.

Lyle sneered at me. “I took care of it like I always do. They were understanding given the situation with my missing family.” He stepped to me, bending down so his face was inches away from mine. “Where is my wife?”

Chad crossed his arms, narrowing his eyes. Steven paid me no attention, his entire focus on Sophia. She visibly shrunk under his stare, cowering in her chair. Steven gave a small smirk, pleased at the effect he still had on her.

My original plan to stay calm until the team arrived was becoming increasingly harder to stick to the longer Steven hovered over Sophia, visibly enjoying the way her body shook. He wouldn't make it out alive. I'd make sure of that.

I leaned back in my chair, giving the impression that I was relaxed, and waited until all the saliva and mucus pooled in my mouth, then spit in Lyle's face. He reared back in disgust as he wailed and cursed, wiping my loogie from his face.

The small things in life provide so much joy.

I turned, giving Steven my attention. “Does hovering over her like that make you feel like a man? Does it make up for your small dick?” I pursed my lips. “Or does it help you feel better about being a two-pump chump?”

Steven's face went bright red. He gripped the chair on either side of Sophia and screamed in her face, “What the fuck lies have you been telling them?”

Sophia shook, knuckles white from how hard she was holding onto the sides of her chair. She kept her face down, refusing to meet his eyes, using her hair as a shield between them.

“Oh, she never said anything. Deanna had a lot to say when I called. So did Lana. And Abby, the neighbor. A list of disappointed women you left in your wake, Stevie.” I shook my head, slow and mocking. “It started with your mom, didn’t it?” It never failed to set men off whenever you implied that they had mommy issues. Steven was no different.

His face went redder, which I didn’t think was possible. I smashed down the glee that rose to the surface. He was fun to screw with.

“I know I said I’d let you get the first hit, Lyle, man. But this bitch needs to learn her place,” Steven said through a clenched jaw. He slipped off his blazer and strode over to the crates, carefully placing it there. He ate up the distance between us, pulled his fist back, and punched me in the face.

Pain exploded in my cheek, my head snapping to the side. Stars dotted my vision, but I schooled myself as years of training kicked in. Breathing through the pain, I turned my head back to face him.

His hate warped his face as he hit me again and again. Each hit gave me a moment to yank on the ropes. After three hits, I had the rope dangling in my hands.

Fuck. I hated the hits to the face. Slowly, I brought my head back, ignored the throbbing pain on the left side of my face, and smiled.

Steven’s face pulled into a grimace. “This is your fault. I have to hurt her because of you!” He pointed at Sophia, who finally picked up her head and stared at me. I waited until she looked me in the eyes and gave a subtle nod.

I’m okay. I tried to say it without words. *It’s fine. I wanted this to happen.* I wasn’t sure if Sophia got my message, but I

hoped she did.

“Don’t you ever tire of blaming everyone else?” I asked, though talking hurt my jaw. “You have the worst close rate in the entire police department. Everyone knows if you’re on the case, it’s never getting solved.” I laughed mirthlessly, keeping their focus on my face so they didn’t notice my arms straining while I continued working at the knot. “Lose at poker? The other guys are counting cards. Can’t get a recommendation to move up ranks, not because you suck, but because the other guys were jealous. Wife runs? She was ungrateful.” I paused for dramatic effect. “It’s called accountability, Steven. Look it up. Then grow a pair and act like a fucking man.”

My pointer finger moved through a loop I’d made, and I twisted my wrist, ignoring the twinge of pain from trying to turn it in a way it wasn’t meant to. The rope unraveled in my hands as Steven cocked his arm back.

Two fast punches struck, one to the other side of my face, causing my mouth to fill with blood, and the other to the gut. I heaved gulps of air, trying to tamp down the pain, knowing that any reaction I gave would only fuel and empower him.

Picking my head up, I spat a wad of blood at him and was disappointed when it landed on his shoe. Steven lunged at me only to have Chad finally step in as a barrier between Steven and me. In the tussle, I spotted the gun Steven had under the waistband at his back.

