



HAWWK

THE BEGINNING



K.L. SAVAGE

HAWK

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**RUTHLESS KINGS MC
LAS VEGAS**

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HAWK

My heart and soul both belong to the Ruthless Kings. As the club's VP, it's expected that nothing comes before the Kings for me. And for the years, I've been happy with that life.

But recently, I've been feeling a longing for something more... It was on a routine run down to Phoenix that I found what I've been looking for. The problem is, she belongs to another. She belongs to the President of the club I've been tasked with getting back into line, to be exact. But the heart wants what the heart wants.

If Molly and I want to be together, we're going to have to navigate a sea of betrayal, club politics, violence, and even death.

We're going to have to risk it all... but if we're successful, it will be well worth it.

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PROLOGUE



2002

I light up a smoke, take a deep drag, and exhale, watching as the thick plume of smoke drifts up into the darkened sky above. I look at the cityscape in the distance then cut my eyes to the vast emptiness that surrounds it. Year by year, that vast emptiness gets a little less empty as people flock to the desert. They say it's cheaper to live here than most cities, and maybe it is, but I don't know about all that. All I know is that these morons flocking here are turning my city unrecognizable.

It's the twenty-first century, and honestly, I figured Vegas would be a sprawling metropolis by now. Back in the day, I kinda thought it would rival LA or New York by the turn of the millennium. But here we are, in the new millennium, and it's still got a long way to go before it can achieve that lofty status. That's fine by me though. I kinda like the emptiness. The quiet and solitude of it all lets a man be alone with his thoughts. Plus, all this emptiness makes it a hell of a lot easier to hide the dirty deeds men do. The dirty deeds I do.

The night is cool and the moon is high, casting the world around us in a silvery radiance that glitters off the chrome of my bike. A few cars pass by on the road ahead of me, but not the one I'm looking for. I sigh and glance at my watch. It's just past eleven. Willard should be off work by now and coming down this road any minute. The road itself is small and isn't well-traveled. I know Willard uses it to get home. Which makes it perfect for the reason I'm sitting out here in the middle of the night.

I've got to deliver a message.

In the distance, I can hear the hiss and buzz of the cars on the highway. Beyond that, the glitz and glamor of the Las Vegas Strip lights up the desert sky. There's a vibrancy and energy about Vegas that's always gotten to me. It's just so alive and it fires me up. Even after all these years out here in the desert it still does. Vegas is a place that caters to every vice. Even your darkest whims and impulses can be satisfied in Sin City. If you know where to look. There's a little something for everybody here and I like that.

I glance to my left and see the headlights of Willard's charcoal gray Dodge Ram coming down the dark road. I slam my brain bucket on my head, quickly buckle it, put on my pair of yellow-tinted glasses, then fire up my bike as he approaches. The engine growls underneath me, making me grin. That feeling of steel and chrome underneath my legs always feels like a thunderbolt of power straight through my body. Just like the Strip, it never gets old.

I drive off the side street and fall in behind Willard. I can tell the moment he sees me behind him because his truck swerves left, then right, almost looking like he's going to lose control before he manages to right himself again. I laugh to myself and shake my head. Willard's always been jumpy as fuck, but this time he has good reason to be.

I give my bike a little more throttle, relishing the throaty roar it lets out as it shoots forward. I pull up alongside the driver's side window and look in at him. For a moment, it looks like Willard is trying to pretend he doesn't see me. His eyes are wide and locked on the road before him and he doesn't show any sign of slowing down. He's obviously weighing out the pros and cons of gassing his truck and trying to outrun me. Either that or trying to run me off the road. As if he even could.

I can see his face by the glow of the streetlights along the road. He's terrified. As he should be. You don't fuck with the Ruthless Kings and get away with it.

I point to the side of the road and shout over my bike's engine. "Pull the fuck over, Willard. Pull the fuck over now!"

I have no idea if he can hear me locked away in the cab of his truck but the gesture I'm making should make what I want him to do clear enough. He seems to do the calculations and ultimately decides that not pulling over would be far more detrimental to his health than pulling over. It seems to occur to him that if I were there to kill him, I would have just pulled up

alongside his truck and started firing. Willard is a fucking idiot, but he's not completely stupid.

I fall back as he pulls the big truck to the side of the road and shuts it down. Like a cop, I pull in behind him and dismount. I take my time as I strip off my brain bucket, gloves, and glasses; giving him a minute like the pigs do, to sweat it out. After setting my helmet down, I slide the baseball bat out of the holster I keep on the side of my bike. A thirty-four-inch, thirty-one-ounce Louisville Slugger bat made of ash. She's a beauty. Not only can she do some real damage, the mere sight of her makes shitheads like Willard piss in their pants.

I casually walk to the driver's side door and tap on the window with the small end of my bat. Willard flinches and refuses to look at me for a long moment. I tap again and he finally and reluctantly turns to me, instantly growing ten shades paler.

"Get out of the truck, Willard," I say.

He hesitates and quickly looks away. With a sigh, I lower the bat, and with my other hand, pull my gun and point it at his head.

"Don't make me shoot you, Willard," I tell him. "Get out of the truck. Now."

With a look of horror on his face, Willard fumbles with the handle but finally manages to open the door. He slips out of the truck and closes the door behind him, still refusing to meet my eyes. Willard is an obsequious little man with a nervous, skittish temperament. He's all of about five-six, with thinning brown hair, dark eyes behind his round, rimless spectacles, and a paunch around his middle. Willard is average in every way. Nondescript. He's the kind of man you'd probably forget five minutes after meeting him.

"How are you, Willard?" I ask.

He finally raises his gaze to me, and I see his eye twitching like it does when he's nervous. Willard clears his throat and tries to keep from shifting on his feet.

"I—I'm all right, thanks," he stammers. "H—how are you, Hawk?"

I frown. "Well, I tell you, I'm not doin' too good, Willard. See, I was expectin' to get our shipment last Friday," I tell him. "And here we are on Wednesday, and I still don't have it."

"Th—there are some problems at the airport, Hawk," he says. "New protocols I have to follow and—"

"That, my friend, is what the kids call a 'you problem,' isn't it?" I ask.

“See, you told me you were the big man, the senior Customs agent at McCarran. That’s what you told me, ain’t it?”

“It is. I mean, I am,” he stutters. “I am the senior Customs agent—”

“Good. Then you should be able to make this happen.”

“It’s not that easy, Hawk. They hit us with a new procedure for international shipments, ever since... you know.”

I know what he means. Everyone in the world knows what went down last September. But from where I’m standing, that screams of yet another Willard problem.

“T-t-they have to be quarantined until they can be scanned twice and right now, we’re backed up,” he tries to explain. “Hawk, we have regulations. Everything’s so crazy now. We—I—have rules we have to follow that—”

“There’s another one of those ‘you problems’ we’re talkin’ about, man. When you took our money, you made certain promises. You told me you’d be able to make this happen,” I interrupt. “Now, if you’re tellin’ me you can’t do what we paid you to do, that’s goin’ to make a lot of people unhappy. Me, for starters. But I’m the least of your worries, bro. It’s Reaper you got to be worried about, and right now, he’s a very unhappy man. You remember Reaper, don’t you?”

At the mention of the name, Willard’s eyes go wide with fear. For the last few months, Reaper has been the Prez of the club in all but name, and his first act was to appoint me as VP. Reaper’s father Old Grim still makes the final decisions, but he’s getting on in years. Probably won’t be long before he fully retires.

“I can. I will,” he says quickly. “I can do it. It’s just going to take a minute.”

“Seems like it’s takin’ a lot more than a minute.”

“I get it. I get that you’re upset and—”

“You’re damn right I’m upset. You promised me you’d be able to bring in our shipments like clockwork. I vouched for you with *Reaper*, man,” I press. “And now here we are, no shipment, and nothin’ but me standin’ here with my dick in my hand. So you’re damn right I’m upset, Willard.”

“Hawk, I—”

I step forward and jam the handle of my bat into his gut. The air explodes from his lungs and Willard doubles over with a loud, raspy croak. He wraps his arms around his middle and lets out a choked sob.

“Stand up,” I snap. “At least try to act like a fuckin’ man for a change.”

Willard straightens up but his expression is pained. His face has taken on a bright shade of red and a loud wheezing whistle is coming from his mouth.

“You know the value of a promise, Willard?” I ask as I push my long brown hair out of my face. “You know the value of keeping your word?”

He nods. “I do.”

“Do you? I wonder about that,” I comment.

“I do, Hawk. I get it.”

“Remember when you had a stiffy for that stripper? What was her name?” I ask. “Oh, right. Raquel. Remember when you begged me to get Raquel to bang you?”

Willard looks down, shame and embarrassment coloring his features. Raquel is one of the cut-sluts always hanging around the clubhouse. They’re always drinking and hooking up with the guys under some delusion one of us will finally settle down and make her our ol’ lady. Which is a fat fucking chance. Girls like those will fuck anybody with a patch. Or anybody those of us with a patch tells them to fuck. Which comes in handy in situations just like this.

Maybe it’s the veneer of danger inherent in all MCs that gets their juices flowing. Maybe it’s that rough, outlaw life we lead. I can’t say for sure, but for whatever reason—and I don’t really care to learn what that reason is—they want to be part of the life, even if only hanging on the fringes of it.

“Do you remember that, Willard? Do you remember Raquel?”

He nods but remains silent and lowers his gaze.

“I promised you that you would have the night of your life with her, didn’t I?”

“Yes,” he says quietly.

“And what happened?”

“I had the night of my life with her,” he whispers.

“And I promised you that I wouldn’t tell your wife, didn’t I?”

“Yeah.”

“And have I?” I ask. “Have I told your wife that you wanted a little strange on the side and banged some stripper?”

“No. You haven’t.”

“And do you know why I haven’t?”

Willard shakes his head miserably. “Because you promised me you wouldn’t.”

“That’s right. Give the man a cigar,” I say mockingly. “Because I don’t

want to live in a world where a man's word ain't good for nothin'. I don't want to live in a world where promises ain't worth the breath used to speak 'em. Know what I mean?"

He nods. "I do. I understand."

"Well, you made me a promise and you haven't come through," I reply. "So, here we are, on the verge of a world I don't want to live in. What are we gonna about that, Willard? You took our money. You made promises. You haven't come through for me yet."

"I will, Hawk. I'll get your shipments to you," he insists. "I promise."

A rueful chuckle passes my lips. "Another promise," I say. "Do you know how bad you're makin' me look to my club, Willard? I'm the goddamn VP, boy. If my club can't rely on the word of the VP, you know what that makes me?"

Willard shakes his head. "I don't."

"The soon-to-be ex-VP," I growl. "And you don't want to know what happens if they take my office from me because you didn't keep your promise?"

"I'll get your shipment released, Hawk. I swear."

"When?"

"Soon."

"When is soon?"

He shakes his head. "I don't know—"

"You have until Friday to find a workaround to get my shipment out of quarantine."

"Friday? That's not possible."

"Make it possible."

"Hawk—"

"You've been paid a handsome sum of cash to do a job for us," I cut him off. "Believe me when I say you do not want to be on the wrong side of the Kings, man. You don't want to fuck us over because that will go real, real bad for you."

"I'm not trying to—"

"Get it done. You have until Friday," I snap. "And if you're even thinking about running, let me just remind you that we have eyes and ears everywhere, Mr. Senior Customs Agent. Everywhere."

I punctuate my words with another sharp blow, driving the handle of my bat straight into his belly. Willard drops to his knees, wheezing and gasping

for the breath that erupted from his mouth. He curls into a ball and starts to sob. I shake my head, disgusted with this obsequious little turd.

“Get it done,” I growl as I walk back to my bike.

And then I ride off into the night.

CHAPTER ONE



The morning sun slanting in through the window wakes me up and I roll out of my bunk. My head is throbbing and my body aches. I don't know what the fuck happened last night, but I feel like I just went a few rounds with Evander Holyfield. I shuffle into the bathroom and pull a bottle of Advil out of the cabinet and swallow three of them, then scoop some water out of the sink into my mouth to wash them down. I splash a few handfuls of water on my face and stare at myself in the mirror. My eyes are bloodshot, there are dark circles beneath them, and I haven't thought about going near a razor in more than a week.

"You look like shit," I mutter to my reflection.

My looks mirror how I feel, so at least I'm consistent. Shaking my head, I take a piss, then shuffle back out to my room and stop at the foot of my bed. I want nothing more than to crawl back in and sleep a few more hours, but the sight of a curvy blonde nestled under the covers changes that plan. She's naked, out cold, and I've got no fucking idea who she is, but I'm definitely not feeling like cuddling if she happens to wake up.

Frankly, I like sleeping alone. I don't like sharing my bed at all, so I usually don't. I'm not much for spooning and sharing my feelings, or whatever happy horseshit couples do after they fuck. The chick in my bed is obviously somebody I banged last night but I can't say who the fuck she is. She's hot and has a great ass but I can't even remember what her name is. Doesn't matter. I have no idea what she's doing here.

"Well. fuck," I mutter.

I pull on my jeans and boots, then look around. There's a pile of clothes in the corner but I can't remember if it's the clean or the needs to be washed

pile. I walk over, grab a black t-shirt off the top and give it a sniff. Seems clean to me, so I put it on then throw on my cut, followed by my leather jacket. The last thing I do is slip my wallet into my back pocket, then hook the chain to the belt loop in the front.

Once I'm dressed, I walk back to the bed and give it a firm nudge with my boot.

"Hey," I call. "Wake up."

The blonde's eyes flutter for a moment but don't open, so I nudge the bed harder.

"Get up," I say louder.

This time her eyes do open and focus on me. A slow smile stretches across her face.

"Come back to bed," she murmurs dreamily.

"Get up. You have to go," I grumble. "There's aspirin in the bathroom. Get up, take a shower, and get out."

"What the fuck, Hawk? I thought after last night—"

"What, that we were gonna get married? Raise a family?" I snarl. "Maybe I could get a nine-to-five office job and come home to our two-point-five children in our home with the white picket fence? That what you thought, lady?"

She sits up, pulling the sheet up to her chest, preserving her modesty or something. Like I didn't just see her ass naked, sprawled out, and spread eagle two seconds ago. But fine, whatever. She stares at me with a look of disgust on her face.

"Lady?" she asks, her perfectly plucked eyebrows raised.

"It seemed the least offensive thing I could call you since I don't remember your name."

Her mouth falls open and her face reddens. "You are such an asshole!"

"Not the first person to tell me that and I'm sure you won't be the last," I reply, then turn to the door and open it. "Shower up. Get out. Later."

I close the door behind me, muffling the shouted string of curses coming from the room I just left. With a chuckle to myself, I wander into the kitchen and fix myself a cup of coffee, then take it out to the front porch. My best friend Reaper is leaning against the wall, staring out at the Nevada desert with a cup of coffee and a smoke. The sun isn't as high as I thought—it's still relatively early. I glance at my watch and see that it's just past seven.

"Huh," I mutter, then take a sip of my coffee.

“Jesus fuck, Hawk. You look like somethin’ I scraped up off the road the other day,” Reaper comments with a chuckle.

“Yeah well, I guess I look exactly how I feel then,” I reply. “What happened last night?”

“What happened?” Reaper repeats with a shit-eating grin on his face. “You really don’t remember?”

“Enlighten me, dickwad.” Of all the guys, I’m the only one who can even think to talk to him like this. He’s going to officially become the Prez once his old man hangs up his cut, and I’ll be his VP. Despite what I boasted to Willard about last night, I’m not technically VP—not yet. Not that anyone outside of the club needs to know.

“Enlighten? That’s a new one.”

I roll my eyes. “What happened?”

“I have never seen one man down a whole 12-pack in an hour and still be functional enough to take a cut-slut to bed. I’m surprised you’re awake, honestly.”

“Jesus,” I mutter. Surprisingly, my stomach doesn’t feel too bad.

“Oh yeah.”

I nod and take another drink of my coffee then set the mug down on the railing that fronts the porch of the clubhouse. I stare out into the vast stretch of land out there. A lot of people think the desert out here is ugly. Think it’s a wasteland. But there is a rugged beauty out there. The desert can be a hard land and it raises hard men, but there are few things more beautiful than watching the sun rise over the mountains out there. It starts with fiery hues of red and orange, and when the sun finally crests the horizon, the world explodes with a golden light that makes everything shine. It’s beautiful. At least I think it is.

I shake a cigarette out of my pack and light up, then take a deep drag, letting the smoke fill my lungs. I’ve always loved the first smoke of the day the best. It always gives me that little buzz I need to get my day started.

“What’s up with you?” Reaper asks. “You all right?”

I nod. “Yeah, fine. Why do you ask?”

“You’ve got that look you get when you’re thinkin’ about somethin’ too hard.”

“That’s bullshit.”

“Nah. That’s true shit,” he fires back. “So? What is it? What’s on your mind?”

I shrug and take another drag of my cigarette. I've never been the most talkative guy around and it's hard to put what I'm thinking into words that make sense. I take another draw and exhale a plume of smoke.

"I don't know, man," I admit. "It's just... partying, cut-sluts... don't you ever want more than this?"

"More?"

I shrug. "I don't know. This whole outlaw life. Getting shot at, bar brawls, all this shit we do... don't you ever want more than that?"

Reaper shrugs. "This is my life," he says. "Has been since I was a kid. Figure it always will be." He eyes me closely. "You thinking about getting out or something? I mean, you're not leaving the Kings, are you?"

I shake my head. "No, it ain't that. It's just... there's got to be more to life than doin' the shit we do. I mean I'm not plannin' on leaving or anything like that. I just... I feel like there's something more out there for me sometimes."

"Okay, like what? What more is out there for you?" Reaper asks.

"Prez..." It still feels weird to call him that.

"Not as your Prez. As your friend."

I rub a hand over my face and sigh.

"No idea. But sometimes I think about havin' an ol' lady. Maybe a couple of kids."

Reaper bursts into laughter. He doubles over, resting his hands on his knees. His face turns red as tears spill down his face. I'm just standing there awkwardly. I'm trying to not take it personally but it's kind of hard not to.

"Man, fuck you," I gripe.

"Relax," Reaper says, trying to get his laughter under control. "I didn't mean to laugh at you. It's just... funny."

"Why would me wanting to have a couple of kids be funny?"

"Because you hate kids."

"No, I don't."

"I've seen you with kids, man," he counters. "I've got a feeling if you could throw them all into the sun you would. You sneer so hard at them they're afraid to come around you."

I chuckle and look away. I guess he's not wrong. But still, there's a big difference between somebody else's kids bugging me and having kids of my own.

"It doesn't matter anyway. It's just a thought I have sometimes. It comes

and goes,” I say. “But the clubhouse ain’t a suitable place to raise kids anyway. Too many shitheads like you running around who’d fuck ‘em up in the head. Poor kid would never have a chance.”

Reaper laughs. “Yeah, you’re probably right about that. Could you imagine a bunch of kids runnin’ around at the Ruthless Kings Clubhouse?”

That finally draws a laugh from me too. “You’d fuckin’ hate it. Little shits running around destroying everything?”

Reaper barks out another laugh and he rests an arm on my shoulder as we laugh. The moment fades and we fall silent again as we drink our coffee and smoke our cigarettes. The clubhouse behind us is quiet. If last night was as crazy as Reaper says it was, I doubt anyone will be up before noon. I don’t really remember—which is part of the reason I’m a bit melancholy today. I mean, the Kings is my life. I’ve given my blood, sweat, and tears to this club, and I am damn proud to be the next VP once Reaper officially takes over.

But there’s another part of me that thinks having a stable place to call home would be nice too. The clubhouse is a great place, but it’d be cool to not have to step over the bodies of the drunks who are sleeping where they dropped the night before. It’d be nice to have a floor not covered in cans, bottles, and the dark stains made by puddles of vomit left behind by guys who’ve had way more than their limit. And it would be nice to have a place that isn’t permanently saturated with the stench of body odor, stale beer, cigarettes, and grease.

That part of me thinks it would be nice to be able to come home at night to a good woman and maybe to some kids as well. I’ve never known that kind of white-picket-fence lifestyle personally, but it has to work for some people, right? Maybe it’s for me, maybe it’s not. But there is some small piece inside me that would like to find out for myself. I may have thrown it in that cut-slut’s face, but I wouldn’t have even brought it up if some part of me didn’t want to have that someday.

But who the hell ever heard of a Ruthless King raising a family?

“You really want to go all domestic on us, man?” Reaper asks.

I look over and flash him a grin. “Pretty sure that ain’t in the cards,” I tell him. “I’m too feral and I don’t see that changing.”

The door to the clubhouse bangs open, slamming into the wall behind it as the blonde I woke up next to storms out. Her hair is pulled back into a sloppy ponytail and she’s tugging her skirt down. But it’s so short that I don’t think it’s helping. I have to admit, she’s pretty fine. Thin with curves in all

the right places and a golden all-over tan. She's got kind of a fresh-faced look about her and doesn't seem like one of the club's usual cut-sluts who all seem to have a hard edge to them.

The woman stops before she gets to the stairs and rounds on me. Her face is pinched and her eyes are narrowed and filled with rage. She's eyeing me like a pile of dogshit she just stepped in.

"You are complete fucking waste of life, Hawk. Fuck you," she sneers. "Is it really that hard for you to show a little respect to a woman you just spent the night with?"

All I can do is shrug. "Sorry. I got too fucked up and passed out before I could kick you out."

Her mouth falls open and her face darkens with rage. From the corner of my eye, I see Reaper clap his hand over his mouth to stop from laughing. She's absolutely livid. She looks like she could actually murder me right now, right where I stand. But she turns and storms down the stairs. I watch as she crosses the parking lot where all the bikes are in a row, unleashing a string of curses that would make a trucker blush as she goes. She jumps into a late model Jetta, fires up the engine, and speeds out of the parking lot in a spray of dust and rocks, her middle finger sticking out of the open sunroof.

Reaper and I look after her, drinking and smoking in silence for several long moments. He finally turns to me.

"So," he comments. "New friend?"

"You don't recognize her? She's not one of our usuals, is she?"

He shakes his head. "Never seen her before in my life."

"Huh."

Neither of us says anything for a long moment and I turn to look at the parking lot. I take a drink of my coffee, then a drag from my smoke before dropping the butt onto the porch and crushing it out beneath my boot.

"So, what do you have on your plate?" Reaper asks.

"Making a run to Phoenix for your dad," I tell him.

"Howler business?"

I nod. "Gotta check in with Hammerhead and see what's what down there. Shouldn't be more than a few days."