Chad muttered something in his ear, too low for me to hear. Steven deflated and shoved Chad off him. He glared at me as he walked to the other side of the room and leaned on the wall. I shot him my best bloody smile.

Lyle frowned at Steven before coming back to me. “I didn’t realize how much I underestimated you the first time we

met. I thought you were just some computer nerd. Not a mistake I'll make again. Tell me what I want to know or I'll let Steven off his leash." I resisted rolling my eyes. "Tell me where my wife is." Lyle didn't scream; he enunciated every word with deathly calm fury.

I'd learned that people who could refrain from screaming and throwing things in their rage were far more dangerous than those who lacked such discipline. Such control over emotional reactions belied the hidden darkness within and put anyone who failed to recognize the warning in grave peril.

Pursing my lips, I shifted in my seat before letting my shoulders sag. "Fine. I'll tell you where she is." Sophia let out a sharp cry. Lyle's eyes gleamed, his excitement barely contained. "She's in Paris."

"Paris?" Lyle's mouth got tight. Behind him, Chad stood taller, and his hands came from out of his pockets. Steven gave a humorless laugh.

"No, sorry. Not anymore." I shook my head and pretended to think really hard. "Rome, has to be." I sucked air between my teeth. "She's taking a much-needed vacation, traveling Europe and enjoying her freedom, so it's a bit hard to remember."

"How did she get there, when everyone in the country is searching for her? She doesn't have her passport or the kid's passport." He spun around, pacing and pulling at his hair.

"She isn't in Rome, you moron." I rolled my eyes. "Get real, man. She's smart, she has a kid to look out for. Tallulah was always going to find the strength to leave you."

Lyle's leash on his anger finally snapped. He charged at me from the other side of the barn, and I gripped the rope,

waiting.

Ten feet. Six. Three.

I jumped to my feet, keeping my shoulder and body low like a football player. Lyle was too close, moving too fast to stop. I braced my feet, angling my body so he ran into my shoulder, then I stood up, using his momentum to lift him off the ground and send him flipping over my chair. He landed hard on his back, air whooshing out of him.

Everyone stared, too shocked to react. I used their distraction to stand in front of Sophia, blocking her from Steven's view, then shielded her with my body when the side of the barn exploded, sending wood and debris everywhere, using my body as her shield.

The smile on my face hurt. My girls knew how to make an entrance.

Smoke filled the air, stinging my eyes initially but I blinked through it. I grabbed Sophia who was huddled behind me in a ball. The men had scattered, but they weren't my priority. Sophia was.

My feet were swept out from under me, and I fell hard on my side. I sat up fast, but Steven already had Sophia by the throat and was struggling to drag her back by her hair. Instead of fighting him, she'd gone limp, making it nearly impossible for him to maneuver her.

"He has her!" I yelled out, knowing someone would go after them. I was too far away.

I got to my feet, but Lyle launched himself at me, tackling me back to the ground. His legs straddled my waist, his hands wrapping around my throat. "Tell me where she is!" Air became a luxury with my throat locked in his vise-like grip.

Pushing my arms between his, I shoved my elbows out, breaking his grip.

Glorious oxygen filled my lungs, but he came back, pulling my hair hard enough to rip it from my skull, and bashed his fists anywhere he could reach. Blocking his wild hits, I kicked at him to get space and pushed my legs between us. Lyle lacked the skills to stop me from pressing my feet to his chest and send him flying backward. Except he was heavier than he looked and didn't go far. I only managed to bring him up. His weight knocked the wind out of me when he came back down. Gripping my hair, he smashed my head on the ground, and my brain bounced against my skull.

Enough.

My arms were too short to reach his head, but my legs weren't. I slid them through the gap between our bodies, bringing them up until they were on his shoulders. The position had my body angled too far up, resting more on my shoulders than my back. Lyle had no leverage to bash my head down, so he tried for my throat again.

I wrapped one leg around both his shoulders, stabilizing him. As fast as I could, I crunched up, placing a hand on either side of his head, snapping it up and to the side with every bit of strength I had.

Lyle's hands went limp, life drained from his eyes, and his dead weight came crashing down. With a hard shove, he landed next to me, unmoving.

I stood up. Or tried to. Pain in my side made me hunch over.

“Peyton!” The scream, so full of panic and terror, reverberated in the barn. I turned and realized why the scream

was so afraid.

Chad stood a few feet away, aiming my gun at me. His hand shook, and he brought his other one up to steady it. I braced, ready to use the residual smoke as cover and throw myself off to the side.

Reaper appeared out of nowhere, blocking my view of the gun. Two gunshots rang out. Everything slowed down as Reaper's body jolted twice and fell.

A scream, so broken and inhuman, erupted out of me as I tried to catch him but only managed to fall with him and soften the blow.

His eyes were squeezed shut, and his breath rattled. A crimson spot on his shirt spread until his shirt was soaked and darkened with blood. I sat frozen, my brain trying to catch up to what had happened.

I jumped into action, refusing to let my panic and fear of losing him take over. Two gunshots, one to the gut and one to the shoulder. I was frantic, trying to apply pressure to both wounds to no avail.

"We need a medic." My voice came out broken from my screaming. So, I repeated my order, louder.

Reaper's eyes finally opened. "Hey Einstein." He smiled. His skin was already losing color. He'd lost a lot of blood. Too much blood. His breathing was labored, and his eyes fluttered closed again.

My stomach dropped like a lead weight. Tears pricked my eyes, blurring my vision. "No. No. You keep your eyes open. If you do, I'll tell you a secret." I needed to keep him awake until help came.

His eyes opened a fraction. “I want to know all your secrets,” he whispered. “Were you the one who released all those bunnies in the clubhouse a few years ago?”

Oh, god. I’d forgotten all about the time I drank too much tequila and decided that silly prank was the best payback I could get for them ignoring me. A sob ripped out of my chest, and I brought my bloody hands to his face, bending down so our faces were inches apart. “Maybe,” I choked out, barely able to speak as my tears flowed freely. I pressed kisses over his face and whispered, “I love you. I’ve always loved you. I decided when I was eight and you found me in the woods that I’d marry you someday.”

He brought a hand up and held my wrist. “Say it again.”

“I’ll only say it if you stay awake. You have to keep those eyes open and stay with me until we get you some help.”

Reaper coughed and blood dribbled from the corner of his mouth. His eyes fell shut, his hand falling from my wrists.

“No. No. Reaper please.” My voice broke as I shook him by the shoulders.

I couldn’t lose him. I wouldn’t survive it.

Gunshots rang out. Screams. It was all background noise as I tried to stop the bleeding. Hands grabbed at me, forcing me off him, but I fought them, scrabbling back to Reaper’s motionless body.

Multiple hands grabbed me, pinning me down as I screamed for Reaper to stay with me.

Chapter Thirty-Six

REAPER

SCREAMS. Cries. Everything muffled, like I was underwater.

Peyton. Where's Peyton?

I tried to open my mouth but couldn't. Tried to open my eyes but they wouldn't budge.

More darkness

"I love you," Peyton whispered, tears in her voice. Everything was dark, but her voice called to me, pulling me back. "Just don't move. Please stop moving."

I wanted to tell her I loved her. That she meant everything to me. That those years without her were like a limb was missing.

My mouth wouldn't work, my eyes stayed shut.

I tried to open them, to tell her I was there and I wasn't going anywhere. Wasn't going to leave her.

I slipped back into nothing before I could.

My eyelids felt like they were being held down by heavy weights. My throat was drier than a damn desert. A jackhammer went to town on my skull.

My eyelids finally moved, and the only thing I could make out through my blurry vision were blinding fluorescent lights. I blinked as everything came into focus.

Beige walls, tiny TV mounted on the wall. The IV in my arm and the pain I felt every time I moved told me I was probably in the hospital.

Memories trickled in. Peyton, her team, the barn. Being shot. Twice.

Peyton. *Where the fuck is Peyton? Is she okay?* She'd better be.