"Yeah, probably best for you to get out of town for a bit," he says. "The last thing I want to hear about is you gettin' plowed over by an angry chick in a blue Jetta."

I laugh. "That makes two of us."

“Watch your back out in Phoenix, brother,” he tells me. He looks left and right and leans in, his voice lower as if he doesn’t want anyone to hear him. “Keep an eye on them. Something’s up.”

“They’re our allies,” I say.

He nods, but there’s a look of concern in his eyes. “I know. But that’s just ‘cause Dad has stayed loyal to them forever. But when I’m in charge, that just might have to change.”

I frown. “What are you saying?”

“What I’m saying is, I don’t trust those fucks as far as I can sling a piano.”

I nod. “Yeah. That makes two of us too.”

I turn back and look at the desolate and lonely vista of the desert as an ominous weight descends over me. I shake it off and head inside. I need to get my shit and get on the road.

CHAPTER TWO



Vegas to Phoenix. Just over three hundred miles and a little over four hours on the road. Although I'm not real thrilled about my destination, I enjoy these long trips. It's sometimes nice to get away and enjoy the open road. It's nice to just have time and space to think. The feeling of my bike rumbling beneath me, the sound of its throaty roar filling my ears, and the sight of nothing but that endless ribbon of highway stretched out before me reaching out to the horizon is comforting.

When I'm on my bike with the wind flowing through my hair and washing over my skin, I feel free. There's no club, no business, none of life's pressures weighing down on me. I'm just me. Sometimes I think it'd be nice to just climb onto my bike and drive away, never looking back and only stopping when I need to eat, sleep, or take a piss. When I'm on the back of my bike, I feel most at home. I feel a sense of joy and freedom I don't get out of anything else in life.

Reaper always calls me anti-social. Maybe he's right. Aside from the club, there isn't anybody in my life I really enjoy hanging out with. And even the boys get on my nerves sometimes. I'm a solitary creature by nature. I don't need much, and I don't need people to be happy. Some of the guys may think that's unusual. None of them would say it to my face, but I can tell they think I'm distant. But I don't give a shit. I once heard a shrink talking about finding joy in your own company and not relying on others to make you happy being a sign of good mental health. So, those guys can all go fuck themselves.

I pull off the highway and head into the small town to gas up and get something to eat. After finishing at the gas station, I pull into a hole-in-the-

wall diner and park my bike. I hold the door open for an older couple coming out of the diner. The woman, probably in her sixties, looks at me with a dubious expression on her face. She switches her purse to the shoulder opposite me and keeps eyeballing me. The man gives me an apologetic smile and a shrug. I'm used to people looking at me sideways. Comes with the territory.

"Have a nice day, folks," I say.

"You too," the man says.

The woman quietly admonishes her husband as they walk away, making me laugh softly to myself. Being a biker comes with some baggage. For one thing, people always assume you're going to rob or kill them. Most people look at me the way that older lady did. Not that I really care. Let them look at me however they want. But it shows me just how many of them judge a book by its cover. These people can't see past my size, my long hair, or my tats. But most of all, they can't see past my cut. They see the Ruthless Kings patch on my back and immediately assume I'm a bad man.

I can't say the reputation a lot of bikers have isn't well earned. There are a lot of bad apples in the trees, and I'll never try to say otherwise. A lot of guys embrace that outlaw lifestyle and try to embody it. They fight, they kill. A lot of them get into some pretty horrible stuff. I'm not saying I'm an angel or that I haven't done my fair share of sketchy, violent shit, but I'm not like some of those other punks. I will never get involved with trafficking women or children. And neither will the Kings as long as I'm alive.

I embrace the outlaw lifestyle not because it's a status symbol or because I want people to think I'm cool like some of these posers. I embrace it because it's just who I am. Who I've always been. I've always had a healthy disdain for authority and have had a hard time following the rules. Mostly because I've found the people in positions of power and authority are idiots and the rules they set down are stupid and arbitrary. With the Kings, I'm free to be me and to do what I want, when I want. We have our own rules, and yeah, sometimes they seem stupid to me, but at least I have a say in shit with the club. I've got a voice.

I walk in and take a seat in a booth near the back of the diner that puts my back to a wall and gives me an unobstructed view of the place. Call me paranoid, but I don't like having my back exposed. I've definitely earned a few enemies over the years. I know there are some pricks out there who'd like nothing more than to walk up and shoot me in the back of the head, who

think they'd be justified in doing so. And maybe they would. But I'm smarter than that. I don't intend to ever give them the chance. If somebody's going to come at me, I'm going to see them coming and give them one hell of a fight. If they're going to kill me, they're going to have to fuckin' earn it.

Come to think of it, some of those enemies are exactly why I'm headed down to Phoenix in the first place. A while back, Reaper's dad Old Grim made allies with the Howlers. We've been doing business with them to make sure other clubs in the area stay out of our shit. Most especially the Desert Deviants, who are lower than scum. The shit I've heard about them makes my stomach turn. Hammerhead promised he'd take care of them in return for regular cash payouts, but Reaper's warning is still ringing in my ears.

"Mornin', hon. Coffee?"

I look up and nod. "Yes, please."

The waitress, Linda according to her nametag, pours me a cup from the pot she's carrying. She's a middle-aged woman with hair that's a little too red to be natural, blue eyes, and a thin frame. She's got some miles on her tires but she's still a pretty woman. I imagine back in her heyday she was a knockout.

"Thank you," I tell her.

"Wow. Please and thank you," she notes, sounding impressed. "Most guys who roll through here wearing cuts don't seem to know those words."

I shrug. "Most guys in cuts don't know how to be respectful."

"So, you're a different kind o' biker, are you?"

"Nah. Not really. I just know how to show proper respect," I reply. "You're workin' hard and are feedin' hungry people. I think that deserves respect."

She nods like she's surprised but gives me a smile. "Well, I appreciate that," she says. "What can I get you?"

I take a quick glance at the menu as she sets the coffee pot down on the table and pulls an order pad and pen out of her apron pocket. I decide quickly then slip the menu back into the holder behind the napkin dispenser.

"Steak and eggs. I'd like the steak bloody, eggs over easy," I tell her. "Hash browns, sourdough toast. And keep the coffee coming, please."

She smiles. "Long road, huh?"

"Long road after a longer night."

"Yeah, I've been there too," she says with a chuckle. "I'll have your order out in a few."

“Thanks, Linda.”

I sit back in the booth and sip my coffee as I look around. It's filled with mostly truckers and other working men. There is one family sitting in a booth though. Mom and Dad are sitting with a little boy and girl, both probably only about four or five years old. The boy has one finger jammed completely up his nose and the girl is tapping her silverware incessantly on the table. What's funny is that even though the parents look completely exhausted, they also look so... happy. They're making silly faces and joking around with the kids. I'm pretty sure if I go out into the parking lot, I'll find a minivan with four little family stick figures in the back window.

I'm sure they're just passing through on their way back to suburbia, back to their home with the white picket fence, expertly manicured lawn, and the fresh, updated exterior paint and the tire swing in the tree out front. I'm sure they just had the perfect vacation and are heading back to their perfect lives, living in their perfect neighborhood, surrounded by their perfect neighbors, their whole existence just perfect.

I look away from them, knowing I'm being an asshole. They didn't do anything to earn my scorn other than be what looks like a nice, normal family. A good family. The kids are cute. They'll probably turn out to go to good schools, get good grades, and be well-adjusted, high functioning members of society.

They're everything I'm not and will never be. Their seemingly perfect lives are everything I never had, and maybe I'm a little jealous. Even still, all these years later, maybe I envy those kids. Stability and even love were things not known in the Richards household when I was growing up. The second-best thing my old man ever did for me was die. The best thing he did was give me my first bike. My first taste of freedom. While I still hate the man with everything in me, I have to thank him for that at least.

It was my fourteenth birthday, and my old man came home with a pile of metal and parts. He dumped them out onto a tarp on the garage floor, muttered out “happy birthday,” then went inside and crawled into a bottle. I knew fuck-all about motorcycles or engine repair. But I learned. I read every repair manual I could get my hands on, annoyed every mechanic I could find, then begged for, borrowed, or stole everything I needed to put my bike together.

By the time I was done, I could have taken it apart and put it back together again blindfolded. I won't say that I'm a prodigy, but I am a great

fucking mechanic. There's almost nothing I can't diagnose and then fix. Before that, I never knew I was mechanically inclined or how good I was with my hands. That bike turned out to be a good lesson for me in a lot of different ways. Not that he meant for it to be a life lesson learning project... it was just an added bonus for me.

It took me the better part of a year to get it done, but when I finished, it was the proudest moment of my life. That first ride was nerve-wracking. I was terrified that my bike, held together with pretty much nothing more than bubble gum and chicken wire, was going to fall apart and send me skidding along the blacktop, tearing off every layer of skin I had. At the same time though, it was the most exhilarating feeling in the world. I felt liberated. Free. Tearing down those roads with the wind in my hair and the world flying by me was the most incredible feeling I'd ever had in my life—and still is. It's better than any drug I've taken. It's almost better than sex. Almost.

That was the one and only good thing my father ever did for me. He gave me my first taste of freedom. When he died, that bike was the one reason I had him cremated and scattered his ashes rather than just leaving him to rot where he fell. I figured I owed him one kindness for the one he did for me.

The only thing keeping me home anymore was my sister Trixie. I took a job at a local garage for a couple years to help pay the bills, and the second she turned eighteen we both high-tailed it out of that place and moved across the country to Vegas—that's how desperate I was to get out of that fucking house. When I got there, I looked up Reaper, and I've been riding with the Kings ever since.

“You all set here, hon?”

I nod. “I am. Everything was great. Thanks, Linda.”

“Anytime, sugar.”

I take a couple of minutes to finish up my coffee, then pay my tab, leaving a healthy tip for Linda. After that, I hit the head before getting back on the road. As I walk out to the parking lot, I notice the family from inside climbing into a minivan. Just as I thought, there's a little family of stick figures on the back of the window, which makes me laugh.

“Of course,” I mutter to myself.

The sun is well past its peak and is sliding toward the horizon. Still enough daylight for me to get to Phoenix long before dark, though. I climb aboard my Fat Boy, point it south, and let my engine roar.

CHAPTER THREE



Molly

“Get this shit cleaned up!” he screams. “Don’t make me tell you again!”

I try to stand strong—I’m tired of him seeing and feeding on my fear—but I can’t stop myself from flinching as if he’d slapped me anyway. He knows he scares me and uses that to keep me in line.

I wish I was stronger. I wish I had the backbone to stand up to him. But having seen him murder one person and beat a bunch of others near to death, I’ve learned to be terrified of him. As much as I hate it, my natural reaction is to do as he says.

I’ve been cleaning for the last two hours and I’ve barely made a dent in the mess. The members of the Howlers MC are fucking pigs. Every night they get wasted and start fighting and breaking shit. And every morning, Hammerhead yells at me to pick it all up so they can trash the place again that night.

I fight back the tears of frustration welling in my eyes as I walk through the clubhouse picking up the empty bottles, cans, and other pieces of random crap everywhere. I drop them into the trash can I’m dragging behind me, then empty the ashtrays into the can as well. I use a rag to wipe out the ashtray because Hammerhead likes to see clean ashtrays on the tables.

The can is getting heavy as hell though. I don’t know how I’m going to get this thing outside and down the steps. I look over at Hammerhead and clench my teeth. He’s parked his fat ass on the ratty old sofa in the back of the clubhouse. He’s alternating hitting his bong and swilling tequila straight out of the bottle as he watches some game show on TV. I would love nothing more than to grab that bottle and smash him over the head with it.

But I know I won't. As much as I wish it was otherwise, the only acts of violence I'll commit against him are in my mind. Hammerhead is a large man who, once upon a time, had been a solid mass of muscle. But he's let himself go. These days, he's become little more than a lot of flab and a horrible attitude. But he's still strong, unpredictable, and has a quicksilver temper that's become more pronounced the more he downs his booze and weed. Most of the time, I just try to keep my head down and hope he doesn't notice me.

I've hated the man from the start. I was abducted shortly after I graduated from high school. The men who kidnapped me were disgusting. I always tried to fight back, but soon learned that I'd only be beaten for my trouble. I was passed around for a while before I was finally given to Hammerhead as a peace offering from a rival MC—the Desert Deviants. I was forced to be with him and have essentially been his prisoner for... years. He never lets me leave the clubhouse and forces me to clean it. Forces me to cook his meals, wash his clothes, and oh yeah, fuck him whenever he wants it. Though to be honest, over the last year or so, the drugs and booze have prevented him from getting it up all that often, so his addictions have been something of a blessing.

He rarely bathes anymore and usually smells really bad. He never smelled like a rose to begin, with but lately, he's gotten so much worse. It's all I can do to keep from throwing up when I'm near him. And on those occasions when his prick is actually working and he wants to fuck me, I always make him take me from behind so I can actually breathe a little clean air and not gag on his stench. It usually only lasts a few minutes though, thankfully, so I just close my eyes and pretend I'm somewhere else. It's the only way I can get through it.

“Molly, bring me a beer!”

I jump to obey and run to the bar at the far end of the clubhouse to grab his beer. He usually times me. Anything over thirty seconds earns me a slap in the face. I learned early on to be quick and efficient when fetching him a drink. The one time I mustered up the courage to suggest he might get it faster if he did it himself, I woke up on the clubhouse floor about an hour later to find him and the rest of the Howlers, partying and carrying on as if there wasn't a woman lying unconscious on the floor at their feet.

“About damn time,” he growls as he snatches the bottle from my hand. “Now finish cleaning up. We have a VIP coming later.”

That news piques my curiosity. It's been a long time since we've had any outsiders roll through here. As membership has declined and the club sits on the verge of extinction, the Howlers have stopped being a major player in Arizona. The truth is that Hammerhead is usually too drunk and strung out to properly run the club, but everybody is still afraid of him, so they won't challenge him and try to take his patch.

He's the President and will remain so until somebody works up the balls to do something about it. Which, given the number of defections, I don't think will be anytime soon. Which also means I'm stuck. Unless somebody deposes him, Hammerhead is going to keep me here with his boot on my neck. I'm just too afraid of him to do it myself. To try and free myself or do something to him. I'm just not that ruthless. Not that strong. And definitely not that brave.

Besides, even if I were to escape, where would I go? What would I do? Nowhere and nothing are the answers to those questions. I have nothing. Not a cent to my name. Nor do I have any idea where to go. The one time I did escape—this was early on—I called home, called my parents to beg them to rescue me, only to find the line had been disconnected. One night after Hammerhead got drunk and passed out, I used his computer to do some searching and I couldn't find them. All I could find was that somebody else owns my childhood home now. It was like my parents just... moved on. Without me.

So, even if I do manage to escape, I have nowhere to escape to. Nobody is waiting for me. Nobody is out there looking for me. I guess as far as my family is concerned, I'm long dead and gone. It's a thought that still tears my heart into tiny pieces.

"Who's the VIP?" I ask just to deflect from my melancholy thoughts.

"None of your fuckin' business, that's who. Get back to cleaning," he snarls. "And stock the bar, too. We're gonna have a party to welcome this prick."

I turn away and start to do as he said. I don't want to get him angry with me for a couple of reasons. First, I don't want the obvious and obligatory beating that comes with upsetting him. And second, once the guys start to arrive for the welcome party, Hammerhead will forget about me, and I'll be able to catch a glimpse of who this mysterious VIP is. If I have to guess though, I would assume it's somebody from the Deviants, the club who used to own me. They've been hanging around a lot lately

Or maybe it could be somebody from the Ruthless Kings out in Vegas. They come by every once in a while with deliveries. I don't know much about club business, but I do know the Kings and the Deviants are enemies. The Kings pay Hammerhead to keep this turf open. If they ever found out Hammerhead has been doing a little business on the side with the Deviants, all hell will break loose. That would not make the Kings happy.

More than a few times, I've thought of sending an anonymous note to the Kings letting them know of Hammerhead's double-dealing. But I've played it out in my head over and over and I'm sure it wouldn't go the way I want it to. When he's sober, Hammerhead is smooth and charming. He can talk his way out of most anything and he would probably be able to smooth things over with the Kings. Once he's able to unruffle any feathers and prove his loyalty to them, I have a feeling Hammerhead would know it was me who tipped them off. And that would be very, very bad for me. That might be something I don't come back from.

"You done yet?" Hammerhead yells.

"Not yet," I reply softly.

"Hurry the hell up then," he shouts. "I ain't got all night. He's gonna be here soon. Jesus Christ, woman."

I grab hold of the trash can and try to pull it toward the back door but it's too heavy and only moves a few inches. I grunt and try again. Another couple of inches. My frustration is building and I'm doing my best to keep from crying. Hammerhead doesn't like it when I cry and slaps me when I do, thinking it'll get me to stop. Yeah, he's really that stupid.

The door to the clubhouse opens and Hogwild walks in. He's a large, imposing man who's bald as the day he was born but has a thick, bushy goatee that's dark and shot through with gray. He's got a big silver ring in his nose making him look like, well, a hog. The man is corded with muscle and has tattoos on virtually every inch of skin that can be inked. He's big enough to tear a person in half without breaking a sweat. He's Hammerhead's VP and is, strangely enough, the only one in the entire club who treats me with even a modicum of kindness and respect. Sometimes.

"Let me help you with that," he says, his voice a low, deep rumble.

"Let her do it herself, bro," Hammerhead calls. "Builds character."

"Fuck off," Hogwild fires back, making Hammerhead chuckle. "Try being a gentleman sometime, asswipe."

"You first."

Hogwild shakes his head and grabs the can. He lifts the bag out of it as if it weighs nothing at all and heads out the back door to throw it away. I grab another bag and start loading more trash into it. As long as Hogwild is here and is in a helpful mood, I should try to take advantage of it. The bottles and cans clink and rattle as I throw them in and Hammerhead chuckles.

“Oh sure, now you’re movin’ your ass,” he says.

I roll my eyes, making sure my back is to him so he can’t see. Once I have the tables all cleared and the trash can filled again, I start sweeping the floor. Hogwild comes in and takes the second can out for me.

“Thank you,” I tell him.

“No sweat,” he grunts. “Takin’ long enough.”

I pretend to smile at him, not sure whether to be upset he’s being rude or just grateful for the help.

Hogwild grins, turning away from me as if I’m not even here. “Hey, what time is he coming?”

Hammerhead shrugs. “He’ll be here when he gets here. That’s all I know.”

“You know what he wants?”

“Nope. Probably just wants to come down and flex his muscles to make sure we’re staying in line or some shit.”

Hogwild nods. “Yeah, probably. Been a while since the Kings sent somebody down here though. And they’re sending their new VP at that,” he points out.

“Wait, shit. Hawk’s VP now?”

“That’s what I hear,” Hogwild tells him. “Reaper is Prez.”

“Whatever happened to Old Grim?”

Hogwild shrugs. “Fuck if I know. But it kind of seems like something’s up. They wouldn’t send their brass down just for shits and giggles.”

“You’re paranoid, brother. You’re overthinkin’ shit,” Hammerhead waves him off. “He’s just comin’ down here to wave his dick around and show us his is bigger. All we gotta do is smile, tell him how massively hung he is, and send him on his way. It’s cool, man.”

“Yeah, I hope you’re right.”

“I know I am.”

So, the Kings are sending their VP down. Personally, I agree with Hogwild. Granted, I’m not super well versed in club politics but sending a high-ranking member on a run like this kind of seems like a big deal. Or at

least bigger than Hammerhead is thinking it is. Hogwild might be right to be worried. But Hammerhead is too high and drunk to see it. Good. All I can hope is that it's the beginning of the end for him. If he pisses off the Kings, it will be his downfall. And if there's any way I can help usher that in, I will.

Hogwild leaves, muttering under his breath to himself. Hammerhead stands up and walks over to me. He looms over me, at least seven inches taller and definitely twice as wide. I turn my head away, barely able to deal with his stench, but he grabs me, his fingers and thumb pressing hard into my cheeks, and turns my face back to his. I frown and try to break free, but he's got a grip like an iron vise. His breath is warm and rancid. I swear to God if he doesn't let go of me soon, I'm going to puke on him.

"When he gets here, I want you to be invisible. You got it? Serve the drinks, pick up the empties, and clean up the shit," he growls. "But you're to be seen and not heard. And under no circumstances are you permitted to talk to him. You say a word to him, and you know what's waitin' for you. Am I clear?"

I close my eyes and grit my teeth, doing my best to hold down my vomit. I know what will be waiting for me if I disobey him—the same thing that landed me in the hospital the last time I disobeyed him. And the mere thought of it terrifies me. I'm fighting like hell to keep the tears from spilling down my face, but one gets loose and slides down my cheek.

"You'd best stop cryin'. You know I fuckin' hate it when you cry," he snaps. "Now, tell me you understand. Tell me you ain't gonna open your fuckin' mouth while the Veep is here."

I don't answer for a second. I can't. I'm trying to pull back my tears as well as my puke, but the taste of bile fills my mouth, and the back of my throat is burning with it. Hammerhead is growing angry and gives my head a sharp shake.

"I asked you a fuckin' question," he says, his voice low and tight. "Am I clear?"

I nod. "You're clear. Perfectly clear. I understand."

He leans in close to me, his eyes boring into mine, and plants a kiss on me. The taste of his breath in my mouth and the feel of his cold and slimy tongue, swirling around my own nearly makes me lose it. I don't know how I manage to hold it in check, but I do and somehow keep my sick down. I deserve a medal for that.

He pulls back and a menacing chuckle slips out of his mouth. His lips are

curled into a vicious sneer. After a moment, he turns and walks toward the door to the clubhouse Hogwild just went through.

“Finish cleanin’ this shit up,” he calls over his shoulder. “And hurry up about it.”

The door slams behind him and I fall to my knees. Burying my face in my hands, my body shakes violently as I tremble. I manage to get back to my feet, fearing he’ll come in and find me like that and earn his wrath. Instead of continuing to wallow in my self-pity and rage, I run over to the bar and grab another bottle of tequila. Opening it as quickly as I can with my shaking hands, I raise the bottle to my lips and take a long drink, washing the taste of Hammerhead’s disgusting mouth out of my own.

I set the bottle down on the bar and let out a long, trembling breath. “I need to get out of here,” I whisper as a fresh tear spills down my cheek. “I need to get the hell out of here soon.”

CHAPTER FOUR



“Jesus, what a dump,” I mutter to myself as I climb off my bike.

I haven’t been to the Howlers’ clubhouse in a while, but I do remember the last time I was here, it didn’t look like this. The last time I was here, the clubhouse was tight. It was still an MC clubhouse, to be sure, but the place was clean enough and in good repair. It looked like they had some pride in their place. Now it looks like a worn-down crack house. Piles of trash are littered everywhere, there’s cardboard covering the busted-out glass in a couple of windows, and a nasty stench wafts in the air around the clubhouse. The whole thing looks almost ready to collapse under its own weight. The standards around here have obviously dipped since my last visit.

A few of the Howlers step out onto the porch and give me a nod. I remember two of them—Hogwild, the VP, and Jammer. Hogwild is a big guy and looks exactly the same. He may have gotten a couple tattoos since I saw him last. Jammer is a couple of years older than me but looks like he’s aged a decade since I last saw him. His eyes are red and rheumy, his skin is sallow, and his face is full of pockmarks that weren’t there before. He’s short, maybe five-six or so, and he used to be rocked up, but most of that muscle seems to have withered. He’s become so scrawny now. If I had to guess, I’d say he’s been dipping into the meth market.

“How’s it goin’, brother?” I drop my bag and greet Hogwild with a handshake and back-slapping embrace.

“Hangin’ in there,” he replies. “How was the ride down?”

“Uneventful. It was just what I needed... a long ride on the open road to clear my head.”

He nods. “I hear that. I’m about overdue for one of those myself.”

“Ride north. We’ll roll out the red carpet for you.”

“Might just do that.”

I nod then turn and shake Jammer’s hand. “How you been?”

His eyes are wide and unfocused, but he’s doing his best to hold his shit together. It’s not hard to see that he’s high as fuck right now.

“Yeah, yeah. I’m good, man,” he replies. “I’m good.”

I nod and look around. I want to ask them about the condition of their clubhouse, but I don’t want to be rude so soon after arriving. Hogwild seems to catch my vibe, because he looks away and frowns as if he’s embarrassed by the state of things. He clears his throat, and I can see that his embarrassment seems to deepen as he reaches for the door.

“Well, let’s get on inside,” he says. “I’m sure you’ll be wantin’ to talk to Hammerhead.”

“A beer to wash the road dust out of my mouth would be good too.”

“I can do that.”

I follow Hogwild and Jammer in, letting the door swing closed behind me. The stink that surrounds the clubhouse on the outside seems to be even worse inside. It smells like a combination of rotting meat, body odor, and an outhouse in August. I light a cigarette real quick just to smell something other than the other pungent scents that fill the clubhouse. I turn to Hogwild and grimace.

“You got a dead animal in the crawlspace or something?” I ask.

He frowns and shakes his head. “It’s—”

“Hawk! Good to see ya,” Hammerhead’s voice calls out. “Get over here, you son of a bitch.”

I walk over to the bar where he’s sitting and as he slips off the stool, I notice that like his clubhouse, the man himself has started to fall into serious disrepair. Once upon a time, he used to be ripped like Hogwild. But all his muscle seems to have coalesced around his mid-section and he just has a look of ill health about him. He looks kind of jaundiced, his eyes are bloodshot, and he’s got veins spiderwebbing on his red nose, showing he’s become a pretty prolific drinker.

He’s also got that unfocused wild-eyed look Jammer has that tells me he’s high too. I’d swear he was doing meth like it seems Jammer is, but Hammerhead is puffy and bloated, not stick-thin. If anything, it looks like he ate his meth dealer. As he pulls me into a bone-crushing, back-slapping embrace, I suddenly understand the stench in the clubhouse. It smells a lot

like Hammerhead who, I'm assuming, has stopped bathing regularly. What an absolute shitshow he and his club have become.

I step back and take a drag from my cigarette. "Thanks for havin' me."

Why I'm thanking him I don't know, since at the very least I'm going to need a tetanus shot and some time in isolation to prevent the spread of whatever shit I'm picking up just by being here. He's standing there smiling at me, but his eyes are totally vacant. It's like he has no idea what to say next and is just hoping that I'll say something he can react to. I take a long drag off my cigarette though, content to wait him out. He runs a hand through his greasy hair and sniffs loudly.

"Yeah, yeah, of course," he finally says. "Glad to have you here. Sit down. Have a beer with me and the boys."

I take a seat at the bar and survey the crowd, such as it is. There are maybe seven or eight guys in Howlers cuts in the clubhouse. The last time I was here, there were twice this number.

"The rest of your guys out on a run or somethin'?" I ask.

He shakes his head. "Nah. This is pretty much it right now."

"We've had some defections recently," Hogwild jumps in. "We've had to do some internal housecleaning. But we've got a batch of new prospects comin' in."

I nod. Purges sometimes happen within a club. I've seen my share. But never one that reduces the size of a club by half. Whatever internal drama they've been dealing with, it had to be bad. I don't like that sort of instability. And I doubt Reaper or Old Grim are going to either. We're working with these guys and the sort of mass purge and instability isn't good for business. It's something I'm going to have to take up with the boys when I get back to Vegas. We might just need to find another partner down here.

We sit at the bar and have a beer, but the clubhouse is strangely subdued. Even Hammerhead, who's normally always loud and joking, doesn't seem to have much to say. Far from the wild welcome I'd kind of anticipated getting, this seems more like a wake. Don't get me wrong, I'm actually glad we're not having a raucous party, but it's just weird. Nobody's really talking. They're all just sitting around drinking and staring off into space. It makes me wonder if the somber tone of the clubhouse has to do with the club's purge.

"What's going on down here?" I finally ask Hammerhead just to get him talking.

He shakes his head. “Not much. Not much, really,” he replies quickly. “What’s going on up in Vegas?”

I shrug. “Same old. Just staying busy.”

“Yep. We’re doin’ the same down here.”

Hammerhead is not the same guy. I don’t know if it’s because he’s high right now or what, but he’s just acting really squirrely and I’m not digging it. Not at all. It’s making me uneasy about the arrangement we have with the Howlers. By the state of this club, I’m not sure how much longer the Howlers are going to be a viable club and business partner. At this point, I’m thinking the only thing that can save them is if Hogwild deposes Hammerhead and takes over. Maybe he can get the Howlers back to what they used to be. Maybe. At this point, it seems like a crapshoot really.

I think I’ve seen enough. I just want to do what I came here to do, then get the hell out of Phoenix. I don’t even want to sleep over in their clubhouse. I’m sure I’d pick something up and I don’t have the antibiotics to get rid of it.

I turn to Hammerhead and drain the last of my bottle. “Shall we talk business?”

He nods his head, making his jowls jiggle. “Yeah, sure. Sure thing. Let’s do that.”

He finishes the last of his bottle then has his guy behind the bar give us a couple of fresh ones and we slide off our stools. He gestures with his head to me.

“Let’s go to my office,” he tells me.

“Lead the way.”

I heft my bag then follow him down a hallway that ends at a door. As I pass, I see the kitchen to my left and pause when I see the woman leaning against a counter. She’s got a bowl of noodles in her hand and is eating as she reads the magazine on the counter beside her. She’s a small, delicate little thing with some knockout curves on her. She’s got a head of thick dark red hair, eyes so blue they don’t look real, and skin the color of porcelain.

She looks up at me and when our eyes meet, her eyes widen and her perfect, full lips form a perfect O. I stand there like an idiot, gaping at her, feeling like I just had a fist driven into my chest that drove the air right out of my lungs. She’s the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen, and I want to talk to her, but maybe for the first time in my life, I’ve been rendered speechless.

“Hawk, we doin’ this, or what?”

I turn and look at Hammerhead who’s holding the door to his office open

and looking at me with an expression of annoyance on his face. I glance at the redhead again and she's still in the same spot, the same look on her face, looking absolutely terrified. And yet, I see a glimmer of curiosity in her eyes as well.

"Don't worry about her. She's nothin'. Nobody you need to worry about," he grumbles. "Come on. Let's do some business."

"Yeah, comin'."

I take one last look at her and swallow hard. It's crazy, I know. But I've never been so affected by a woman instantly like that before. I don't know what it is, but the mere sight of the sultry redhead is stirring something deep inside of me. Something I don't think I've ever felt before. I'm not quite sure what it is or what to make of it, let alone what to do about it. But the urge to pull her to me and plant the most passionate kiss I can muster is strong. The desire I feel for her is no joke.

After one last look at her, I turn and head down to Hammerhead's office. I don't know who she is, but that girl is most definitely not nothing.

CHAPTER FIVE



Molly

I lick my lips nervously and swallow hard as I look into the man's eyes. He's a stranger to me but there is still something so familiar about him.

Or maybe it's just my mind wanting to see connections that aren't really there. That's probably it, to be honest. But he's so strikingly handsome that just seeing him standing there makes me feel things I haven't felt in such a long time that I've forgotten what they feel like. Just the sight of him stirs the embers of passion inside of me that I honestly thought had burned out long ago.

His shoulder-length dirty blonde hair is lustrous and full. The way it hangs over one of his eyes with a casual indifference makes it look like something out of a shampoo commercial. He's got dark eyes that seem to penetrate to the deepest parts of me with practiced ease and set my heart racing. The man is tall and very well built. He's long, lean, and strong—not muscle-bound like Hogwild—but his arms are definitely thick with taut, corded muscle. He's fit as hell, like an Olympic athlete.

"Don't worry about her. She's nothin'. Nobody you need to worry about," I hear Hammerhead call from his office. "Come on. Let's do some business."

"Yeah, comin'," the stranger says.

He gives me one last look before turning and heading down to Hammerhead's office, showing me the patch on the back of his cut. Ruthless Kings. So, that's the VP of the Howlers' ally in Vegas, huh? I can see why Hammerhead doesn't want me looking at him—the VP is gorgeous, and Hammerhead's so insecure, petty, and jealous enough that he'd assume I'd sneak away with him. And I can't say if he asked, I wouldn't.

It's crazy, of course. As tempting as it would be to hop on the back of the man's bike and ride for the horizon, I know I never would. I'm not brave enough. I'm too afraid of Hammerhead to cross him. As romantic as the idea is for this man to be my knight in shining armor, I'd never be able to muster up the nerve. If Hammerhead somehow ever found us, his revenge would be horrible. He slaps me around for something as simple as not fetching him a beer fast enough. It terrifies me to think what he might do if I ever betrayed him like that.

As it is, I'm half-afraid Hammerhead's going to be pissed the guy stopped to look at me. Flattering as it was, it's probably caused me more trouble than I wanted, and Hammerhead is probably going to lash out at me for it. Like it's my fault. I didn't ask him to stop and stare like a smitten schoolboy. But I'm sure Hammerhead is going to be pissed that I wasn't hiding in my bedroom, well away from the wandering eye of his guest.

I finish up my noodles then wash the bowl and put it away as quickly as I can and scoot back to my room. I close the door and try to lock it, only to remember Hammerhead kicked my door in and busted the lock about a month ago after I refused to sleep with him. He'd managed to get it up for a change and wanted to put it to some use, but I said no and locked myself in my room. The next thing I knew, the door exploded inward. Splinters of wood from the door frame flew at me and the lock had been totally shattered.

The terror I felt when I looked into his drunken face nearly paralyzed me. He demanded I perform my duty, so I did, just to keep him from beating me. I wasn't entirely successful as he slapped me around a bit anyway, splitting my lip and bruising my cheek. But the whole thing was thankfully over in a matter of minutes, and he stumbled out of my room, crowing like he was the biggest stud in the world. I cleaned myself up and closed the door as best as I could. Hogwild found out what happened a couple of weeks ago and said he'd fix it for me, but he hasn't gotten around to it. Until then, I have to wedge a small piece of wood under it to keep it from swinging open.

Saying no to Hammerhead was one small act of rebellion I'd hoped would ignite more courage and strength in me. I'd hoped to make myself brave through sheer will. My thought was that if I became more troublesome than I was worth that he'd finally leave me alone. It's a thought I have every few months, but every time I try, I wind up cowering in the face of his fury and giving in to whatever it is he wants. And I hate myself for it every single time.

You would think that after all this time and all the abuse I've suffered at his hands, I would be numb to the fear. That the pain would no longer scare me. Maybe I wouldn't be so terrified of the thought of death if it meant being free from him. But the truth is, I like being alive. I cling to the hope that this is temporary and that all I have to do is survive until I can finally get free from him and from this life. Just survive.

That spark of hope is the only thing that keeps me going most days. I nurture it, giving it little bits of oxygen in secret. I don't want to die. Although my life has been a series of terrible events for the past few years, I want to believe my circumstances are temporary. I know I'll find a way out of this cycle of misery and come out the other side alive. I know I'm going to bear scars from my ordeals—mental, emotional, and even spiritual—but I know I can work through those. I know I don't have to let my situation define me and that if I want to put this all behind me, I can. It's just going to take time and work.

But I'm more than willing to put in the work that needs to be done to come through this whole thing. I want to work through it and move forward with my life. I'm young and there are still many things I want to do. I just need to hold onto that hope. I just need to keep that flame, small as it is, alive, and never let it go out. Because I know once it's extinguished, once I give into the despair that is constantly hovering over me and lose my hope, I'll probably be better off dead.

I can't live in a world without hope. I won't.

I sit down on my bed and press my back to the wall. Though, it's probably generous to call it a bed. It's four milkcrates topped with a piece of plywood that has a ratty old mattress on top. My room isn't much better. It's about as big as a prison cell—which is fitting—and has one window that latches from the outside so I can't open it and escape.

The closet doesn't have a door. Not that it matters. It's not like I have anything to hang in it anyway. Most of the time, I only use the closet when I want to hide. A battered old chest of drawers fits all my clothes and has room to spare. And other than a small, mismatched and thoroughly beaten-up nightstand that sits next to my dresser with a lamp being held together with duct tape, I have no other furniture.

Living in squalor would be a step up from the way Hammerhead forces me to live now. I literally am his prisoner. The only times I'm allowed out of the clubhouse are if I'm escorted by one of his men, who never let me out of

their sight. I'm denied access to the internet, don't have a cellphone of my own, and no other way of communicating with the outside world. At least I'm allowed to have books and magazines to read. It's usually Hogwild who remembers to grab some for me. He's also brought me journals and pens to help occupy my mind, though he warned me to keep them hidden from Hammerhead. He says it's important to keep the mind working.

I've thought about asking Hogwild to help me escape about a million times. I never do, though. I'm afraid of angering him and losing the only ally I have in this place. If I can even call him that. Hogwild is the best of the guys here, but that's kind of like saying he's the prettiest-smelling turd in the room. I appreciate what he does for me, but he's still loyal to Hammerhead and the club. He may sometimes come around, but he doesn't really care. If he did, he'd help me.

Even though I'm a prisoner, I'm an outsider, and I don't see him sticking his neck out for me like that. I keep hoping he'll bring it up, that he'll suggest an escape plan, but he never does. And I'm too scared to bring it up myself.

I honestly don't know how I've managed to hold onto even the barest scrap of hope and the dream of getting out of here one day. I have no idea how I keep that spark alive when I'm stuck in this pit of misery week after week and month after month. But somehow, I do. I just keep hoping one day I'll have the courage to make a break for it. Maybe one day I'll have the strength to just run—and keep running until Hammerhead gets tired of chasing me. Maybe if I run far enough, he'll eventually decide I'm not worth the trouble and leave me be.

That might be a pipe dream. He is one of the most possessive people I've ever known. I know that possessiveness flows from his insecurity, but to me, it makes him dangerous. It makes him hold tighter to those things he owns. And he definitely thinks of me as something that belongs to him. His property. He barely sees me as a human being. All I am to him is the house cleaner, dish washer, food maker, and fuck toy when he sees fit. What he said to the Kings' VP, that I was nothing and nobody, perfectly epitomizes what he thinks of me.

Back when I was first given over to him, I tried to be kind. I tried to win him over, believing there was a good person buried underneath all the gruff bluster. I tried to see a decent man behind the cruel words and abusive actions. I was wrong, though. Very wrong. I learned fairly quickly that there is nothing good or decent in him. Maybe there was back in the day, but the

version of the man right here and now has no redeemable qualities. There's nothing but a charred piece of stone where his heart should be. Anything good in Hammerhead died a long time ago.

I pull my pillow into my lap, hold it to my chest, and lean my head back against the wall. I close my eyes and almost instantly, an image of the Kings' VP pops into my head. In my mind's eye, I see his long sandy brown hair. Those dark, smoldering eyes. The stubble along his strong jawline. In my imagination, I feel his thick, toned arms around me and his mouth pressed to mine.

A fire lights up in me and sends tingles down my body. I imagine his rough, calloused hands brushing on my cheek softly. I imagine him caressing every inch of my body, peppering tiny kisses down my chest and on my nipples. Touching me softly. Kindly. The way I deserve to be touched. I imagine him reaching a hand between my legs and pressing against my warm wet center, massaging in slow circles as he brings me ever higher.

I let out a soft gasp as I realize my own hand has already wandered down there, and I'm soaking wet. My other hand is already on my nipple, pinching it just slightly for that perfect pinch of pain mixed with pleasure.

I hesitate for just a moment before deciding to continue. It's been so long since I've been touched. Really touched, not just abused and manhandled. I've almost forgotten the feeling. But as I slip my hand down my panties, imagining that it's his fingers circling my clit, imagining that it's his teeth softly nipping at my breasts, I feel an overwhelming sensation flooding through me.

I imagine his confident smirk—not cocky—as he stands up and removes his jeans. I didn't get a good look at him, but I just know he is packing. It was only for a brief moment, but I definitely saw the outline of his thick cock pressing against his tight jeans. My mouth waters as I savor the memory.

In my mind's eye, the man is lifting up his shirt, revealing gorgeous tattoos all over his taut body. He unbuckles his belt and pulls down his jeans, revealing his massive, hard cock tenting his boxers. I pick up the pace rubbing my clit as I envision the fires of lust in his eyes as he looks over me. I bite down on my lip, willing myself not to cry out as in my fantasy, he leans forward, kissing me deeply and pressing me back onto the bed. His cock rubs against my stomach and I whimper, begging for release, begging for him, wishing I could only make this real.

I close my eyes and let the vision take over as he prepares to enter me,

prepares to make me his. I'm so close. I feel electricity tingling my body just from my own imagination. He's holding his long shaft in his hand only millimeters from my entrance, ready to penetrate me and drive me over the edge. I want to beg him to take me, to make me his, to—

“Molly!” someone yells out, knocking the door roughly, and my fantasy dissipates in a split second. I'm brought back to the sheer disappointment of reality and I groan.

“What?” I finally manage once I've calmed down and caught my breath.

“Jammer clogged up the shitter again. Come fuckin' fix it.”

I can barely keep the tears at bay as I press my hands over my eyes, the visions of the man from the Kings fading into thin air.

“Molly!” he repeats, angrier this time and already slurring his words.

“I'm coming!” I snap. I gather myself together and head to the door, my face already a mask of indifference. Any sign that I was just masturbating to thoughts of the new visitor is completely gone. Not that any of these morons would ever be observant enough to notice.

As I cross the hall to head to the bathroom, I cut a glance over to Hammerhead's office down the hall, where they are speaking in low tones now, and my heart pangs with the thoughts again of that man, the Ruthless King, getting me out of here.

You'd think with everything I've endured, I would be afraid of sex. That I'd have a complete distaste for it. But I don't. Like the hope that continues to fuel me, I still find myself wanting to believe that I can have a healthy relationship with somebody. One that includes physical intimacy. Even though I've experienced so many horrible things, I still have to remember what true intimacy could mean. Before I was abducted, I always thought it was a beautiful thing that two people could share. Against the odds, I still believe that.

I'm not saying the Kings' VP is the man for me. I'm not saying we're even compatible that way. Or any way for that matter. Hell, I don't even know his name. But there was a kindness and compassion in his eyes that struck a chord in me. When his eyes met mine and I saw a look in his eye that said he saw me—really saw me—and not just as a sex toy, I felt something inside of me shift. I have no idea what it was, but it ushered in a lot of thoughts I've kept hidden from everybody—especially from Hammerhead.

The way he looked at me filled me with a warmth that started in my belly and spread outward. That warmth filled every square inch of my body, and I

couldn't keep the smile off my face. I don't know what came over me just now to have a full-blown sex fantasy about the man. It was only a fleeting glance. But feeling like I'd really been seen by somebody blew a little more oxygen onto those tiny flames inside of me, giving them a little more life.

Of course, there's a cynical voice in my mind that always has to chime in, and this time, it's telling me that I'm only feeling this way because the VP is somebody new. Somebody different. And God knows when the last time was that I saw somebody who wasn't a Howler. That cynical voice is trying to tell me that what I feel is false only because of a lack of options. Not because it's a real feeling.

It's also telling me that I might have seen in his gaze what I wanted to see. Not what was really there. It tells me I'm so desperate for something, for anything, to break up the monotony of my days that I'll grasp onto anything and make it out to be something it's not. Maybe I'm reading way too much into what really was only a fleeting glance. For all I'm letting myself believe, the VP might be in Hammerhead's office trying to buy me off. Another trafficker just like the Deviants.

I admit, it's possible. But something tells me that's not what's going on. I want to believe his gaze was more meaningful than my cynical voice will give it credit for. He didn't have that, "I just want to use you for sex" look on his face. I've seen that many more times than I can count on the faces of the Howlers, and this man just didn't have that. His was a look of curiosity, open and honest sincerity—and of course, one of attraction.

I can't say that I didn't look at him the same way. Especially after where my mind just went. It's like what we shared was a spark. Of what, I'm not so sure. But there was something between us.

I have nothing to back it up and no way to prove that of course. But that's what I'm going to choose to believe since I know that believing those things will nurture that spark inside of me. It will fuel the hope that sustains me. And there will hopefully come a time when I can utilize that hope to find a way out of this mess.

A way out of this mess and into the life I want. The life I deserve.

CHAPTER SIX



Hammerhead drops his considerable bulk into the chair behind his desk. It groans ominously but manages to avoid collapsing beneath him. I lower myself into the hard plastic lawn chair in front of his desk, setting the bag down at my feet. I light up another cigarette and take a drag. Tilting my head back, I blow a plume of smoke toward the ceiling, then lower my gaze to Hammerhead again.

“What’s going on out here, man?” I start.

“Not much,” he says. “Just doing our thing—”

“That’s not what I mean,” I cut him off. “Your place looks like absolute dogshit and you look even worse.”

His face darkens and he looks down at himself, frowning. I can see my words pissed him off, but he knows what’s in my bag, so he holds his tongue. But I want some answers.