“‘Bout time you woke up, son.” Dad said from the chair next to me. “Don’t think about ripping those things out of your arms.”

Peyton. I mouthed the word since my throat was too dry to talk. Dad reached over and hit a button, shaking his head. Pushing up on the bed with my elbows, pain skittered through my body, making my stomach roll with nausea.

“What’d I say? Don’t fucking move.” I sucked in air, trying to work through the pain.

A man in a white lab coat walked in and came to my bedside. “Nice of you to join us, Mr. McMillan.” There was something missing from his voice, but my brain wasn’t working well enough to figure out what was wrong with it.

He gave me a cup of water with a straw, placing it on my uninjured side. I chugged the water in one gulp, relishing how it soothed my throat.

“Let’s check your vitals.” He stared down at his tablet, reading whatever it was that doctors and nurses checked out.

“Peyton,” I said, coughing to clear my throat.

“Ms. Linwood stepped out for a moment.” I fucking hated how bored his tone was, like he had more important places to be than doing his job.

“She’s okay?” That was the only thing that mattered. Peyton had to be okay or none of this was worth it.

“Cuts and bruises. Nothing to worry about. She’s had worse.” If I could move without wanting to vomit, I’d slam the guy’s head into a wall for his don’t-give-a-fuck tone when he spoke of Peyton.

He eyed the way I fidgeted on the bed. “You’ve been here for four days. A bad reaction to the anesthesia caused you to hallucinate. Uncommon but it happens.” I nodded, trying to remember something—anything—but it’s all blank.

“Two gunshot wounds,” he continued, eyes on the chart in his hands. “One to the shoulder, one to the gut. The gut was and will continue to be the one I’m most concerned about. It took some luck, but I approve of the work I did. You’re out of the woods for any major complications.” Were all doctors full of themselves like this guy?

Peyton walked into the room, and nothing else mattered. Her hair was up, her ponytail falling to the side. Stitches at her hairline, a map of bruises across her face and neck. Scratch marks. But she was alive and standing in front of me.

Whichever guy did that to her better be dead. If not, I was going to track him down. Kill him slowly, painfully.

“Hey.” She was cautious as she walked up to stand next to my bed.

I turned to the doctor. “You done?” Rather than answer me, he spun on his heels and left. “Dad, get out.”

He chuckled as he stood. “I’ll let your mom know you’re up.”

I gave it two seconds after the door closed. “Either you get in bed or I come and get you. You got two seconds to decide.”

She smiled, big and beautiful. My heart pounded in my chest. Fuck, I loved her.

And she loved me. She fucking said it, and she couldn’t take it back.

I waited for her to lay her body on my good side and settle in.

“Tell me what happened,” I demanded, resting a cheek on the top of her head.

“It was a trap.” Peyton sighed. “They tased me. Questioned me, hit me. You guys showed up shortly after.”

“They’re dead?” I asked, needing confirmation. I know one was definitely dead. Peyton snapped his neck.

“Two are. Pullbar was trying to escape with his wife, gun to her head. Tyler did what she does best and put a bullet between his eyes.”

I dropped my head back on the pillow and stared at the ceiling. My thoughts were still sluggish. “How did the EMTs get there so fast?”

“Jessen called them while they were in the car with you. Did you forget? Is there anything else you don’t remember?”

I gave her a long look. “I was too worried about you to pay much attention to anything else.” She looked down, and I decided to let her off the hook. Her team would put her through the wringer for going off alone. Again. She didn’t need to get that from me too. “The third guy?”

She rubbed her lips together, her eyes moving from my face to the bandages covering my wounds. “He got away,” she said carefully.

“What?” I couldn’t have heard that right.

“The cops who showed up were newbies. First look at a dead body. Pearson slipped out while they were distracted.” Her eyes went back to my bandages and filled with tears.

I didn’t hate seeing her cry, knowing those tears were for me. I knew what it meant that she finally opened up, gave me her tears, let herself be vulnerable. It was everything.

It meant everything.