“Listen, man, I didn’t want to do this in front of your boys but you’re falling apart. You can’t fill out a football team with your club membership, morale seems like it’s in the toilet, and the only one who looks like he still has his head on straight is Hogwild,” I tell him, my voice low and hard. “You’re supposed to be looking after our interests, but it looks like your entire house is coming down around your ears, man. It doesn’t look like we’re getting value for the money we’re paying you. So, let me ask again—what in the hell is going on out here?”

He sighs and runs a hand across his face, the stubble on his cheeks making a dry, scratchy sound. Hammerhead starts bouncing his leg underneath his desk, acting squirrely. Like a junkie who needs his fix.

“Things got complicated, man,” he finally admits. “We had some guys

who weren't loyal to the club... had to clean those fuckers out. We've had some pushback from the Desert Deviants... things have been gettin' hairy out here."

"Hairy how?"

"The Deviants been trying to take back what's ours," he explains. "Some of my guys... they made a side deal. We suffered some losses. But listen, I'm on top of it. We're good here."

"It doesn't look like it from where I stand," I tell him. "You're supposed to be keepin' our territory and our supply lines open."

"And we are, man. There hasn't been no disruption in supply, has there?"

"Actually, there has. We've missed a couple of shipments the last few months," I tell him. "Reaper tells me—"

"When the hell did Reaper get to be Prez anyway?" he interrupts me.

"A while back," I reply noncommittally.

"Seems to me you should be letting your allies know what's really going on. Here I thought we'd be working with Old Grim, and I come to find his own son has deposed him and installed you as VP?"

"Old Grim's around," I tell him.

"Why ain't he Prez then?"

"Club business."

He barks out a laugh. "Club business?"

I nod, not wanting to tip my hand too much.

"Come on now, Hawk," he says, a trace of that old Hammerhead coming to life. "Agreement I made was with Old Grim. And if Old Grim ain't in charge no more, I might be thinking about renegotiating the terms of this deal."

I raise an eyebrow. I don't know what the hell he's playing at. With the sorry state of this club, he's in no state to push back on us, especially since the Kings are only growing by the day.

"Cut the shit, Hammerhead. Right now we're talking about the shipments. You said you'd make good on them. You haven't."

"I will. We're still just trying to recover from our losses, man. We just need a little more time. That's all," he insists.

"How much time?"

"I don't know," he admits. "We've got some prospects patching in and we're bringing in some guys from Tucson to pitch in in the meantime."

"Do I know these guys from Tucson?"

“You might,” he offers. “Sharp’s guys.”

I nod, making a mental note to double-check that later. Sharp is a money launderer down in Tucson. We’ve worked with him in the past, but he’s not exactly the closest of our allies. Sharp is damn good at what he does and has enough connections to get you anything you need for the right price, but his associations are... murky, at best. If Hammerhead’s getting in bed with Sharp, that could mean he’s even worse off than I thought.

I regard him skeptically. “So it’s good?”

“I’m tellin’ you, it’s all good down here.”

I take a drag off my cigarette, never taking my eyes off him. He’s nervous. Twitchy. Shifting in his seat and avoiding my eyes.

“What’s going on with you personally, man?” I ask.

“What do you mean?”

I sigh. “You look like a crackhead looking for a fix,” I snap. “Are you using?”

He shrugs. “A little bit. Yeah, I smoke a little weed.”

“Weed doesn’t make you twitchy like this,” I counter. “What are you on?”

“I’m drinkin’ a little more than normal. I admit that,” he finally relents. “But I’m only smoking weed. That’s it, man.”

I know he’s lying to me and it’s starting to piss me off. None of us are angels. We’ve all smoked some weed. Some of us have done a little coke in our past. Some guys did worse. But as far as the Kings go, the club rules prohibit the use of anything harder than weed. We can smoke, we can deal, and we can even distribute the harder stuff if the Prez authorizes the transaction, but that’s it. If we’re caught with a needle in our arm or snorting something in the clubhouse, that’s cause for punishment up to and including being stripped of our patch and run out of the club.

It’s that serious and that rule has been in force for a long time. And we demand the same of clubs we do business with. We can’t expect every club to run as clean and tight as us, but there are some basic standards of behavior we expect from our allies. Part of that is for self-preservation. We don’t want to be dragged down in someone else’s bullshit just for our association with them. When we’re bankrolling clubs like the Howlers, we expect them to follow our rules.

Hammerhead is quite obviously not doing that. Which is a problem for him and an even bigger problem for us. If we can’t rely on the Howlers to

keep our supply and distribution lines open down here, we lose revenue. And there's nothing that makes me unhappier than to lose revenue. That's part of my job as the new VP. If I can't keep the taps open and the money flowing, that looks bad for me. And I don't like looking bad in front of my club. Especially if it's because of a junkie not doing his job.

"Listen, I know what somebody who's smoking weed looks like," I say slowly. "And I know what somebody on something else looks like. So, you might as well tell me what you're on, man. Come clean with me and maybe we can work this out."

"I'm tellin' you, Hawk. I'm good," he replies. "I'm straight, man."

I sigh and shake my head. "You really going to stick with that story?"

"It ain't a story, man. It's the truth."

I pick up the bag and set it in my lap. Never taking my eyes off him, I unzip the bag and pull out one of the banded stacks of cash. Hammerhead's eyes grow wide, and he licks his lips nervously. I can practically see him imagining all the smack he can buy with it. I hold the bag open so he can see how many bundles of cash are in it and his eyes grow even wider. I hold it out in front of him for a moment and he fixates on it like a cat with a laser pointer. But before he can reach out to take it from me, I drop the bundle in my hand back into the bag, zip it up, and get to my feet, slinging the heavy duffel bag back over my shoulder. Grabbing the pen sitting on his desk, I jot down my cellphone number on a scrap of paper.

"I'm going into town. Gonna find a hotel to stay at. I'll be around for a couple of days to... assess things," I tell him. "If you feel like coming clean, get in touch. If I leave town without hearing from you, expect that some changes will be coming to town."

I walk to the door but before I can open it, Hammerhead stops me.

"Hawk, wait..."

I turn back to him. "What?"

He looks at me for a long moment, looking like he has a lot to say, but then he frowns and sits back in his chair.

"I'll be in touch," he finally says.

I nod then walk out of his office. As I make my way down the hallway, I look into the kitchen again, hoping to catch sight of the redhead again. She's not there though, which is a bummer. I walk into the clubhouse and see that most everybody is gone. The only person left sitting at the bar is Hogwild. I can see the disappointment and shame on his face knowing how far the

Howlers have fallen.

“How long’s it been this way?” I ask.

He sighs. “A while.”

“Why haven’t you done something about it?”

“I’m loyal, man. He’s... he’s my Prez.”

I nod. “I get that. I appreciate that,” I tell him. “But the day for change may be coming. Just make sure you’re ready when it does. I’ll see you later.”

His face darkens. He obviously doesn’t like what I’m implying, but I bet some part of him, deep down, knows how this is going to end up. “Later,” he mutters.

I leave the clubhouse and get on my bike knowing one of two things are going to happen. Hammerhead is either going to come clean and start to walk the straight and narrow. Or he’s going to send somebody to kill me so he can take the money. It’ll be interesting to see which way he goes.

I fire up my Fat Boy and rumble off into the night, heading for the bright lights of the big city to find a place to crash for the next couple of days.

An hour later, I’m lying flat on my back staring up at the ceiling in a cheap but clean hotel room. I can put up with a lot, but no way in hell am I sleeping in that rat-infested clubhouse. I’m thinking about just how far the Howlers have fallen. When we first met them, they were tight. They were a solid club, and they were hungry to expand. Hammerhead had his shit together and he was a solid and effective leader.

But that was years ago now. Back when Reaper’s father was in charge. Hell, it might have been before he even added the “Old” to his road name and was just known as Grim. They’ve been good allies for a long time, but it wasn’t until the last few years that we’ve asked them to step up. With Phoenix having a straight shot to the border, other clubs like the Desert Deviants or the Vengeance Riderz have been muscling in on what used to be open territory, which has been a problem for us. And those clubs don’t keep their shit straight the way the Ruthless Kings do. Those clubs are happy to get in bed with cartels, white supremacist groups, or even human traffickers, which makes big fucking problems for our supply lines through the desert. We don’t want or need any of that shit on our heads, so we’ve been sending

the Howlers some cash to clear out those groups and keep things clean for us.

It was my idea, actually. I knew we couldn't afford to lose this territory, and I believed so strongly in this plan that I went to bat with Reaper and Old Grim for it. It took some time and discussion, but they finally agreed to give it a shot. It was a brilliant business move and it helped build my credentials with Reaper for him to choose me as his VP.

And for a while, it worked out just like I'd said it would. We had a tight pipeline in from Mexico and the product was coming in regularly. The money was flowing, and the club had never been more prosperous. It was all going like clockwork. But then about a year ago now, we started having hiccups. Shipments were late. Some were missing altogether. Hammerhead had every excuse in the book for us and because things had been working so well for so long, we gave him some leeway.

And finally, a month back or so, Old Grim had enough. We had a few meetings to discuss how to handle the issue. Because I'd vouched for him, I took it upon myself to get this shit straightened out. I told him I'd come down and have a talk with Hammerhead. See if I could figure out what the problem was and see if I could unclog the pipeline and get everything flowing again.

Having seen how far their club has deteriorated—and how far Hammerhead himself has declined—I kind of doubt that this situation can be fixed at all. I want to give him every opportunity to get his shit tight again not because we're friends or I think he's a good guy, but back in the day, he was reliable. He was never the greatest guy, but he was good enough for what we needed him for.

Plus, if things don't work out with him, what the hell are we supposed to do? Go with the Deviants? We can't just let them take over this territory and allow them to open up their trafficking network into our turf. Our asses would be completely sunk if that happened.

I let out a long breath. I'm tired and want to get some sleep. I push all thoughts of business problems and club politics out of my head. I can't sleep with my mind spinning a million miles a minute. I close my eyes and clear my mind, trying to relax my body enough that it will let me drift off to sleep.

As I let go of all the stresses and clear my head, the face of the redhead floats across my mind. I see her standing in the kitchen with the bowl of noodles in her hand. I feel that surge of emotion when our eyes meet all over again and my heart starts to race. The feeling starts as a burst of warmth in my belly that spreads through my entire body. Just the thought of her makes

me feel like my veins are filled with liquid fire.

This is entirely new to me. I've been with lots of women over the years. Some of them I even liked and spent some time with. Not that I would ever call it serious. I've never had a serious relationship in my life. Six months was the longest I've ever been with somebody and even that, I consider more of a friends with benefits kind of deal. She didn't, as I found out, which led to me getting a dozen stitches to close a gash over my left eyebrow. But I'd never had that urge to make any of the women I've been with my ol' lady.

The fact that I'm having the reaction I'm having to the redhead tells me there's something different about her. It's not just that she's sexy as hell—although she is that for sure—but when our eyes met, I felt like she unlocked something inside of me. I don't know what it is or what it means. And I sure as shit don't know what, if anything, to do about it. I have no idea who she is. She might be somebody's ol' lady for all I know. I'm hoping she's just one of the Howlers' regular cut-sluts and that she hasn't been claimed by anybody. I'm going to have to ask Hammerhead about her.

For now, though, I content myself to falling asleep with images of her dancing through my mind. And as I surrender to the dark embrace of the night, it's with a smile on my face.

CHAPTER SEVEN



Molly

“Didn’t I tell you to make yourself invisible?” he sneers, his voice low and tight.

“I—I did,” I protest. “I was—”

“Shut up,” he cuts me off. “You were in the kitchen, in plain sight. Just like I told you not to be. Don’t you ever fuckin’ listen?”

Barely minutes after the Kings’ VP left, Hammerhead stormed into my room, a look of rage darkening his face. I tuck myself into the corner of my bed, my pillow pulled into my lap protectively, trying to make myself as small as I can. I think that’s the only thing saving me from catching a beating right now. My bed is so low to the floor that to get to me, he’d have to bend down quite a bit. His girth doesn’t allow him to bend down that far.

It’s a thought that makes me want to laugh but I hold it in. Laughing right now would make him pissed off. I don’t want to make him have to put in effort. That would only make the beating that much worse.

“I’m sorry,” I say. “I was hungry and thought you—”

“No, see, that’s the problem. You didn’t think. You never fuckin’ think,” he growls.

Hammerhead looms over me, his dirty face twisted into a mask of rage. He’s in an even worse mood than he was earlier so I can only assume that the Kings’ VP smacked him down. It usually goes that way—when somebody else humiliates him or upsets him in any way, he takes it out on me. Every single time. I’m less his ol’ lady and more his punching bag. And it’s been that way from the start.

“We didn’t speak, Hammerhead. We didn’t say a word to each other,” I protest. “I don’t know what your problem is.”

“Oh, you don’t?”

I shake my head. “I don’t. We didn’t even speak to each other.”

“I told you I didn’t even want Hawk to see you!” he roars. “I told you to stay out of sight! Are you deaf or just fuckin’ stupid?”

My frustration is boiling over and I’m having a hard time keeping it in check. I know talking back to him will carry consequences but for whatever reason, right now, I don’t care. I’m just so tired of this. All of this.

I am pleased, though, to finally have a name to put to the man’s handsome face. Hammerhead is so pissed I don’t think he even realized he let it slip in front of me. That’s the one good thing about him—the angrier he gets, the dumber he becomes. I can always count on him to say or do something stupid when he gets riled up.

“No, that’s not what you told me,” I snap back. “You told me that I’m to be seen and not heard. Well, I was seen and because I didn’t say anything to him, I wasn’t heard either!”

His expression darkens and he grits his teeth as he stares at me. He’s trembling with so much anger right now that his jowls are jiggling. It’s almost comical. Or would be if I wasn’t afraid that he would kill me for my defiance.

“Your smart mouth is gonna get your teeth kicked in if you’re not careful, woman. I’m gettin’ real tired of your lip.”

“What is the big deal?” I demand. “What does it matter if this Hawk guy saw me?”

“Because I said it was. I told you I didn’t want him seein’ you. And around here, my fuckin’ word is the law,” he growls. “You’d think that’s somethin’ you’d know after all these years together and all the times I tried to teach you that lesson. Looks like you’re gonna need a refresher course though.”

Seeing him standing there, trembling and jiggling in his impotent rage, forces something inside of me to shift. The only way I can explain it is that it feels like some door inside of me slamming shut and another one opening. I don’t understand it. But for some reason, I feel the fear Hammerhead has inspired in me from day one begin to fall. It’s replaced by a strength rising within me, a strength that I didn’t even know I had. I’m left speechless for a moment.

I stand up straight, feeling that new sense of strength filling every square inch of my body. I don’t know what’s causing it or why I suddenly feel this

way, but for the first time in my life, the anger is blotting out my fear. I'm suddenly not afraid of him. Well, that's not true. I'm still afraid of him, but for the first time, I'm not paralyzed by that fear. It's not keeping me quiet and docile. In this moment, I feel like I could take on the world.

It's a strange sensation and I don't understand where it's coming from or why it's only filling me now. I don't get why I didn't feel this strength earlier. But whatever the reason, I'm glad to feel it now. I know it's going to cost me but right now, I don't care. Right now, I want Hammerhead to see that I'm not scared of him. I'll deal with the fallout later.

"You can beat me all you want," I hiss. "It's not going to change a thing. I did what you told me to do."

His eyes narrowed into vicious, evil slits, he reaches down and grabs me by the hair, yanking me to my feet. I grimace with the pain and struggle feebly against his grip. Hammerhead delivers a vicious slap that sends lightning bolts of pain crackling along my every nerve ending. But the pain doesn't stop me. Not this time. Instead, it only makes me angrier.

"Does that feel better, Martin?" I mock him, knowing how much he hates his given name. "Does that make you feel like a man?"

He growls and drives a fist into my stomach, driving the air out of my lungs with a loud "oomph." Hammerhead lets go of my hair and I double over, clutching my midsection as I try to swallow large gulps of air. I'm queasy and feel like I might throw up, tasting the bile in the back of my throat. But I don't care. I'll throw up all over his stupid face if I have to.

When I stand up again, I narrow my eyes and grit my teeth. I have no idea where this surge of righteous rage is coming from but I'm going to ride it until the wheels fall off. Reaching back, I deliver a hard slap across his face, snapping his head to the side and making his jowls quiver. There's a perfect red mark in the shape of my hand on his cheek and a thin trickle of blood spills from his lip.

He looks at me, some of the hardness in his eyes fading, replaced by surprise that I'd lashed out at him. Hammerhead wipes the blood with his thumb then looks at it. He nods to himself then wipes the smear of blood on his shirt. He looks up at me with a sly grin crossing his lips and his eyes glitter dangerously.

"Well, somethin' put a fire in that belly of yours. Is it Hawk? Did the sight of him get you all wet, Molly?" he asks with a small chuckle. "Are you trying to impress him, hoping he'll give it to you good? Is that what's giving

you a spine all of a sudden?”

“You’re a pig,” I growl.

“Well, somethin’ has you all unexpectedly fired up,” he says. “Near as I can tell, that’s the only thing that’s changed.”

“You have no idea what you’re talking about.”

He chuckles to himself. “No? Then why are your cheeks all red, huh?” he counters, his voice low and suggestive as he leans close to me. “I bet your panties are all wet for him right now, aren’t they?”

“Shut up,” I respond. “You’re disgusting.”

It’s not that I’m all wet for Hawk. And—well—I am. But it’s not about that. It’s not just that he’s gorgeous, and exactly the kind of man I can someday see being the man who can take me out of this horror into a life I truly deserve. In the two seconds I saw Hawk looking at me, I got more emotion and humanity from someone than I have in years. We didn’t share a single word, but somehow I know that he’s a good man. There’s just something about him that makes me feel better. Maybe that’s where this surge of strength is coming from. I don’t know.

For once in his stupid life, Hammerhead is right. Hawk’s arrival is the only thing that’s changed in my world. So maybe it’s the feelings that have been surging through me ever since seeing him that have me suddenly standing up to Hammerhead. I don’t understand it, but I feel stronger, braver, and more capable because of Hawk. And I know it’s nothing that he did. It’s something that he inspired in me, something he represents: a bright ray of hope shining out of the darkness. Not that I’d ever share that with Hammerhead. If I told him that I’m hoping against hope that Hawk could take me out of here—and not to mention that I was just fingering myself to thoughts of him barely an hour ago—he would give me the beating of a lifetime.

“You want to fuck him, don’t you?” he says.

“You are disgusting. I don’t even know him.”

He shrugs. “Doesn’t mean you don’t want to fuck him.”

“Shut up, Martin,” I sneer. “You are foul.”

He leans closer to me, his eyes boring into mine. “You’re to stay away from him, Molly. You got that?” he hisses. “If I find you screwin’ around with him, I will kill you. And then I’ll kill him. You got that?”

“Yeah, I got it.”

“You sure about that?”

“Unlike you, I usually only need to be told something once,” I spit.

He shakes his head. “You really do got a mouth on you, girl. It’s even kinda cute,” he says. “But you watch yourself. I’m givin’ you a pass right now but don’t mistake that kindness for weakness. It’s a one-time deal, girl. You step outta line again and we’re gonna have some problems. You got me?”

I look away, doing my best to hold my tongue. But there’s so much anger that’s built up inside of me that I want to lash out against him. I want to punch and kick him and make him bleed. I want to hurt him. Scare him. I want to make him feel every ounce of fear and every stitch of pain he’s caused me in all the time I’ve been trapped in this hellhole.

He turns and walks out of my room, doing his best to slam the door behind him. But since he’s already broken it, the door just bangs against the frame and rebounds, bouncing against the wall behind it. I rush to the door and close it, sliding the small piece of wood beneath it to keep it from opening again. After that, I walk back to my bed, and they finally give out beneath me, and I collapse. I don’t find any comfort in it, though. The mattress is so stiff it’s almost like falling on concrete.

I pull my knees up to my chest and wrap my arms around them, curling myself into a ball. I have no idea where that burst of anger came from, or whatever possessed me to talk back and slap him. Maybe it is the fact that Hawk is here and some small part of me is hoping that he’ll notice me. That he’ll take me out of here. Maybe I’m trying to prove something to myself. Or maybe I really have just had enough of Hammerhead’s shit.

Whatever the reason, I’m done being passive. I’m done being a wallflower. And I’m done letting him slap me around and doing nothing about it. I don’t know what caused it, but something has clicked and now I know there’s no going back. Something has imbued me with a strength that I’ve never had before and has made me willing to stand up. Made me willing to fight back.

It’s a mystery to me, where this strength and courage have come from, but I like the feeling it gives me. I like the rush of power filling me. And part of me is starting to seriously believe that maybe, just maybe, this isn’t going to be my life forever. For a long, long time, I’ve kept hope hidden away, locked tight like a tiny spark in the wilderness, but now I feel it spilling over. For the first time in too long, I allow myself to hope that I am going to find a way out from under his thumb and live the life I want to live. On my own

terms. I like those thoughts and the feelings that come along with them.
I like them a lot.

CHAPTER EIGHT



Molly

Hawk came back the next morning, his face grim and full of purpose. I don't think he even noticed me standing in the kitchen as he strode through the clubhouse. Hawk walked into Hammerhead's office briskly, slamming the door behind him. I finish the bowl of cereal then quickly wash the bowl and put it away.

I stand in the kitchen for a moment, trying to decide what to do. My survival instinct tells me to go back to my room and wait for Hawk to leave before I come back out. If I hide out for a while, I'll avoid another confrontation with Hammerhead. It would be the smart thing to do. On the other hand, if I do that, I won't get a chance to see him. I mean, it's not like I'm going to do anything about it.

I'm not going to have a conversation with Hawk or anything because that would just be inviting trouble. But I just... I just want to see him. I don't know why. I don't know what I hope to gain from it. It's not like he's going to take one look at me, throw me on the back of his bike, and ride off into the sunset with me. This isn't like the book I've been reading lately—Homer's Iliad. I'm not Helen of Troy and he's not Paris. Hawk isn't going to risk going to war with the Howlers just for me. This is real life and not some romance from ancient mythology.

Not that a war between the Kings and the Howlers would be anything like a war between the Greeks and the Trojans. Hammerhead's club is falling apart. It's in the same state of disarray and repair as the clubhouse as he is personally. Membership is down to a handful and all the guys are demoralized. Even Hogwild, though he's so loyal he tries to hide it. But I can see it. If the Howlers were to go to war with the Kings, it would be over in a

matter of minutes. But even that doesn't mean Hawk would ever risk that. Not for me.

I guess I'm just curious about him. He's a stranger here and yeah, he's gorgeous, but there's something more. I don't know what it is but there's something about him, something I gleaned in just that brief and silent moment we shared, that stirred something within me. Maybe it's because he's a stranger, because he's the first new face I've seen in about forever. Maybe I'm attaching more feeling to it than is warranted. I freely admit that. But I don't think that's all there is. I think there's something deeper in play here. I just have no idea what that thing might be.

I quietly step out of the kitchen and walk down the short hallway to the office door. The clubhouse is silent. Nobody's in, not even Hogwild. I gently press my ear to the door and listen. The voices are muffled through the wood, and I can't make out exactly what they're saying, but I can tell that Hawk clearly isn't happy with Hammerhead. It sounds like he's reading him the riot act, in fact. I can only imagine what Martin's face must look like right now. It's probably red. I can see it now. His bloodshot eyes are clenched in rage, his lips are twisted into a frown, and his nostrils are flaring—it's how he always looks when he's pissed off. And I'm sure being lectured by an outsider is definitely doing that.

The only words I can really make out are things like 'cash' and 'shipment' and 'payment'. From the sound of it, it's a lot of cash. It makes me wonder what kind of business deal they're doing. Hammerhead doesn't let me in on what sort of business the Howlers do, but I'm not naïve. I know what they're doing is likely very illegal. Judging by the amount of drugs and guns that float around the place, I'm pretty sure that's what they deal in. But as for specifics, I don't have a clue. And I'd have to guess now that the Kings are involved with that sort of trade as well.

What I don't understand is why some big-shot Vegas club like the Kings would be involved with a two-bit MC that's falling apart. To be honest, most of the Howlers seem more interested in sampling the drugs they deal, rather than getting out and selling them. I don't really know the intricacies of the business, but I have heard enough to put together that the Kings pay Hammerhead and the Howlers a good chunk of change. For what exactly, I'm not sure. But listening to Hawk and Hammerhead arguing behind that closed door, I'm assuming that the Kings might be tired of not getting a return on their investment. I mean, how can they be getting... anything, really?

It's not like the Howlers are exactly flush with cash. And if the Kings are investing in the club, I can't see how they're making any money. Maybe that's why Hawk is here: to get the business end of their arrangement sorted out. I'm not well versed in club business but that's really the only thing that makes sense to me. He's obviously not here for a social call and the tension I can hear in their muffled voices kind of lines up with what I'm thinking. Which means Hammerhead is not going to be a happy man. Which also means I should get ready to take a beating or two just because he's in a foul mood. I sigh and shake my head. I'm so tired of being his punching bag. That sense of courage I had last night is welcome to come back any time now.

The sound of their chairs scraping the wooden floor snaps me out of my self-pity and sets my heart racing. As light on my feet as I can, I dash back into the kitchen, rounding the corner just as the office door opens. The sound of heavy footsteps precedes Hawk as he comes down the hallway. I catch just a glimpse of him but see that his face is tense, his whole body is taut, and he looks angry, making me blow out a low breath knowing what's coming next.

I grab a rag and am pretending I've been cleaning up in here instead of listening at the office door when Hammerhead stomps down the hallway and comes into the kitchen. He glares at me for a moment before walking to the refrigerator. He pulls open the door and grumbles to himself before he grabs a beer and twists the top off, tossing it onto the ground near my feet for me to pick up.

"There ain't shit to eat in here," he mutters.

"Maybe if we had some money, we could get some groceries brought in," I tell him. "Maybe if we had more money, we could fix a few things around here to make it more... habitable."

He rounds on me, his face red and his eyes burning with anger. He then repeats what I just said in a mocking falsetto that grates on my nerves. "Maybe we could fix it and make it more *habitable*," he sneers, but the last word trips him up and he mispronounces it. I don't dare laugh, though.

"Yeah, because money just grows on trees, huh?" he snaps.

"I just thought that if you and Hawk were talking business that maybe some money would be coming in."

He steps closer to me, his bulky frame looming over me. Even though I'm terrified, I don't give ground and don't let him see just how scared I am. I give myself an internal high-five as I somehow manage to keep myself from trembling.

“Maybe you shouldn’t be talkin’ about shit that don’t concern you,” he growls.

I shrug. “I was just saying, that if we had some extra money, we could get some food in the house,” I reply. “I mean, you were just complaining about —”

“Shut your mouth,” he sneers. “You know, you’re gettin’ awful lippy lately. And I’m gettin’ real tired of hearing you run your damn mouth.”

I shake my head. “I didn’t mean to, I was just—”

“You were just stickin’ your nose into business that ain’t got nothin’ to do with you,” he growls low. “Again. How many times do I have to tell you to stay outta club business? You ain’t part of the club.”

“I’m sorry. It’s just... there are some things falling apart around here and I just hoped we’d be able to fix some things up, you know?” I reply. “Like I said, it’d be nice to make the place a little nicer. A little more habitable.”

“It’s got four walls, a floor, and a roof over your goddamn head,” he snarls. “It’s habitable enough.”

I know I should just leave it at that. He’s obviously on edge and his talk with Hawk has him in a foul mood. And I know that if I keep pushing him, he’s going to snap. But something inside of me makes me want to keep pushing his buttons. Maybe until he snaps. I don’t know why. I don’t know what part of myself is going to come out when he does. Will it be the same old Molly, the girl who cowers away in fear? Or will it be the Molly I became last night, even just for a moment? Will I find that courage inside me to stand up and fight?

I’m not stupid. I know if I do stand up to him, I’ll have to immediately hightail it out of here. Hammerhead won’t let me live if I stick around. But where would I even go? I have no family. No money, nothing. And as sick as it sounds, at least here, I have some modicum of stability. I know what to expect. I get fed. Hammerhead is right and he knows it. At least I have a roof over my head. I have a bed to sleep in, even if it’s a pathetic excuse for a bed.

If I leave, I have none of that. I’ll be sleeping on bus benches and in the bushes at the park. I’ll be scrounging for food in trash cans and the dumpsters behind restaurants. I’ll be homeless and penniless. I have no friends and don’t know a soul around here. There’s nobody to help me. Nobody to take me in. What am I going to do if I leave? How will I survive?

And that’s even assuming Hammerhead himself wouldn’t track me down and just kill me. No, if I get out of here, I’ll have to go somewhere far away.

Somewhere he won't track me. And that will mean having a plan—and most importantly, keeping it secret long enough to pull it off before he notices. But is Hawk really the person I can trust with this?

Even though I don't have the answers to those questions, that voice in the back of my mind still whispers to me, telling me that even going hungry and sleeping in doorways is preferable to what I'm enduring now. But the idea of escaping and running into that uncertainty terrifies me. It terrifies me more than Hammerhead. And I guess if I'm being honest, it's that fear, maybe more than anything, that's kept me here all this time.

What I don't know is what's changed. I've lived like this for a long time, under the threat of physical violence, always in fear for my life—it's sick to say but you kind of get used to it after a while. But I've been losing that fear, bit by bit, over the past months. I've been gradually losing my fear of Hammerhead. I've been really thinking about making a run for it for a good, long while. But I could never force myself to take that jump.

But things are different now. Something has changed. Something is urging me to take the first step off that ledge into the unknown. I don't know what it is or why my thoughts and feelings have all come together and are now pressing me to act, but that desire to get out of here, to just run and figure it all out as I go is stronger than it's ever been. It's terrifying to think about but at the same time, the thought of freedom and getting out from under the boot Hammerhead has on my neck is absolutely exhilarating.

I look up at him and frown. "I just think that maybe—"

He hurls his bottle at the wall and it explodes with a loud crash, raining down beer and small shards of glass all over the floor. Hammerhead advances on me and I can't help but flinch when he grabs me by the shoulders and leans down, the tip of his nose only inches from mine. His disgusting breath washes over me and it's all I can do to keep from gagging.

"I'm sick of you thinking. And I'm even sicker of listening to you runnin' your mouth," he growls. "The next time I want to hear your goddamn opinion about anything, I'll tell you what it is, you got me?"

I shake my head. "I don't mean—"

"That was a yes or no question!" he roars. "Just shut the fuck up already!"

He gives me a hard shove and I stumble backward and can't keep my feet. I land on my ass and slam my back into the shelving rack. Glass plates and bowls coming raining down with a hellacious crash, the glass shattering and spraying everywhere. I barely have time to cover my face

before the jagged shards come crashing down, slicing up my hand and arm.

When the destruction stops, I uncover my face and raise my eyes. Hammerhead is still standing over me, glaring. His expression is even angrier than before. Like this is my fault.

“Goddamnit!” he shouts. “Do you know how expensive that shit is?”

“You pushed me into it!”

“Get up and clean this shit up. Now!”

He takes a step forward and I shrink back, but he stops with his hand cocked back and ready to smack me. He’s not looking at me anymore though, he’s looking to the doorway. I turn and see Hawk standing there. He’s staring at me but then turns his eyes slowly to Hammerhead, a frown crossing his lips.

“What the hell is going on here?” he asks.

CHAPTER NINE



“**W**hat the hell is going on here?” I snap.

“She broke some dishes,” Hammerhead explains. “I’m just tellin’ her to clean it up. You know how it is.”

“I don’t know how it is actually.”

“Yeah, well... this bitch needs to stop being so fuckin’ clumsy.”

Few things in this world piss me off faster than somebody abusing animals, children, or women. Seeing Hammerhead standing over the redhead with his arm cocked back like he’s going to slap her has me seeing red. It’s taking all my self-control to not wade in the beat the shit out of him right now. I don’t know what she did or said but nothing justifies a man twice her size beating on her.

I know this isn’t my business. This is Hammerhead’s deal, and I shouldn’t be mixing myself up in it. It’s not my responsibility or my problem. But I’m not about to just sit here and watch as he wails on a helpless woman.

“Don’t worry about it,” Hammerhead says. “Just doing some housekeeping.”

“I am worried about it. I worry about it when I see a grown-ass man beating’ on a woman half his size,” I reply.

“It’s not your business, Hawk,” he warns.

I clear my throat and step into the kitchen, never taking my eyes off Hammerhead’s. The shards of glass from all the broken dishes crunch under my boots and the closer I get to him, the more nervous he gets. Although he’s standing tall, he licks his lips nervously and swallows hard. I stop when I’m standing a foot or two away from him—and immediately regret getting that close to him.

“Jesus, bro. You stink,” I say, scrunching up my face. “When was the last time you took a fuckin’ shower?”

His expression shifts from one of ready outrage to one of red-faced embarrassment. He opens his mouth to reply but apparently can’t think of something to say because he closes his mouth again.

“Seriously, man. Go take a shower before we go. I don’t want to be dragging’ your musty, smelly ass around,” I tell him. “And don’t forget to put on some goddamn deodorant.”

He looks stunned and shocked—and ready to protest. But instead, he levels a withering glare at the woman before he turns and stalks out of the kitchen. I hear a door slam somewhere deeper in the clubhouse and chuckle to myself. Then I turn and look at the woman who’s still sitting on the floor, almost in stunned silence. I reach my hand out to her, but she recoils as if expecting me to smack her. But she seems to come back to herself pretty quickly then takes my hand, letting me help her to her feet.

For the first time, I look at her. Really look at her. She’s beautiful, but I already knew that. Now I can see the tiredness in her bright blue eyes; the emotion and fear twitching across her face. It’s obvious in the way that she backed away from me that she’s been through some hard times. But underneath it, I can see one hell of a strong woman in there. She reminds me of the girl next door, or maybe of that family I saw at the diner on my way down here. She doesn’t fit in this place. She should be in a nice house, cozying up to a fireplace with a book and a glass of wine. She should be out walking her dog in some nice suburban neighborhood. It’s amazing that she’s been able to maintain that air of almost innocence about her given the dire circumstances she’s living in. This life can make a person hard. It can amplify the rough edges while blunting the soft spots in a person’s soul. And those changes can manifest in a person’s appearance. It ages people and makes them look physically rougher.

But somehow, that hasn’t happened to her. At least, not yet. Maybe she hasn’t been in the life very long. That’s the only thing that makes sense to me. I’ve seen some women age a decade or more in the first couple of years they start running with a club. MC life, with all the drugs, hard drinking, and harder living, isn’t exactly a recipe for a healthy and youthful glow.

“What’s your name?” I ask. I know I need to tread gently here. I’m sure she has a pretty damn low opinion of biker guys. And given her situation, I don’t exactly blame her. But I need to show her I’m not a threat.

“M-Molly,” she whispers. “Molly Sanders.”

“Nice to meet you. You can call me Hawk.”

“I know. I heard Martin call you that.”

I laugh softly again. “He lets you get away with calling him Martin?”

“No. I only do it when he’s not around.”

“Smart girl,” I say. “Let me help you clean this up.”

“No, it’s all right. I got it.”

“No, you don’t. Let me help.”

She gives me a shy, awkward little smile and doesn’t say anything. But she goes into a pantry and grabs a broom and dustpan. Then she steps out and starts to sweep up, the clinking and clanking of the broken glass echoing loudly in the room. As she does that, I start picking up the larger shards and dropping them into the trash can. As I work, I steal glances at her, stunned by her beauty. Her fair skin is flawless, and the cool, icy blue of her eyes sends a flutter through my heart that’s unexpected but pleasant.

“I’ve never heard anybody talk to him that way,” she says.

I shrug. “Why not? He’s just a guy.”

“Everybody lives in fear of him.”

“Do you?”

The moment of silence stretches far too long between us.

“Especially me,” she admits quietly.

I feel a flash of anger tear through me as I see him standing over her, ready to slap her around in my mind’s eye again. That scene plays over and over again and I feel myself growing angrier and angrier. I take a breath and let it out slowly, getting myself back under control again. The thought that this woman lives in fear every day of her life because of that walking sack of shit infuriates me. It makes me want to put two in his head and leave him to rot somewhere in the middle of the desert.

But I know I can’t afford to think like that. I’m here on business. Club business. I can’t afford to be distracted or let my emotions get the better of me. And if I move against Hammerhead, Old Grim will have my ass on a platter soon enough. Still, I can’t tamp down the anger entirely.

“Does he do that often?” I ask.

She looks away and won’t meet my gaze. Her cheeks flush and her eyes shimmer, as if she’s fighting to keep tears from falling. I can tell she’s embarrassed by her situation. It wrenches at my heart.

“You have no reason to be embarrassed,” I tell her.

“It’s... humiliating. I hate that I’m even in this position.”

“If there’s anybody who should be embarrassed, it’s him,” I say, my voice low and hard.

“Yeah, well, he doesn’t see it that way.”

“He’s an idiot,” I reply. “But why don’t you just leave?”

She looks up at me and I can see by the look on her face that I just asked a really stupid question. I know these situations are complicated, to say the least. I’m not an expert in psychology but I have read that victims of domestic abuse often can’t just pick up and go when things get rough. There are a lot of reasons for it, not the least of which is fear of what happens if they’re caught. For others, they simply don’t have anything to run to. And there are a host of other reasons why some remain in situations as miserable as Molly’s.

“How did you end up with him anyway?” I ask.

She frowns. “It wasn’t my choice.”

I cock my head. “What do you mean?”

She shakes her head. “It’s just... it’s complicated.”

She sweeps in silence for a moment then I hold the dustpan for her. She gingerly sweeps it into the pan for me, taking care to avoid meeting my eyes. Molly has such an open vulnerability and a look of pain on her face that it physically hurts me to see it. I hate that she’s having to endure this life. It’s nuts. I don’t even know this woman and yet I already feel protective of her. There’s some part of me that wants to get her away from this prick.

“How long have you been here?” I ask.

“Seems like forever,” she says.

“If you were able to leave, would you?”

A wry smile crosses her face, but she doesn’t say anything. She simply keeps cleaning up. I take that as my cue to not press that issue since it seems like a sensitive spot for her. It also tells me that she would leave in a heartbeat if she could. I can feel her keeping me at an arm’s distance as well as the walls that she surrounds herself with. She doesn’t trust me. And I suppose I can’t blame her if Hammerhead is her first interaction with a biker. If I wasn’t in an MC already, dealing with that prick would probably turn me off the life too.

But that’s the thing. She doesn’t strike me as a typical cut-slut. I can’t put my finger on what it is exactly but something about her doesn’t quite jibe with this life. To me, Molly feels like a square peg in a round hole—she

doesn't quite fit into the MC life. She doesn't have that feeling about her. That makes her comment about this not being her choice make a lot more sense. Which only piques my curiosity about how she wound up here, to begin with.

"Where are you from?" I ask. "Originally."

"Feels like another planet."

I chuckle. "Are you always this vague?"

"Usually," she replies with a grin.

"Oh, she does have a sense of humor," I smile.

She shrugs her thin shoulders. "Sometimes," she replies. "But there's honestly not much to laugh about around here."

I look around and nod. "I can see that," I tell her. "Listen, I don't like how he treats you. I'm going to see to it that his behavior changes."

"Please don't," she shakes her head. "It'll only make things worse for me."

I frown and look at her for a long moment then nod. "All right. But I don't like it," I tell her. "I don't like it at all."

"Thank you. I just... I barely hang on most days. I don't know that I can handle it getting any worse," she says softly.

"Fair enough," I reply.

We work in silence for a minute and the tension in the air is growing thicker. I can feel her putting up higher, thicker walls around herself. I know I shouldn't be screwing around here. This is Hammerhead's woman—for better or worse—and messing with her is only going to cause trouble for me and for the club. But there's something about her that compels me. Something that makes me want to take the stupid risk just for the opportunity to get to know her. It's stupid. It's reckless. But I find that it's something I want more than I've wanted anything in a long, long time.

I give her a grin. "C'mon," I say. "Where are you from?"

"What does it matter?"

"I'm curious," I reply. "Indulge me."

"Why would I do that?"

"Because of my boyish good looks and overwhelming charm."

She laughs. "Yeah. That must be it."

"Are you trying to be an enigma? Or does it just come naturally to you?"

"I like to keep an air of mystery about me."

"Well, mission accomplished."

She laughs softly and we work together in silence for a few more minutes. The pipes stopped rattling, which tells me Hammerhead is out of the shower. I just hope he's got clothes cleaner than the ones he'd been wearing. He really did stink like hot garbage. I just don't know how somebody lets themselves go to that extent. The guy has really slipped since the last time I was out here. Not for the first time since I got here, I'm thinking that maybe the time has come to put the Howlers under new management.

Hogwild seems like a decent guy with a good head on his shoulders. I'm pretty sure he'd be a hell of a lot better in the big chair than Hammerhead. But I know he's loyal and that he wouldn't be down with helping bring about the sort of regime change I'm talking about. I don't think he'd turn down the job if I offered it to him, but I am fairly certain he's not going to help us take Hammerhead out. That's fine, though. I can do that on my own.

A couple of minutes later, I hear Hammerhead's heavy footsteps coming down the hall toward us. I'm just finishing picking up the larger pieces and holding the dustpan for Molly. He stands in the doorway, trying to buckle his belt but having problems trying to get to it with his huge gut in the way.

"What are you doin'?" he asks as he stares daggers at me.

"Cleaning up the mess you left behind," I shrug.

"I didn't leave a mess," he counters. "The clumsy bitc—"

He doesn't get to finish that statement because I step up to him and deliver a vicious backhand. The crack of my hand meeting his face is like a gunshot and his head snaps to the side. Molly gasps and covers her mouth with her hands, her eyes wide and filled with terror. Hammerhead rounds on me, his cheek an angry shade of red and his eyes blazing with hate. I shouldn't have put my hands on him, but I couldn't help it. That he abuses Molly is bad enough. But I'm not going to put up with him degrading her in my presence.

"You need to learn a little respect," I growl.

"Didn't I tell you this ain't your business, Hawk? You'd best remember that."

I cut a glance at Molly who's staring at me wide-eyed and gives me a small shake of the head, silently imploring me to stop this. It goes against my every instinct, but I have to stop. I have to remember that whatever I do not only reflects on her but will be taken out on her as well. I frown and look down, giving him a nod.

"You're right," I say. "My bad. This is your house, and I shouldn't be

disrespecting you or it. Apologies, man.”

He looks at me for a minute then nods. “It’s cool,” he says. “So? We goin’?”

I nod. “Yeah, let’s get out of here.”

I give Molly one last look before I turn and head out of the kitchen. As I walk down the hall, I can hear Hammerhead speaking to her. He’s pitching his voice low and trying to keep me from hearing, but his voice carries in an empty clubhouse.

“Get this shit cleaned up while I’m out,” he hisses. “This place better be spotless by the time I get back. You understand me?”

“Where are you going?” she asks.

“I’m goin’ out. It’s none of your fuckin’ business,” he snaps in a hushed tone. “Do what I tell you and clean this shit up. Get it done, goddammit.”

Hammerhead storms out of the kitchen and comes down the hallway. I hate the way he talks to her, and I’m so tempted to lay him out right there. But this is his house. It’s not my business, and all I can do is swallow it down as we head out.

CHAPTER TEN



Molly

I listen to their bikes rumble off and let out a sigh of relief when they fade into the distance. With them gone, I finish sweeping up the last of the broken dishes and throw them away. That done, I finish cleaning up the rest of the kitchen and putting everything back in order. I look at the shelving rack though and shake my head. There isn't much left on it, and I know when Hammerhead goes to grab a dish, he's going to blame me for it and start that argument all over again.

I know he was trying to be kind and trying to help me, but Hawk made things so much worse for me. Hammerhead isn't going to lash out at Hawk. He's going to take out all his frustrations on me. He's going to use the embarrassment Hawk caused him as fuel for his outrage and the impotent rage he feels. I already know he's going to slap me around the second Hawk's out of sight. Hawk just doesn't understand how things work here. Not really.

It was sweet that he tried to help me. I appreciate that he tried to stand up for me and get Hammerhead to treat me with a little respect. But it was entirely misguided. I wish I could make him understand. But that would entail another, longer conversation—which would create a whole host of new problems. Me talking to him would absolutely not go over very well with Hammerhead. He'd accuse me again of wanting to fuck Hawk—and I don't know if I could hide the flush in my cheeks when I think about that kind man. But even worse than that, it would trigger Hammerhead's insecurities. He'd feel embarrassed that he just got shown up in his own house and he'd take it out on me. Again. Like he always does.

I push those thoughts away and try to focus on something better.