She was giving me all her emotions that I knew she kept behind a wall. I’d finally worked my way inside her heart, and she wasn’t going to get me out. Ever.

She lay back down next to me, and I massaged her scalp the way she liked. “I need to ask a favor.” She tilted her head back and looked at me, waiting for me to continue. “Wait to go after Pearson until I’m healed. I want to get my licks in. Then you girls can do whatever you want.”

“Deal. The team already talked it out and came to the same conclusion.” She burrowed into me more deeply, her face nuzzling my neck. “Heard you gave a very ... impassioned speech. Good for you. Everyone enjoyed it.” I grunted, which

only made her laugh more. “Tyler even unloaded the gun with your bullet in it.”

Jesus, that woman scared me.

When she fell asleep a little while later, I lay there and listened to her even breaths, thanking every deity I could think of that we were both okay. That she was mine. Closing my eyes, I fell asleep next to her with plans of our future playing in my mind like a movie.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

PEYTON

A METAL SPRING poked my butt.

The old recliner had seen better days, but it was one of the only chairs in the room.

It took three weeks for Reaper to fully recover and make the trip. That was how long Chad had been hiding. Perverse joy filled me at the knowledge that he was paranoid, looking over his shoulder, wondering if and when he would be caught.

It was dark out, closing in on ten at night. Chad picked an industrial building in St. Louis to hide out in. I bet he thought it would take a while to find this place, since it was owned by a shell company and had been sold, with questionable paperwork, at least four times in the last two years.

It took me a day.

But with the police coming to question us over the past few weeks and waiting for Reaper to recover, this was our first opportunity to collect what we were owed.

Keys jingled, the front door pushed open, and a light flicked on.

Chad carried two large brown paper bags and set them on the folding table. He put away milk, a cereal box, and a few

other snacks. Like he'd be needing those.

Completely unaware of the danger that lurked in the dark corners of his hideout, he popped open a can of beer and *finally* turned around. The beer slipped from his hand, splattering on the floor.

"Hey, Chad." I smiled like a Cheshire cat. A heavy weight at the top of my chair had me tipping back. I didn't need to look to know Reaper had made his grand appearance and placed his hand on my chair.

Chad sputtered, his mouth opening and closing. His eyes darted to the door.

Adrienne was there, leaning against it, waving at him. Like someone set off a timer, Izzy, Jessen, Tyler, and Chris appeared out of the dark corners of the room.

A dark stain appeared at the crotch of Chad's pants and spreads.

A disgusted noise came from Adrienne.

"Nice place you got here," Chris said, taking a step further into the room.

"No neighbors." Izzy shifted on the other end of the room.

Jessen nodded. "Quiet street."

"A lot of room to play too." Tyler walked over and stood by Reaper.

I got out of the chair and walked until I was only a few feet away from Chad. Raising my gun, I shot him in the stomach and chest. The same places he'd shot Reaper.

Reaper walked up to Chad, who was crumpled on the floor, rolling in pain. Hands on his hips, he sighed and turned

to me. “You shot him before I could have my fun.” I shrugged and Reaper kicked Chad on his uninjured side, rolling him over onto his back. He leaned down, shoving a finger into the wounds, making Chad scream more. Reaper laughed as he pulled his finger out, went to the kitchen sink, and washed his hands. “I thought this would be more fun, but I can’t stand the fucking screaming.”

I headed to the door, where Reaper stood waiting for me. “Enjoy, ladies.”

After handing my gun to Adrienne, the begging from Chad for us to “please have mercy” carried me out of the building, holding Reaper’s hand. There’d be no mercy for him, and I couldn’t wait to tell Kate Pearson that she never had to look over her shoulder again.

I climbed onto Reaper’s bike and gave him a soft, pleased smile.

His hand slid up my thigh, squeezing it. “Ready for the ride?”

I wrapped my arms around his waist, bringing my chest flush to his back.

“Show me what you got,” I said, taunting him. He revved his bike in that loud, obnoxious way all bikers did when they wanted attention.