Something pleasant. No matter what happens, I'll never forget that Hawk was so kind to me. That he stood up for me in a way not even Hogwild ever would. It only cements in my mind that he really is a good man. It was strange to see this big, tough biker going out of his way to be so tender. It's something I've never seen or experienced before. My only exposure to bikers has been of the cold, cruel, slap-you-around-until-you're-unconscious kind. The Howlers haven't given me a particularly good impression of an MC. And it's not just Hammerhead, either. All the guys treat me like shit because that's what their leader does.

I'm even treated worse than the cut-sluts who hang around the clubhouse. At least the few who are left. They're treated like little more than holes for the members to use when they need to get off. The women are degraded, mocked, made to fetch their beers, and used. But they come and go whenever they want. They party and drink with the guys. And they don't get smacked around like I do. They're not treated great, not by any stretch of the imagination. But they're not treated as horribly as I am. And from what I've seen, they seem to like it. This lifestyle suits them.

More power to them, I guess. If this is how they want to live, it's not my place to say otherwise. All I know is if I had the choice, if I could come and go as I pleased, I sure as hell wouldn't be hanging out in this place. I'd put this place in my rearview mirror forever.

"You should tell Hawk to cut it out. He's going to get you, and himself, killed," the voice behind me says. "You know how Hammerhead feels about other guys talking to you."

A sharp squeal busts from my mouth and I spin around to see Hogwild leaning against the doorway casually. He's using the tip of a knife to clean underneath his fingernails then raises his eyes to meet mine.

"I know. But he started talking to me," I reply.

"Yeah, but you talked back to him."

"What was I supposed to do?"

Hogwild shrugs. "Ignore him," he says simply. "Fella would've gotten the hint and walked away eventually."

"So... I should just be rude?"

"If it keeps you from gettin' beat on, I'd say that's the smart thing to do."

I grumble under my breath and shake my head. Hogwild frustrates me almost as much as Hammerhead does. I can never tell if he's trying to help me or if he's secretly keeping an eye on me from his Prez's orders. He's the

only one who even halfway treats me with respect around here, but I still can't bring myself to believe he actually cares. If he did, he would have done something about this a long time ago. Like what Hawk did.

It took Hawk barely a split second to make the decision to help me. Hogwild's been around long enough and has seen enough to where I don't know what he's after. Sometimes he wants to help me or does nice things, other times he just cruelly disregards me as if he doesn't give a single shit about what I'm going through. It frustrates me because I want to believe he's better than the other guys, somewhere deep down in there, but he's never lifted a finger to help me whenever Hammerhead starts screaming at me. I know it's a different situation, because he's loyal to his Prez, but this has been going on for so long now that I can't bring myself to trust him any more than I trust Hogwild.

Not that I know whether I can trust Hawk, either. I believe he's a good man, but what do I really know about him?

"Not sure how much longer Hawk is gonna be here," Hogwild says. "But if I were you, I'd stay well away from him."

There's something in his voice—it's just a hint—but it sounds almost like jealousy. The tone of his voice is tighter and harder than seems necessary. Add to that the way he's looking at me and it seems pretty clear that Hogwild has other reasons for wanting me to stay away from Hawk. He's got his own agenda and ulterior motives.

I don't know how I missed this before. I don't know how I was so blind. All this time I've been thinking he was just genuinely trying to be a gentleman. But I see now, the fact that he helps me, is kind to me, and brings me things like books and whatnot, is motivated by something else. It's because he thinks that one day, I'll choose him.

Maybe I'm wrong. Maybe I'm reading too much into things or hearing things in his voice that aren't really there. It's possible that I'm just wrong. I mean, I'm not psychic. And my ability to pick up on social cues has been hampered by the fact that I've been stuck in this damn clubhouse for—I don't even know how long anymore—and the only people I interact with are people who see me as less than a human being. That's not exactly a recipe for healthy social interactions or being able to pick up on the nuances of conversation.

"Yeah, maybe you're right," I sigh.

"I'm just trying to look out for you," he tells me.

“Thank you,” I say. “You always look out for me.” The words kind of feel like a lie as I say them. If he was looking out for me, he would have found a way to get me out of here a long time ago.

He shrugs. “I just don’t like the way he treats you. And I don’t want to see you give him any more reasons to beat on you.”

Any *more* reasons? It’s little casual comments like that, that betray Hogwild’s true personality to me. He knows damn well that Hammerhead has no reason to beat on me. And he knows damn well that I don’t deserve any of this. But somehow, it’s my fault?

I grab a glass and fill it from the tap in the sink. Standing at the window that looks out into the backyard, I take a long swallow of water, my mind working.

“What do you think of Hawk?” I ask.

“I don’t know. I guess I don’t think about him very much.”

I cut him a frustrated glare. “You know what I mean.”

He shrugs. “I don’t know. He seems like a decent guy. Straight shooter. Don’t take shit from anybody.”

“Do you think he’s trustworthy?”

“I don’t trust anybody, so I’m not a good judge of that.”

My only response is a wordless grunt.

“What I do know is that you shouldn’t be thinking about him at all,” he adds. “You know what’ll happen if Hammerhead catches you so much as looking at him.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“You’re Hammerhead’s girl until he decides you’re not,” he presses. “And until that happens, you just need to make peace with the reality of what is right now.”

“You know what he does, Hogwild. You know how badly he treats me,” I say. “You yourself said you don’t like it.”

“I did say that. And I don’t.”

“Then why can’t you help me?” I point out. “Why can’t you help me get out of here?”

I’ve never straight up asked him like this. I’ve been tempted to before, but I was always too afraid. That question has been weighing on my mind for a long time. Why can’t he help me? Why can’t he get me out? What is so goddamn important that Hogwild can choose to just stand by and allow me to get beaten and then try to swoop in at the end to rescue me from a situation

he could have rescued me from for all this time?

Does he seriously think I'll choose him after this? He's sorely mistaken.

He bristles. "You know I can't," he tells me. "My loyalty is to the club and that means to Hammerhead. At least for now."

I cock my head and look at him. "What do you mean, at least for now?"

He shakes his head. "Nothing. I shouldn't have said anything."

"But you did. So, tell me."

"It's nothing really. It's not even worth thinking about, to be honest," he says. "Just something Hawk said..."

His voice trails off and he looks away. Hogwild slips the knife he was cleaning his nails with back into the sheath on his belt. I'm quiet, waiting for him to go on. But he doesn't.

"Well? What did he say?" I prompt.

"He just said somethin' in passing. Somethin' about the Howlers havin' new management if Hammerhead don't get his shit squared."

I shake my head. "You see what he's done to your club. Why do you stay loyal to that?"

"Because he's my Prez, Molly. And he's your man, too," he scowls. "Don't forget that."

"Wow," I comment, throwing my cup into the sink and rinsing it out, taking out my frustration by really scrubbing the crap out of it with the sponge. "And just when I thought you were better than all the others. Just when I thought you were actually being kind to me."

"It's not like that, Molly," he replies. "I can't just—"

"You can't just what?" I snap. "You can't just stand up to him? You're the one with the muscles and the weapons. You're the one who could actually do something about it. And you expect me to try to stand up for myself when you won't even stand up for me?"

Hogwild blinks, looking almost wounded. A flicker of rage crosses his face, but that's all it is—a flicker. He takes a deep breath and resets himself before continuing.

"Look, Molly. I don't know what's gotten into you lately. You've been getting' mouthy. You've been pushing him in ways I haven't seen you push before. And just because I'm loyal to my Prez don't mean I like seeing him beat on you."

In my mind, I scream at the top of my lungs: "Then fucking *do something about it!*"

But in real life, I just sigh. I shake my head. And the words that come out aren't a rage-filled roar, but a low mumble. "I'm sorry."

I hate this. I hate feeling so weak, and I hate myself for letting myself feel so weak. I hate Hammerhead for making me feel that way, I hate Hogwild for letting it continue to happen, and I hate that every time I think I can muster up the courage to really stand up for myself, I end up crumpling.

I'll never get out at this rate.

"Look, Molly..." he starts, as if unsure of what he's going to say. "I know this is a shitty situation for you. But, well... maybe things will be changin' in the not-too-distant future."

"Yeah. Maybe."

He gives me a wan smile then turns and walks out, leaving me alone with my thoughts. The idea that Hawk might replace Hammerhead as Prez of the Howlers is intriguing—and by replace, I assume that means putting a bullet in his brain and leaving him to rot. It's exciting, really. That I could finally be out from under his thumb breathes a little life into that spark of hope inside of me.

The one thing that worries me though is the way Hogwild was talking. More specifically, his tone. To me, it sounds like he's already counting on being the one to slide into the big chair. It almost sounded like he was prepping me to become his woman once Hammerhead was deposed. Like nothing about my life will change other than who's wearing the boot that will be on my neck.

Maybe I'm wrong. Maybe I'm misreading or misunderstanding his tone. But I fear that I'm not. And it makes the blood in my veins run colder than ice.

CHAPTER ELEVEN



After we left his clubhouse, I had Hammerhead run me through the supply lines, introduce me to some of his distributors, and give me the lay of the land around Phoenix. We took a lot on faith with this guy—I took a lot on faith with this guy—and I wanted to know the inner workings of his operation. And frankly, I’m not feeling a lot of confidence in what I’ve been seeing so far.

His guys, the few I got to meet, are not very bright. They don’t know what they’re doing. They didn’t seem to know that we, the Kings, are the bosses in this arrangement. They’re way too deferential to Hammerhead for my liking. I understand the need for club members to follow the orders of the hierarchy, but these guys are more like lackeys than members.

A good Prez and Vice Prez have the unquestioned say at the end of the day, but they also should allow their members to speak their piece, to have their own opinions. It’s the job of a leader to consult with his members and do what’s best for the club, not just rule with an iron fist the way Hammerhead does. As the new VP of the Ruthless Kings, that’s a lesson I’ve had to take to heart.

I don’t know that I’ll ever be Prez. Not that I mind that. Reaper and I are young. We have many more years, decades even, that we’ll be running the show out in Vegas. I’m honored that he chose me as his VP for when Old Grim finally hangs it up for good. It’s almost done now—I’ve been basically operating as the VP for the last couple months anyway, and I already got the patch on my cut.

But I also know this is still an audition. Nothing is set in stone yet. If I screw this up, Reaper and his father both will have my cut. I’m grateful for

the trust that's been placed in me for this opportunity. This is my first major mission as VP, and I can't afford to screw this up. It will reflect not only on my ability to maintain good business for the club but also on the Ruthless Kings' ability to deal with other clubs. If word got out among the MC community that the Kings couldn't handle a two-bit club like the Howlers—or worse, that we just rolled over and let them take advantage of us—that could result in a severe blow to our rep. And with the reigns being handed over from Old Grim to Reaper, that's the absolute last thing we need right now.

Which brings me back to what the hell we're going to do to keep this turf open. I'm not at all impressed by the Howlers. I don't know what's happened in the last few years, but I obviously can't trust these guys. Which is a problem. I need to be able to trust and rely on the guys watching our pipeline. And our product.

Of course, I need to trust the guy at the top the most. I need to be able to rely on his judgment and his integrity. I've only been here a day and I already know I can't trust Hammerhead's judgment. I can already see he's lacking in integrity. He's definitely not the same guy I got to know when I vouched for him. And it's pissing me off.

I point to a bar that's up ahead of us. It's been a long day, it's warm, and I'm parched. We rumble into the parking lot and shut off our bikes. I take off my brain bucket, gloves, and road glasses and tuck them all into my saddlebag. We walk into the bar, and I lead us over to a booth in the back of the place. The bar is dimly lit, probably to cover up all the dirt in the joint. But hell, it may as well be a gourmet restaurant compared to the clubhouse. The walls are all painted a dark blue, somehow making the place look smaller and darker.

There's a long bar on the left side of the place and half the stools are taken up by what I assume are the regular patrons. A row of tables runs down the middle of the place and booths line the wall on the right. As we slide into the booth, a waitress stops by. She's in her mid-twenties with blonde hair that came straight out of a bottle that falls to her shoulders, bright green eyes, and a perky smile. The skirt she's wearing is short. Extremely short. And she definitely knows it. By the way the eyes are following her all around the room, she'll be fetching some handsome tips for sure. But I don't even really notice. She's pretty I guess, but all I can think of is Molly.

I don't know why—it's not like there's anything between us—but I can't

stop thinking about her. I can't help but want to get her out of this horrible situation. And I can't help but want to take a shot with her. Is that crazy? I don't know. I barely know her.

"What can I get you fellas?" the waitress asks.

"Couple of beers and shots of tequila," I tell her.

"Comin' right up."

Hammerhead looks at me, an expression of uncertainty on his face. He tries to cover it with a smarmy grin though.

"Tryin' to get me drunk so you can diddle me, Hawk?"

I don't smile or laugh, I just continue to stare at him blankly. He shifts in his seat and looks distinctly uncomfortable. Which is good. He should be feeling like he's sitting on a hot seat right now. That's exactly how I want him to feel. A minute later, the waitress comes by and drops off our drinks. I pick up my shot glass and down the tequila, then chase it with a swallow of my beer. After a brief moment of hesitation, Hammerhead does the same.

He is squirming in his seat and I can see his discomfort growing. I watch as his eyes dart all over the place. He's doing his best to look everywhere but at me. He finally manages to settle himself down and returns my gaze—though I can see the effort he's making to maintain eye contact with me.

"What's this all about, Hawk?" he finally asks.

"Needed a drink."

"Right. So, why are you lookin' at me like I just shit on your boot?"

"Because I'm still waiting for you to come clean with me."

"About?"

"About what you're on," I tell him. "I know you're using. So? What is it?"

"I told you. I smoke some weed but that's—"

"You know, I came into a bar—a public place—to keep myself from doing something stupid within eyeshot of a bunch of people," I cut him off. "But you're really pushing my commitment to that."

"What are you talking about?"

I look at him evenly, a scowl on my face. "If you keep lying to me, we're done, Hammerhead," I say coldly. "And you don't want to know what happens when we're done."

"I have no idea what you're talking about, Hawk. I'm not lying to you."

"In a minute, I'm going to give you one more chance to tell me the truth. In a minute. But, if you choose to keep lying to me, I'll tell you what happens

next,” I tell him. “First, our agreement is null and void. Then I’ll call up the Deviants and tell them the Kings are no longer interested in maintaining their alliance with the Howlers. They’ll run roughshod over you and what’s left of your club and will probably kill all your guys. Except for you.”

His eyes widen, but he doesn’t say anything.

“See, if you lie to me, I’m going to kill you myself,” I go on. I’m going to take you out to the middle of the desert and beat you to death with my favorite baseball bat—she’s a thirty-one inch, thirty-one ounce Louisville Slugger. Ash. The old kind, the good ones they don’t make anymore. She cracks skulls real well. And after that, I’m going to leave you to rot out there. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

“Where is this comin’ from, man?”

“I’m going to ask one more time, man. One final chance to come clean. One,” I tell him. “Are you ready?”

He swallows hard and takes another pull of his beer. I can see him trying to see into my soul, trying to figure out if I’d really do what I said I would, then weighing that against his need to keep his shit secret. Hammerhead finally looks down at the table and lets out a long breath, having come to his decision.

“What are you on, Hammerhead?”

“I... do a little meth from time to time,” he finally admits. “It’s just to take the edge off, man. You know how it is.”

“I don’t know how it is. But okay,” I tell him, trying to keep the condescension out of my voice. “So let me get this straight. You’re wasting all the money we’ve been pouring, and you’re letting your club fall to shit, for some meth?”

He bristles, but doesn’t say anything. I know my words are cutting into him though.

“Like honestly, man. I don’t really care if you’re doing that. It wouldn’t fly with mine, but that’s why I’m where I am and you’re where you are. Your club, your rules. I respect that. I do. But it’s obviously become a problem. And it’s cutting into my profits. Which makes it my problem.”

“Yeah, I know,” he says quietly.

“What happened to you, man? Your shit used to be tight down here,” I continue. “For a long time, I didn’t have to worry about you. I knew we could count on you. But you’ve gone to shit, man. I mean, look at you. You’re fallin’ apart.”

He shrugs and stares down into his empty shot glass. “Just goin’ through a rough patch. That’s all,” he tells me. “I can get back on the right path though. I just need you to believe in me, brother. That’s all.”

“I did believe in you. That’s why I vouched for you in the beginning,” I reply. “But I told you from the jump that if you take our money, it comes with strings. One of those strings being you keep your end of the bargain.”

“I know, man. Like I said, I hit a rough patch. That’s all.”

“No, that ain’t all. I think it’s much worse than what I’m seeing. And what I’m seeing is pretty fucking bad, man,” I press. “And from what I’ve seen so far, I’ve got no confidence that you can get it back on track.”

“I can. I just need time.”

“You’ve had lots of time. I want you to convince me. Now,” I reply.

He chuckles. “What is this, like a job interview?”

I lean over the table, pinning him to his seat with my eyes. “No, this is your life interview,” I growl. “I want you to give me one good reason why the Ruthless fucking Kings should keep backing you. Just one. I want you to tell me how you plan on getting your shit back on track. And I want you to tell me why I shouldn’t just liquidate this partnership right here and right now.”

His face darkens and his eyes narrow. He balls his hands into fists, and I can see him clenching his jaw. It’s the first time I’ve seen the barest spark of fire in him since I got here. It’s about damn time. But getting that fire going in his gut again isn’t going to be enough. I need to see more from him. A lot more. I just need to keep pushing him to see if he’s got it inside of him or if it’s gone out of him entirely.

“I still control this city—”

“Do you? Because on our little riding tour today, it sure looked like the Desert Deviants were making strong inroads,” I counter. “I mean shit, just based on what I saw today, I’d say it looks a hell of a lot more like the Deviants run Phoenix. Not the Howlers.”

“Then you ain’t lookin’ in the right places.”

“No? Then where should I be looking? I mean, just riding around today, I saw twice as many Deviant cuts than I’ve seen in your entire clubhouse, man.”

“Yeah, they’ve got numbers right now. That shit’s gonna change though,” he growls. “It’s not a big deal. I’ve got it under control.”

“And how? With Sharp’s guys from Tucson?”

“Yeah.”

I can't help myself; I give a grin. Now I've got him.

“Now the funny thing is, I gave Sharp a call this morning. Now, to your credit, he did tell me he had some guys up here helping you out. But he also told me you couldn't pay up. They stayed for a week and came back. And they ain't coming back until you can pay what you owe. With interest.”

Hammerhead glowers and clenches his fingers in and out, clearly upset that I called him out. But I can't take any more of these lies.

“Listen, bud. From where I stand, it looks like you laid your bike down and left little more than a bloody smear on the blacktop. And it looks like you've got nothing under control,” I say with a chuckle. “And I still haven't heard you say why I shouldn't just blow this all up right here and right now. What is your plan?”

He licks his lips nervously. “I'm gonna get off the shit.”

“Yeah?”

He nods. “I will. I swear it.”

“Uh-huh. And how are you going to do that?”

He shrugs. “Cold turkey,” he tells me. “I'm just going to white-knuckle my way through this shit.”

“You do know that shit never works, right?”

“Yeah well, it ain't like I can afford some fancy rehab.”

“AA is free. Start going to meetings.”

“The fuck I will. I don't do meetings.”

I drain half my beer in one long swallow, never taking my eyes off him. Unlike before though, he's not shifting in his seat. Not squirming. There's a fiery gleam in his eye and a look of determination and resolve about his face. It's the face of the man I met all those years ago. Finally.

I have my doubts that he can white-knuckle his way off a meth addiction, though. But at least I'm seeing that spark of the guy I met before. It's not much and I'm not totally sold on this working yet. But at least it's something.

“You want to stay in business with the Kings, you're going to get your house in order, man. Starting with yourself. As of right now, you're off the shit. You want to keep our money rolling in, you're going to do some things,” I tell him. “You're gonna go to meetings. You're gonna get your clubhouse in order. You're gonna start bringing in prospects. And you're gonna start bathing and wearing clean clothes regularly. You smell like an open sewer.”

His face darkens again and he glowers at me. I can see his expression

tightening and his body growing taut. He's on the verge of exploding and is really fighting his nature right now. He wants to blow up but he's afraid to. Hammerhead seems to finally realize he's at a fork in the road. Down one path is our money drying up, which will likely lead to the destruction of his club. Down the other, though, is a continuation of the partnership and the money flowing into his coffers. What bothers me the most is that he seems to be struggling with the decision.

I'm this close to adding one more term for him to agree to. All I need to do is say it: *"And you're gonna leave Molly alone. You'll treat her with some fucking respect."*

But I know that'll just open an avalanche of shit on her as soon as I leave. I can't do that. All I can do is hope that when he cleans his shit up, he becomes a better person too. I'm not holding my breath, though. I'll have to keep a close eye on things.

Hammerhead blows out a long breath. "Fine," he says, his tone filled with disgust. "I'll clean up my shit. I'll start goin' to meetings and shit. Whatever."

"Hey, if you're not into it, we can walk away right now," I tell him. "Just say the word and I'm out of here, and the Kings will make other arrangements."

"No, it's cool. I get it," he insists. "I just don't like you comin' down here and tellin' me how to run my life or my club."

I shrug. "I wouldn't have to if you were handling your business. Our business. You take our money, you follow our rules. It's as simple as that," I tell him. "And if you aren't into it—"

"I said I'd do it, didn't I?" he snaps.

"You did say that," I admit. "We'll see if you follow through with it."

"Man, fuck you."

"You're not my type," I crack. "Don't take it personally, man. I don't take anybody's word for anything. I always keep tabs on shit."

"You need to learn to loosen up, man. Life shouldn't be so serious."

"Maybe. But I'm here to do a job. Not party," I tell him. "And I'm only here because your failures have made me look like a real asshole in front of my club. And I don't like looking like an asshole in front of my club. So, if you think about it, my being here, climbing up your ass like I am, is your own doing."

"I get it, okay? I fucked up," he replies. "Jesus, are you going to keep

beating this dead fucking horse?”

“I’m going to beat it as long as I need to.”

“I get your point, Hawk. I get it.”

“We’ll see,” I reply. “For now, I want you to clean up your clubhouse. Air it out, for fuck’s sake. And set up a room for me. I’m going to be sticking around for a little bit.”

“How long?”

“Until I feel comfortable leaving you in charge.”

He sighs and rolls his eyes again, reminding me of a teenager. But he apparently has visions of that bag of cash I’m carrying in his head because he finally nods, agreeing to my terms.

“Fine. I’ll get it done,” he relents.

“Take some pride in your club. Take some pride in yourself, man,” I say. “You never know, having a little pride might help you out of his rough patch you keep talking about.”

“Yeah, maybe,” he mutters.

He slides out of the booth then turns back and grabs his beer, draining the glass in one swallow. He sets the glass down harder than necessary and looks up at me.

“Guess I’ll see you ‘round the clubhouse,” he says darkly.

“Looks that way.”

With a frown on his face, he turns and walks out of the bar, leaving me to finish my beer in silence. It’s the first good and smart thing he’s done since I got here. Outside, I hear him fire up his bike. I listen to its throaty growl speeding off into the distance. He’s said the right things—or at least the things he thinks I want to hear—but I still have my doubts. A lot of doubts.

CHAPTER TWELVE



Molly

I wipe the sweat off my brow and blow out a long breath. But as I look around the clubhouse, I smile softly to myself, finding a sense of pride in a job well done. Why I feel proud about cleaning up this dump, I have no idea. I hate being here and shouldn't feel the least bit of pride in what I'm doing here. Maybe I've got Stockholm Syndrome or something like that. I don't know.

What I do know is that I've always been a hard worker. Even back in school, my part-time job at the ice cream shop, or whatever, I always tried to do the best I could at whatever task I was given. I am surprised to find that work ethic is still inside of me, even under these circumstances. In this place.

It only came out today when Hammerhead ordered me to clean the clubhouse and air it out. And I think I only did it because he said Hawk is going to be spending a little time here. After he told me that, I bit back all my arguments and got to work. The first thing I did was open up all the windows and let the stink out. Or as much of it as I could. This is the first time in months it hasn't smelled like an overflowing septic tank.

After that, I performed a minor miracle in getting the rest of the clubhouse nearly sparkling. I mean, I still wouldn't eat off the floors or anything, but I swept, dusted, mopped, and polished everything. There are still holes in the walls, spray-painted graffiti, and an assortment of other things I can't do anything about, but I've made those parts of the clubhouse I can control, shine. It's not exactly fresh but it's clean. Which is kind of like putting lipstick on a pig, to be honest.

I took my time on the guest room though. I really went out of my way to scrub everything, getting all the grime out of all the nooks and crannies. I

washed the windows, changed the sheets, and beat the dust out of the curtains. And when I was done, I stood back and cast a critical eye around the room.

“It’s not the Four Seasons but it’ll work,” I muttered.

I’ve been at it all day. I’m hot, sweaty, and tired. But before Hawk gets here, I want to take a shower and make myself presentable. Not because I’m going to hang out with him or anything—Hammerhead would never allow that. But on the off chance I run into him, I want to feel... I don’t know, nice. I want to look and smell good, not like someone who’s been on her hands and knees scrubbing away gross gunk all day. I grab my things then run down to the bathroom and jump in the shower. I wash quickly then get out, dry myself off, and get dressed.

I’m not allowed to have makeup, so I don’t have to worry about that, but as I stare at myself in the mirror, I frown at the tangled heap sitting on top of my head. It would be nice to do something with it, but I haven’t had it cut, let alone styled in years, so there really isn’t a whole lot I can do. I frown, then do what I always do with it and pull it back into a ponytail, then stare at my reflection again, turning this way and that. That only makes my frown deepen.

I’m never going to grace the pages of a Victoria’s Secret catalog or anything, but I know in my life before it all went to shit, I was considered pretty attractive. Sexy? I don’t know. But I like to think I’m cute. Sure.

But I don’t know that I’m hot enough to catch the eye of somebody like Hawk. I’m sure he’s got all kinds of gorgeous women hanging all over him and he probably wouldn’t be interested in somebody with all my baggage. But still, I like to imagine that I am.

I’ve just finished getting ready when I hear the rumble of the bikes rolling in. I dash out to the main room and peer through the window to see Hogwild, Deadbolt, Jammer, and Hawk roll up. But no Hammerhead. A smile curls my lips upward. I’m curious about where he is, but even more than that, I’m ecstatic that he’s not here. Looking around, I try to figure out something to do that won’t make it look like I’ve been sitting here waiting for them.

I turn and run to the bar and slip behind it. When the door opens and the men walk in, they find me polishing the top of the bar. I look up and pretend to be surprised to see them.

“Hey, fellas,” I say brightly. “How are you doing?”

They all mumble some form of good and I glance over at Hawk, feeling

my cheeks flushing when his eyes linger on mine.

“Can I get you guys a beer?” I ask.

They all nod and say yes, so I grab four bottles out of the refrigerator and open them up one by one, setting them in front of the guys. I hand a bottle to Hawk and when he takes it from me, his fingers brush mine. I swear to God, I felt electricity crackling along my skin, making me jump in surprise. He looks at me with a roguish grin curling a corner of his mouth upward which only deepens the flush in my cheeks.

“Hey,” Hogwild starts. “Why don’t you make us some snacks or something?”

My eyes flash to Hawk before I turn back to Hogwild and nod. “Yeah, sure. No problem.”

He frowns and I see him cut a glance over at Hawk before he looks at me and tries to muster a semblance of a smile. It doesn’t quite reach his eyes though, which sends a finger of ice sliding down my spine. The last thing I need is for Hogwild to tell Hammerhead I was flirting with Hawk or something like that.

“Thanks,” he says.

I nod and lower my head before turning and heading out of the main room and into the kitchen. I lean against the counter and let out a long, shaky breath. That little smile of his nearly melted me and I can’t get it out of my head. I know I should. The last thing I should be thinking about is Hawk. But I can’t deny that electrical spark I felt when our fingers touched. I can’t deny the way his smile made me feel.

I clear my throat and try to get my head on straight. I need to get him out of my head. He’s forbidden fruit. I mean, not that he would necessarily be interested in me or anything but if he happened to be, I wouldn’t be able to do anything about it. He’s off-limits to me. It’s something I need to keep reminding myself of. But it’s hard. There’s just something about him that won’t let me stop thinking about him.

I had crushes on boys when I was in school, but I don’t have a ton of experience in matters of the heart or anything. Hawk makes me feel things I’ve never felt before. I buried it for so long because of my situation, and now I feel like a little girl with a crush. It’s stupid. I don’t even know what to do.

I mean, I know I can’t do anything with it. Not really. But knowing that doesn’t do anything to calm the chaotic emotions churning inside of me. I don’t even know if they’re real. I just know that I feel something whenever

he's around. It's so strong, it nearly steals my breath every time.

What do you do when you have those kinds of insane feelings, but you have no way to express them? They're going to come out somehow, someday. It's just like the anger I feel for Hammerhead. Most of the time I can choke it down, ignore it, and pretend it doesn't exist. But it builds up inside of me and eventually like a powder keg, all it takes is the smallest spark to set it off. It's not a perfect analogy of course, but I'm afraid that at some point, those feelings are going to come bursting out—in front of Hammerhead—and I won't be able to stop it. That, in turn, is going to create an absolute shitstorm that will come raining down on my head.

I hear the men out in the bar laughing and joking with each other. The atmosphere in the bar is always lighter when Hammerhead's not around. People seem to feel like they can actually breathe and joke around with one another like normal, regular people. Hearing the sort of laughter I'm hearing right now is so rare that it comes as a surprise. A pleasant surprise. To be honest, I haven't heard much laughter at all in a really long time. For a second I think something might be wrong. Like my ears are playing tricks on me. But sure enough, that's what it is.

Laughter.

In the Howlers' clubhouse.

Who'd have thought?

I give my head a shake and set about getting some things together they can snack on. I go to the freezer and look inside. There's not much there other than a bag of pizza rolls that have been in there since like, before I was born. But, whatever. If Hammerhead and the guys can't chip in to help keep the food stocked here, they're welcome to go somewhere else and get their own food.

I turn on the oven and as it warms, I open the bag and put them on a cookie sheet. A couple of minutes later, I pop them into the oven and set a timer for half an hour. That done, I grab some plates from the stocking shelf—the now mostly empty stocking shelf, given what happened yesterday. I turn around again and see Hawk standing in the doorway, his hands deep in the pockets of his jeans and leaning against the door frame.

I'm so startled by seeing him standing there that I let out a shriek and drop the stack of plates. They hit the ground with a loud crash, spraying shards of glass everywhere. I look from Hawk to the broken plates all around my feet and sigh.

“You think we’ll ever get to a point where breaking dishes isn’t part of our normal greeting?” he asks with a smile.

I can’t help but laugh and shake my head. “I don’t know. I think it’s part of our thing now.”

“Oh, we have a thing?”

“Kind of seems that way.”

I look at the broken dishes at my feet and sigh, knowing I’m probably going to catch hell for yet more broken dishes. Unlike last time though, I guess this one is my fault.

“Let me help with this,” Hawk offers.

“No, it’s all right. You should get back to the guys.”

He shrugs. “We don’t have much in common and I think we’ve already exhausted the conversations about those things we do.”

As much as I want him to stay here and talk to me, I know that word is going to get back to Hammerhead, which will go worse for me than his anger about the broken dishes. Even still, knowing he’ll probably knock me around a little bit, there’s something in me that wants Hawk to stay anyway. There’s no explanation for it, I just feel such a sense of comfort around him.

In all the chaos around me, Hawk is like an island of calm.

It’s crazy. Insane. We barely know each other. To feel this way about somebody I don’t even know is ridiculous. I’m well aware of that. But he’s shown me nothing other than kindness and compassion in the short time we’ve known one another.

And maybe that’s what it is. Maybe it’s because he has shown me kindness in this world I’m stuck in, a world that’s shown me nothing but cruelty. Maybe that’s what’s leading me to feel stronger than I should. It’s possible. Maybe even likely.

When I look into his eyes though, I feel like there’s more to it than just that. He stirs something in me that I can’t describe, let alone understand. Hawk makes my heart race and my stomach churn with a sensation that almost makes me feel weightless. Like I’m falling from some great height, but I know it’s going to be okay because he’ll catch me.

It doesn’t make any sense, but I trust him. And I think he trusts me too.

Without waiting for me, he squats down and starts to pick up the jagged pieces that litter the floor. A faint smile touching my lips, I do the same.

“What the hell is goin’ on in here?”

We both look up and see Deadbolt, the Howlers’ Sergeant-at-Arms

standing in the doorway. His eyes are shifting between me and Hawk with an expression on his face like he'd just walked in on us having sex or something.

"I dropped some dishes," I tell him. "Hawk was nice enough to help me clean it up."

"Yeah well, I don't think Hammerhead's going to like that."

Hawk's expression darkens and he stands up, turning to face him. "He won't like that I'm helping clean up some broken dishes?" he asks, an eyebrow raised. "Is he really that insecure?"

Deadbolt flushes and opens his mouth to reply but then closes it again. He stands in the doorway, doing his best to look tough, but I know him well enough to know that he's a coward. He's famous for starting fights but having other people fight for him. He poses and postures like a tough guy but deep down, he's afraid of almost everything. I've seen him do it more than once in the clubhouse.

"I'm just sayin'," he finally manages. "Hammerhead don't look too kindly on dudes messin' around with his woman."

"You let me worry about it," Hawk says, his voice a low growl. "I can handle myself."

"Yeah, whatever man," he snaps, then turns his eyes to me. "Those snacks ready yet?"

"I'll bring them out as soon as they are."

"Well, hurry it up. I'm hungry."

Deadbolt gives me a last withering look, then turns and walks back out into the main room. I shake my head and reach down to pick up another piece of glass carelessly. The sharp sting makes me draw in a sharp breath. I pull my hand back and when I hold my finger up, I see the slice in my skin and watch for a moment as the blood wells in the cut then starts to spill.

Watching that crimson line of blood spill down my finger reminds me of the time, early on here, that I tried to kill myself. Or at least, thought about it. I dragged a piece of glass over my wrist, but it wasn't sharp enough to do any real damage. It made a small, shallow cut just like this.

A bit of blood spilled out, but what really freaked me out was that it stung. Just like this one. That was enough for me. In the end, I wasn't brave or strong enough to go through with it. Call me a coward, I sure feel like it sometimes, but I don't like pain or blood. I also like living, so the thought of snuffing out my own torch freaked me out enough to never want to do it again.

I will live. I have to. I know I'll get out of here someday and live a better life. I won't let Hammerhead win, not ever. If he wants me dead, he'll have to do it his damn self. And if it's the last thing I do, I'll take him with me.

I'm going to live.

All those thoughts flash in the blink of an eye as I stare at the blood dripping from my finger. The next thing I know, Hawk is helping me to my feet. He walks me over to the sink and turns the tap on.

"Rinse your finger out," he says. "And do you have a first aid kit or something?"

"More like or something," I reply with a laugh. "It's in the bathroom."

"All right, keep your finger under the water until I get back."

He nods and walks out of the kitchen as I continue rinsing the blood off my finger. It's not a super deep cut or anything, but it stings and is bleeding a lot. Hawk comes back into the kitchen and turns off the water. He pulls a bottle of iodine out of the kit then pours a little bit of it on my finger. I wince and suck in a sharp breath as the iodine hits the cut, feeling pretty much the same as if I'd poured straight lemon juice on it.

"Come on, you're tougher than that," he teases.

I grit my teeth. "How about I cut your finger and pour some salt into it?"

He grins at me. "Feisty girl."

"I can be when I need to be."

Hawk takes a paper towel and gently pats my finger dry. Then he squeezes it, applying a fair amount of pressure to the wound for a minute or so. Once he lets go, he cleans the blood from the cut and quickly wraps a band-aid around it, making it fit snugly. He's so tender and gentle with me that it makes it hard to remember he's a big, burly biker. He's the rough and tumble type, so to see this softer side of him is jarring.

But I'd be lying if I said I didn't like it. I can't deny that my heart is stuttering drunkenly. I can't deny that I feel a warmth, a comfort, a feeling of safety, flooding me to my bones.

That's what he makes me feel.

Strong.

Brave.

Most of all, *safe*.

I've never felt safe with a man. My whole adult life has been being kicked around by one man, then another. But Hawk is different. Being so close to him has my body humming with an electricity that's unlike anything

I've ever felt before. I almost feel like I might just burst into flames. The feeling is so strange but I want to soak in it.

I love the way he makes me feel.

"There you go," he smiles. "That should do it."

"Thank you," I whisper.

For a crazy moment, as we stand there with our gazes locked upon one another's, I have the powerful urge to kiss him. And judging by the way he's looking at me, I'd say he's feeling the same thing. Or maybe it's wishful thinking, I'm not sure. The air between us crackles with an energy that makes everything in me even warmer. The desire is so intense it has my head spinning.

But Hawk breaks the moment and steps back. I swear to God, it feels like a balloon just deflated, letting out all the heat and desire that had built up inside of me. It's a good thing he did, or I might have just let my desire sweep me away. He was right to cut off that moment. If Hammerhead would slap me around for Hawk helping me clean up broken dishes, I shudder to think what he would do if found out we'd shared a kiss.

He looks at me with a smile on his face as if the same thoughts have just been running through his mind. I need to remind myself once more that he's not here to save me. He's not here to help me escape. This isn't some romance novel where he's going to carry me away to a better life.

My experience has taught me, this clubhouse and Hammerhead are about the best things I can expect out of my life. It's a depressing thought but I usually prefer reality. If I catered to the fantasies my heart likes to conjure from time to time, I'd have drowned by now.

He clears his throat. "I should..."

"Yeah. You probably should," I say and hold up my finger. "Thanks for the help."

"Anytime," he says.

As he walks out, I replay his parting word to me. Anytime. Such a simple word, but the tone he used when he said it struck a chord in me. Was it a simple throwaway line? Or did he mean something deeper by it? Was he trying to give me a signal that he'd be willing to help me get out of here? Was that what he meant by saying he'd help me anytime? Or am I being a psycho and reading too much meaning into something where there wasn't any?

I shake my head. I'm so desperate to get out of here, I know I'm

glomming onto anything, anybody, who might offer me a way out. If even the slightest chance exists, I know I'll jump on it. So much so that I am very likely making things up in my own mind and imagining meaning when he might have just been trying to be polite. It's the uncertainty and the not knowing if he was trying to give me a signal that's driving me crazy right now.

I pick up my broom and finish the cleanup, doing my best to banish those thoughts and quash that hope. It's not doing me any good and is only serving to frustrate and hurt me.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



Standing behind the bar, Hogwild opens up a fresh round of beers for all of us and slides them down. The clubhouse has been cleaned up, as I'd asked. I have a feeling Molly spent most of last night and all of today getting it ready. And since I know Hammerhead hasn't been around the clubhouse all day, I know he didn't lend a hand. Neither did anybody else, I'd wager. It looks nice though. Well... nicer. Most of the stench is gone, but traces of it still linger. Still, the difference is night and day. I just feel bad that Molly is essentially slave labor here. I wish I could have said something to Hammerhead to make her situation better, but I know I can't do anything without making it worse.

Once he's got his hand on his new bottle, Deadbolt flashes us all a wide grin. "So, then, still wearing her fuckin' tiara, this bitch gets on her knees..."

I tune him out, already tired of his obviously overinflated stories. This one is about some rich debutante type who took one look at him and couldn't wait to get him into bed. It's like some shit out of a bad soap opera. Deadbolt's in his forties. He's got salt and pepper-colored hair that's thinning up top. But he's grown to the middle of his back—obviously overcompensating for what he's lacking on top of his head. He's lean with broad shoulders and a barrel chest. His cheeks are pocked, he's got a thick, scraggly beard, and eyes that look permanently watery and bloodshot and are ringed with dark circles.

I wouldn't say he's a bad-looking guy, I guess. But he's definitely worn and has some hard edges to him. Life has obviously taken a bit of a toll on him, leaving him looking a little road weary. Suffice it to say, no underwear company is going to be knocking on his door, asking him to model for them

anytime soon. And I would bet every last dime I have the closest he's ever gotten to nailing a teenage debutante is jerking off to debutante porn online.

"You are so full of shit," Hogwild cracks, making me glad I'm not the only one who thinks he's lying.

"Hand to God," Deadbolt insists, holding his hand up.

"You are gonna get your ass struck by lightning," Jammer adds.

"Why do you do this?" Hogwild asks. "Why do you make up these bullshit stories? I mean, you know we all think you're full of shit, right?"

"Y'all can go fuck yourselves. I'm tellin' the God's honest truth," he says, pouting.

"Yeah, sure you are," Jammer mocks.

It's been a couple of hours since the incident in the kitchen, but I can't stop thinking about it. Can't stop thinking about her. The feel of her skin beneath my touch, so soft and smooth, still sends ripples of pleasure through me. That look of innocence in her eyes, the smattering of freckles across the bridge of her nose, and the flush of her cheeks, the red really standing out against the porcelain color of her skin, all combine to stir something inside of me. They set a fire going in my gut that quickly moves to other parts of me.

I know how stupid it is to be talking to her. By all rights, I should be staying as far away from her as I can. If I were smart, I wouldn't have taken a room here and would have just stayed in the hotel. But I really do need to work with Hammerhead to get him back on track and see if this partnership can be salvaged. I could do it from the hotel and just ride over every day. Which is probably what I should have done. But I'm clearly not a smart man, because I saw it as an opportunity to get closer to Molly and I took it with barely a thought.

At least until now. Deadbolt, the surly prick that he is, has been razzing me about helping Molly since I walked back into the main room. I just know he's already going to tell Hammerhead that I'd been in the kitchen with Molly—alone. And even though I barely know the guy, he seems like somebody who's an absolute ass-kisser. He's going to do what he can to plant suggestive ideas in Hammerhead's skull. He's going to look to make it worse and blow it all out of proportion. I know guys like him. Guys who will do anything to improve their own position in the club, even if that means they're standing on the body of somebody else to get there.

I can see in Deadbolt's eyes that he's looking to start some trouble between me and Hammerhead. For what reason, I don't know. But he is

clearly somebody who wants to be in his President's good graces and will lie, cheat, and steal whatever he has to in order to make sure he stays there. I haven't liked the dude from the moment I was introduced to him and my opinion of him is only sinking lower the more I hear him talk.

"What do you think, Hawk?"

I look up, Hogwild's voice having pulled me out of my head and back to the present. "What do I think about what?"

"Deadbolt's story. He bang some nineteen-year-old debutante after her coming out party or what?" he presses.

"I thought they only had coming-out parties for debutantes in the South," I shrug.

"Apparently not," Jammer jumps in. "Unless he's lyin' about that too."

"Fuck you," Deadbolt growls.

"C'mon. Let's hear what you think," Hogwild presses.

I shrug. "Don't know. I've got no opinion on the matter."

Hogwild laughs and claps me on the shoulder. "See? He just don't want to hurt your feelings."

"Nah. It's because he doesn't want to make you two look like idiots," Deadbolt defends himself. "He knows the truth when he hears it."

See, Deadbolt should have quit while he was ahead. But guys like him just can't ever seem to leave well enough alone. If he'd just left it at that, things would have been fine. But now it feels like he's backed me into a corner because both Hogwild and Jammer are looking at me for confirmation. Normally, I'd just shrug and leave it alone. Because I dislike him as much as I do though, the last thing I want anybody to think is that we're aligned when we're most definitely not on the same page. About anything.

"No, it's because I tuned you out almost immediately after you started talking," I correct him. "I couldn't stand to have that much bullshit poured into my ear."

Hogwild and Jammer explode in laughter while Deadbolt glowers at me. His cheeks are flushed with embarrassment, and he looks like he wants to rip my head off my shoulders. I mean, he can try, but he's going to end up spitting up blood and teeth instead. It takes a couple of minutes, but the other guys finally settle down, their raucous laughter fading to softer chuckles of amusement. Deadbolt is still glowering, though. He hasn't softened a bit. He's still looking at me like he's considering pulling his gun.

That thought gets a laugh out of me. The guy is so fucking incompetent,

if he tried to pull his gun, he'd probably shoot his own dick off. I want to tell him he shouldn't be carrying it behind his belt buckle but I'm kind of amused by the thought of him gunning himself down, so I don't say anything.

The laughter fades and the air in the clubhouse suddenly goes thick with tension. Deadbolt's anger rolls in like a storm front. His face is dark, his features twisted into a snarl. He obviously can't take a joke. Not that I care.

"Oh, you think that's bullshit, do you?" Deadbolt finally manages to say to me.