My laugh was big and loud, and I gripped Reaper’s waist as he shot down the street, weaving through traffic, making our way home.

Epilogue: Peyton

I DROVE up my driveway and slid into my spot in the garage. My spot, because my car was no longer the only vehicle in there.

Reaper's bike was in its spot. Like it had been since he moved in three months ago. Three months of waking up and falling asleep with the man of my dreams.

My first crush. My first kiss. The butterflies hadn't gone away yet. I hoped they never did.

I walked up to the house and slipped in through the side door. Music played low, the dining room table was set for dinner, and Reaper was at the stove cooking. I kept quiet, observing him. Loving that it was something I could do.

Reaper turned the stove off and looked up, smiling at me. We stood there, staring at each other. He was the first to break the trance, walking over and kissing me and whispering, "Welcome home" against my lips.

Warmth and happiness filled me until I thought I might burst. This was my life, my home, with the man I loved.

He nudged me to the table, moving around to get me wine and put the food on the table. At least once a week, he cooked a two-course meal and grabbed dessert on the way home. He

took care of me, in all the same ways that mattered. Made sure I ate, because he knew I sometimes got too involved in work and forgot. Helped me shut my brain off and relax. He didn't make a fuss when I had to leave when Betty called.

Once he had everything exactly where he wanted it on the table, he moved to his chair and stopped. Wringing his hands together, he stared at my chair, then back at me.

I looked down and forgot how to breathe. On the chair was a cut. A Redemption cut. The same as the one Aunt Jeannie and Scarlett and so many other women had.

Reaper pulled it off the chair, holding it out while he kneeled in front of me.

"I got this made five years ago. It was always going to be you, no matter how long it took for us to get there." He held it up so I could see it better. It read "Reaper's Old Lady" in the name place on the front and "Property of Reaper" on the back with the Redemption logo in the center. "I'd be honored if you wore this when you came to the club, or whenever you want."

He placed the cut in my lap.

I touched the soft leather. This was the biggest declaration a brother of Redemption could give a woman.

Reaper stayed on his knee and pulled both my hands into his. "I've loved you a long time, Peyton. You'll always be what I want. I'll pick you every day, no matter what. I can't imagine life without you." He pulled something out of his pocket, two patches. One was a computer and the other was from Cannon Beach.

"The first place I realized I wanted you for the rest of my life." He held up the Cannon Beach insignia, the place where I had my seventeenth birthday. "And I think this one is self-

explanatory.” He held up the computer patch. “I’ll fill this cut up with all my favorite memories of us. So that we never forget where we’ve been. The places that helped us fall more in love with each other.”

He cupped my face, thumbs brushing under my eyes. “Why are you crying? Did I do something wrong?”

I didn’t realize I was. “No. It’s perfect.” I let out a shuddering breath. “I want all of that with you.” I launched myself at him, making him fall back onto the floor.

The kiss started as slow sips from each other’s mouths, then grew more urgent. Hands everywhere, pulling at each other’s clothes, trying to get them off as fast as we could.

He rolled me over onto my back, whipping off my last piece of clothing, and held my eyes as he slid into me. We melted into each other, holding on tight.

“I love you,” I whispered to him over and over again.

“I can’t wait for the rest of our lives,” he whispered back.

We were a long time coming, and it felt like our lives had truly just begun.

Acknowledgments

If you're made it to the acknowledgement part of this book (fingers crossed, you didn't just skip to the end) thank you. I hope you fell in love with Peyton and Reaper the way I did. I hope you enjoyed the girl gang that Peyton surrounded herself with and are excited to read more about them.

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About the Author

Brittany grew up in the Jersey Shore before she ran away to NYC for college and never left. She now lives in Connecticut with her husband, toddler and rescue dog.

She writes spicy romance with strong, fierce heroines and the men who have enough guts to love them through it all. Add in a dash of heart pounding, suspense moments and hates writing about herself.

She passes what tiny bit of free time she has reading romance, fantasy and Dramoine Fanfic.

You can find her at:

@Bachayut.romance on Instagram

@Bachayutromance on Tiktok