Hogwild and Jammer fall silent, both of them watching us with anticipation in their eyes. They seem to sense things might turn violent and are keeping a close eye on things. Whether that's because they want to see the bloodshed of a nasty fight, or because they'd step in to quash it, I'm not sure. I'm kind of betting on the former, to be honest. The Howlers don't seem to have that bond of brotherhood the Kings have. They're not a tight, cohesive club.

That, more than anything, is probably why the purge happened. I've got a feeling Hammerhead ran away everybody who wouldn't pledge their fealty and kiss his ring. That's something else I'm going to have to factor into my decision while I'm here. Can Hammerhead rebound? Can he be an effective leader? Or is he simply all about himself? Right now, I don't see any reason to believe Hammerhead can pull it together. But I'm willing to give him a shot. It wouldn't be the first time I was wrong about somebody. And the threat of losing everything can be a powerful motivator.

"Well? Do you or don't you?" Deadbolt presses, still waiting for an answer. "Cat got your tongue or somethin', boy?"

"Well... yeah," I reply. "Your story is absolute bullshit."

"You don't know dick about me, bro," he growls.

He looks at me and I finally glare at him, not really liking his attitude. The guy is like a loaded gun, cocked and ready to go off at the slightest movement. But I don't get the sense that he's really a fighter. Oh sure, he can talk a good game and get himself all puffed up. But when it comes to actually throwing down, I don't know if he's got the stones. I see him as more of somebody who would sneak up behind you and stab you in the back. But squaring up and slugging it out? I fuckin' doubt it.

"You're right, I don't know you," I reply. "But I know bullshit when I hear it. And that's all I hear coming out of your mouth. So, I tune you out."

"You should watch your fuckin' mouth, man," he snaps. "You keep goin'

and soon enough you'll find my fist in it."

"Yeah? Think so?"

"I know so," he snaps.

"I'm ready when you are. Let's go outside and settle this. What do you say?"

Deadbolt cuts a look at the other two then returns his eyes to me. I can see the quiver in his lip and know he feels trapped. I think he'd expected me to back down. Maybe defer to him since this isn't my clubhouse and I'm just a guest in theirs. But because he doesn't know me and has made certain assumptions, he doesn't know that I don't back down. Not when I'm challenged. And I can always back my shit up.

"Whatever, man," he snaps, trying to save face. "You don't know shit."

I shrug. "I know enough to know that you talk a big game. But when it's time to throw down, you pussy your way out the back door."

"Oooooooh," Hogwild and Jammer both say, like kids watching a fight on the playground. That only deepens the flush in Deadbolt's face and he looks away. Before things can get out of hand though, the rumble of a bike draws closer. I spot Hammerhead's bike pulling into the parking lot and a moment later, he cuts the engine and dismounts. Hogwild pulls a fresh beer out of the cooler, pops the cap, and holds it up.

"Prez," he greets him. "Somethin' to wash the road dust out?"

Hammerhead walks over and grabs the bottle, swallowing half of it down. He glances at me and judging by the frown, I'm assuming he went to his first meeting today.

"Where you been, Prez?" Jammer asks.

"Out."

"Out where?" Deadbolt presses.

"Out takin' care of my shit," he snaps. "What, are you writin' a fuckin' book?"

Hammerhead's irritation casts a chill over the room and his guys draw into themselves a bit. Jammer and Deadbolt turn to their beer bottles, biting back any questions they might have, not wanting to poke the bear with a spoon any more than they already have. His irritability tells me he's sober—and isn't too crazy about it. I don't know when the last time his veins weren't flowing with meth but it's good to see him sober, pissed off or not.

"Everything okay?" Hogwild asks quietly and calmly.

"Yeah, everything's just great," he growls.

He casts a glare at me, letting me know that everything is pretty far from great. As if I couldn't interpret that from his tone. But whatever. As long as he stays clean, he can be as pissed off at me as he wants. I really don't give a shit.

"What did I miss here?" he asks.

"Your boy here got your old lady hurt," Deadbolt pipes up.

I look at him in surprise and let out a laugh. I knew the man was a coward, but to blatantly lie like that, hoping somebody else would fight his battle for him, that's a low I didn't expect. Not even from a piece of shit like him. I guess I'm going to have to revise my opinion of him even further downward. Hammerhead rounds on me, his eyes narrowed and shining with fire.

"What the fuck did you do to her?" he demands.

"Despite what your Sergeant-at-Arms over there says, I didn't get Molly hurt."

He stands there huffing and puffing, his face red and his nostrils flaring. He's projecting like he cares about her but I know it's all for show. He doesn't care about Molly any more than he cares about the bottle of beer in his hand. They're just possessions to him. Things he can use—the beer to get drunk, the girl to get off. I've got zero illusions about how things are around here, no matter how he tries to front.

"She was bleedin', Hammerhead," Deadbolt goes on. "I saw it myself."

Hogwild and Jammer both slip off their barstools and make their way quietly out of the clubhouse. Which is fine. Not only did they not see what happened, I didn't expect them to have my back in the first place. Their loyalty is to the club—to Hammerhead—and not to me. Or the Kings. I can't fault them for not wanting to be part of this.

"Your boy is lying through his fucking teeth," I say, my voice low and hard, then cast a glare at him. "And if he utters one more lie, I'm going to knock those teeth down his fucking throat. You got me?"

Deadbolt shrinks in on himself and takes a step back even though there's a chest-high wooden bar between us. I turn back to Hammerhead who's now standing just inches from me, the tip of his nose nearly touching mine, his disgusting breath washing over me.

I grimace in disgust. "Jesus, man. Step back or take an Altoid—"

"Shut the fuck up," he snarls. "Now, I'm doin' everythin' you said to make sure this partnership stays afloat—"

“Good,” I say. “That’s good.”

“I’m even lettin’ you dictate how I run my clubhouse. I’m followin’ your rules,” he goes on. “But you fuck with my ol’ lady, and we’re about to have some serious fuckin’ problems. You ain’t supposed to look at her. You ain’t supposed to touch her. You ain’t even supposed to think about her. She’s my ol’ lady. She’s got nothin’ to do with you.”

I hold my hands up, palms out, in surrender. “You want to hear what really happened?” I ask. “Because the story your boy is telling you is about as real as the story he was telling us about fucking some nineteen-year-old debutante.”

“Shut the fuck up,” Deadbolt snaps. “He’s lyin’—”

Hammerhead rounds on him. “Shut your fuckin’ mouth,” he spits. “In fact, get the fuck out. I’ll deal with you later.”

Deadbolt opens his mouth to protest but Hammerhead holds up a finger and forestalls the argument he was about to make.

“I told you to get the fuck out.”

Glaring at me, but with a smug little smile curling his lips as if he thinks he got me in trouble and is reveling in it, he steps out from behind the bar and walks out. I’m sure he’s out there telling Jammer and Hogwild about how he stood up to me. He’ll probably tell him he knocked me out with one clean punch. Guys like him just don’t know when to stop. That’s all right though. I’ll get mine. I always do. For now, I’ve got to deal with the behemoth standing right in front of me.

I stand my ground and fold my arms over my chest. He looks at me with hatred in his eyes, his jowls jiggling with his impotent rage. I want to laugh but I’d rather not have this situation deteriorate any more than it already has.

“So?” he snarls. “Let’s hear what your version of the story is.”

“My version of the story happens to be the truth. And you can, as I’d expect, go verify it with Molly,” I tell him.

“Leave her the fuck out of this.”

“Fine. Whatever,” I snap. “She dropped some plates. I helped her clean them up. She cut herself and I patched her up. That’s it. No big deal.”

“I told you to stay away from her. She’s got social anxiety and doesn’t like being around new people,” he growls. “That’s why she doesn’t leave the clubhouse.”

I laugh. “She sure don’t seem like she’s got social anxiety, man.”

I’m tempted to ask if the real reason she doesn’t leave is because he’s

essentially holding her hostage, but I bite my tongue. Getting in a verbal war right now isn't going to do me any good, but it will do even less for Molly. Hammerhead is the kind of guy who will take out his frustrations on her—as I've seen. The last thing I want is for her to get hurt. She's suffered enough as it is.

“She does if I say she does. She's my old lady. Not yours,” he huffs. “And she falls outside our business arrangement. So, you keep your fuckin' eyes and hands off her. You got me? Am I clear enough for you?”

I nod. It's an unwritten rule within MCs that like our bikes, you do not mess with a man's ol' lady. Those relationships are sacred. Or they're supposed to be. While I've never seen guys fuck with somebody else's bike, I've definitely seen plenty of guys fucking with another man's woman. But the point is taken. Whether I like it or not—and I don't—Molly is Hammerhead's ol' lady. I don't know how she got to be in that situation but that's not my business. She's not my business.

It just kills me, because I can see very clearly that she didn't ask to be his ol' lady. And she's not being treated with the respect and love that's supposed to come with the title. She doesn't deserve to be in this situation, locked inside a clubhouse twenty-four hours a day, forced to service a man she obviously despises, and acting as slave labor. I hate it. I hate it for her. But Hammerhead is right. No matter my attraction to her, Molly is not my business, and she definitely falls outside the bounds of our partnership.

“Yeah, I got you,” I say quietly. “I get it.”

“Do you?” he presses. “Do you really get it?”

I raise my head and lock eyes with him, my own anger flaring as I stare into his face. I grit my teeth and narrow my eyes, doing my best to bite back my anger.

“Don't you fuckin' push me,” I growl. “Let me just remind you that you and the Howlers need this partnership a hell of a lot more than the Kings do. We can replace you in a heartbeat. You'd do well to remember that.”

And with that, I'm done with this conversation. I walk away from him and head for the room that's been set up for me. I slam the door behind me and flop down onto the bed. As I stare up at the ceiling, Molly's smile floats through my mind. I don't know how she's been able to keep that smile so bright and warm having to endure all she's enduring. I'm curious as hell about her story and want to know more. I want to know everything.

But although I hate to admit it, Hammerhead is right. She's not my

business and I need to keep reminding myself I'm here to do a job. Not steal his old lady.

I close my eyes and try to banish the thoughts of her that keep filling my head. As I do though, a soft voice in the back of my mind—the one that usually precedes some of my worst ideas—speaks up.

Can't you do both?

“Shut up,” I mutter. “Just shut the hell up.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



Molly

I've been laying awake in my makeshift bed all night, just staring at the ceiling in the dark. Voices tend to carry in this place, so I heard everything that happened tonight. I heard Deadbolt lying to Hammerhead, trying to get him to fight Hawk in his stead. Typical of that piece of crap. That's just his way.

And then after that, I heard Hawk and Hammerhead arguing about me. And I heard Hawk storm into his bedroom. And all the while, I've just been laying here, waiting for the other shoe to drop.

I know Hammerhead is going to blame me for what's happened. For the disarray and chaos of the evening. He'll probably blame me for Deadbolt lying, and for having to follow whatever rules Hawk set down for him. The fact that Hawk is dictating rules for Hammerhead to follow makes me see why he's been in such a shitty mood lately. Shittier than usual anyway.

Hammerhead is not a man who likes having rules dictated to him. He's used to being the alpha. The one in charge. He's used to people jumping when he tells them to. So, having to swallow his pride and follow somebody else's rules cannot be sitting well with him. It's a thought that makes me laugh to myself—of course, not loud enough for him to hear me. I like the fact that Hawk is making Hammerhead uncomfortable. It's making him do things he doesn't want to do. Things that he doesn't like but are being forced upon him anyway.

"Maybe he's getting a taste of what it feels like," I mutter to myself.

As I stare at the darkness above me, all I can think about is Hawk. There's a small part of me that wonders if he's lying in his own bed, staring at the ceiling and thinking of me too. I want to think that. It makes my heart

skip a beat to think it. In reality, though, I know he's probably not. I heard him tell Hammerhead that I'm not his business and that he'll back off. I know Hawk doesn't approve of the way Hammerhead treats me, but he seems either unwilling or unable to do anything about it.

A sigh passes my lips as I think about it. I guess maybe because I'm Hammerhead's ol' lady, technically, I'm off-limits. I never agreed to it, but I can't change it now. I don't know where he gets off calling me his ol' lady when he treats me more like his slave, but for all I know, maybe that's just how things are done in this world.

There is a lot about MC life that I don't know—that Hammerhead has purposely kept from me. He depends on my ignorance for my reliance on him. He keeps me from knowing things because he knows I'm smart enough to figure out how to use them against him. We've been through that a couple of times already and it usually results in me being beaten. Still, I assume it's better than the fates that awaited some of the other guys who'd violated those unwritten rules. In my time here, I've seen guys who've broken those unwritten rules go out on a ride never to come back.

That mischievous smile Hawk sometimes gets flashes through my mind, and I can't stop the warmth from blossoming in my belly. I remember how gentle he was in cleaning my wound and bandaging my finger and it makes my heart flutter.

I can't have thoughts like this. I need to stay away from him. For his sake as well as for my own. Messing about with Hawk is like playing with a hand grenade and hoping it doesn't go off in my hand. I know this.

But I can't stop thinking about him. I can't stop wanting to be near him. And it's not just because he's forbidden fruit.

There is something about him that draws me. Compels me. Something about him makes me want to throw caution to the wind and just say screw it, just to be with him. He makes me feel things deep inside that have left me dizzy and breathless.

He makes me want to say fuck it all and risk everything.

Being with him, if only for a night, might be worth the punishment I would receive if it were ever found out. It might even be worth being taken out on a ride I won't come back from. There's just something about him I find so exhilarating. So totally and completely irresistible.

But at the same time, I hate feeling this way. I know it won't come to a good end. Not for either of us. I'm afraid. Because now those feelings have

bloomed in me and I still don't know if it's all in my head.

I want to believe he sees me the same way I see him. I want to believe that he feels what I do. And that he secretly desires me the same way I crave him. Which I know is probably damn near psychotic and will only lead to trouble. Big trouble. The sort of trouble that will lead both of us to an early grave. Even if he does feel the way I do, what can we possibly do about it?

I sit up and press my back against the wall as I pull my pillow into my lap and hug it tight, my mind spinning a thousand miles a minute. I push all the feelings and emotions about Hawk out of my head and try to focus on the one simple question that keeps bouncing through my mind.

“What do I want?” I whisper.

It's a simple question that's got a complicated answer. I mean, there's part of me that would be into an illicit one-night affair with Hawk—one I'm sure would be steamy, torrid, and would leave me with a smile on my face and a thousand memories I can look back on and smile. But I know deep down that's not really what I want. Or at least, not all that I want.

As amazing as I'm sure a night with Hawk would be, the happiness I would get from it would be fleeting. It would be great in the moment. Maybe even for a couple of hours. But eventually, that shine would fade, and I'd be left right where I am now—trapped in a cage, miserable, and unhappy. Which leads me back to the same simple question: what do I want?

What I want is something that I'm not sure I can have. I want to be free of this place. I want to be free of Hammerhead and all his minions. I want to get out of this world and try to find my way back to happiness again.

I want to forget the million terrible memories that make up my life ever since I was abducted. I want to forge new ones. Happier memories. Memories of being surrounded by people who love me and each other.

As crazy as it may sound, I still want to find love. To be married. To have a family of my own. To have a life that's stable and good, beside a man who treats me with love and respect.

Even after all I've endured, the degradation, humiliation, and horrific abuses, I want my hope fulfilled. I still want all the things I used to dream of when I was younger, when life was good and my future was stretched out before me on a vast, endless road where I could go anywhere, do anything, and be anybody that I wanted.

I still believe in all the things I did before I was taken. I locked all those things away in a box deep inside my heart and kept it safe. Nurtured it. Never

let my circumstances diminish its shine.

I still cling to the belief that despite the terrible traumas and abuses inflicted upon me, that I am more than my situation. With shaky fingers, I still hold onto the belief that as terrible as my life has become, it will never define me. It will never extinguish my hope or my sense of self. With all my heart, I believe one day I will be free of this place. Free to build the life I want.

So I already know the answer when I ask myself: “What do you want, Molly?”

The simple answer is, I want to escape. I want my freedom. It seems like it’s been forever since I’ve had even a glimmer of hope that I could get out of this place—probably because it has. And that’s because I’ve never been allowed out. At least, not any further than the lot behind the compound and even then, only when somebody is there to watch me. It makes me feel like a prisoner being allowed some time in the yard.

Hawk is really the first person other than the Howlers that I’ve had any contact with. And he is definitely the first outsider I’ve met, let alone talked to. It’s probably because he knew I’d see it as a chance to escape that Hammerhead tried to forbid me from talking to him. But now that I’ve met him, now that I know he feels bad for me, and that he’s a kind, compassionate man, I see that chance. It might be unrealistic, but if anybody is ever going to be able to get me out of here, it’s going to be Hawk.

So, the question becomes, not what I want, but what am I willing to do to get it. How far am I willing to go to get it? If Hammerhead finds out I’m trying to get out from under him, and asking Hawk to help me escape, my fate will be sealed.

They’ll find my body without a head somewhere in the desert and no one will ever think of me again.

I’m sure Hawk can get out of that sort of sticky mess, but I can pretty much guarantee I’ll be done. So, I have to ask myself if it’s worth being killed—and maybe even tortured first—for the chance to escape? I’m surprised to find that I don’t even really have to think about it.

“Yes,” I answer myself quietly. “Absolutely yes.”

Although I’ve been able to hold onto that hope inside me as well as those pieces of myself, I know that can’t last forever. If I’m forced to stay here, eventually I’ll lose my hold on them. I don’t know how long I can endure all this misery until I lose my grip. Then I really will be the nothing and nobody

Hammerhead tells me I am.

And wouldn't that be a fate worse than death? Isn't preventing that, even at the cost of my own life, well worth the chance I'll be taking by asking Hawk to get me out of here?

"Again, yes. Absolutely."

I don't want to die. I love life too much and want the chance to live a normal one free of this house of horrors and all the horrid memories it contains. I don't want to die until I've had a chance to overwrite those with better memories. I don't want to die until I've been able to taste happiness again. But that will never happen here. And if I don't take a chance—the only chance I've had in God knows how long—it will never happen, period. I don't know if I can wait for somebody else to come along. Especially when Hammerhead goes to such great lengths to keep me hidden away like a dirty secret.

That means my chance is now. This may be my only opportunity to get out and get free of this place. I'm risking it all. Gambling on the hope that Hawk will keep my confidence and keep it away Hammerhead. I think it's a good bet since Hawk doesn't seem to like the man at all in the first place. But it's still a risk.

There are three things that could happen. First, Hawk could tell Hammerhead, which would end in me being beaten and/or murdered. Or maybe Hawk won't tell Hammerhead but will decline to help me, in which case, my life doesn't change, and I'll just have to play out the string until I'm dead or too apathetic to care anymore. Or maybe—and it's a tiny, tiny chance—Hawk will help get me out of here and I can find my way to that life I want.

The odds are definitely against me, but I have to roll the dice though because it really is now or never.

Moving as quietly as I can, I get up and walk over to the dresser that's all scuffed and busted. The clubhouse is silent with the others having already either left or crashed somewhere. I heard Hammerhead go to bed a while ago and can hear his muffled snores through his door. But because sound travels and everything seems louder than it is, I'm taking extra care to make as little noise as possible. The last thing I want or need is for Hammerhead to wake up while I'm at this.

I squat down, take the bottom drawer out, and reach into the empty space. Beneath it, sitting on the floor, is the journal and pen Hogwild gave me a

while ago. He warned me to hide it, which was good advice since Hammerhead likes to tear my room apart and search it like a cell check-in prison fairly regularly. I flip to a blank page and sit down on the edge of my bed then flip on the small lamp on the empty wooden crate that masquerades as a nightstand beside the bed.

That done, I scrawl out my note. I fill it with as much detail as I can while still trying to keep it short. It doesn't have to be a novel. I can fill in all the blanks later if he agrees to help me. But I want to include enough so he gets a sense of just how dire my circumstances are, which I hope will make him more willing to help me. I'm not above using manipulation and pulling on his heartstrings to get what I want. To get what I desperately need.

That done, I fold the paper and write his name on the outside of the page along with another little note. I return my journal and pen to where they belong and put the drawer back into the highboy. After that, I creep to the door and remove the wedge of wood beneath it. I allow it to swing open, making sure it doesn't make a sound, and follow the hallway out into the clubhouse. Everything is quiet and still. The silence is so heavy, it almost has its own weight that presses down on me ominously.

I brush it off and step out into the darkness of the clubhouse. I've been walking these halls so long now, I know where all the squeaky boards are. Some of them can't be avoided, so I step lightly, trying to minimize the sound. When I get to the short hall where Hawk's room is, I move slower and more deliberately since his room is right across from Hammerhead's.

I swallow hard as I look at Hammerhead's door. Holding my breath, I strain my ears, listening. His snores are still coming through loud and clear, though it's hard to hear them over the thundering of my own heart. But I manage it and turn to Hawk's door.

It's now or neer.

Squatting down, I slide the note under it and give it a good push, hoping he sees it and doesn't think it's a piece of trash or something. I stand up and let out a quiet breath, feeling my stomach churning so hard, I feel like I might throw up.

Part of me wants to reach under and snatch that note back, the fear of being found out almost too much to bear. But the other part of me tells the fearful side to shut the hell up. It's under the door now. It's too late to undo what I've done. I want to chastise myself for being so stupid—and congratulate myself for being so bold.

All I can do now is wait. And hope—hope that he sees the note, doesn't report me, and agrees to help get me out of this hellhole. It's a gamble—a gamble with my life. But I have to hope Hawk is as good a man as I think he is. And hope that he's willing to stick his neck out that far for me.

I've rolled the dice and now have to hope I don't crap out.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



I almost didn't see it. But I had to sit down to put my boots on and when I glanced up, there it was. At first, I thought it might just be a piece of trash that had escaped my notice the night before. But then I saw my name scribbled across the front of it. The writing is definitely feminine, which tells me it must be a note from Molly. The second I realized it, I felt a stitch in my heart, but at the same time, an icy dagger of dread pierced it.

A note from her, just after having been warned by Hammerhead, can't be a coincidence. This is not good. I wouldn't usually give a shit what Hammerhead thought. He's just another trash person I have to deal with. But dealing with him won't be easy. For all my talk about him being replaceable, I know it's not that simple. In fact, it would be a real bitch to pull off.

Yeah, I could call up the Deviants. They'd jump at the chance to work with us. They'd love nothing more than to wipe out the Howlers, consolidate their power, and start earning some real money. But that's a pretty damn big risk. From what I hear, the Deviants are involved in some pretty horrific shit. Sure, the Ruthless Kings may play fast and loose with the law, but we don't get in bed with people who run around with cartels or traffic women. The Kings want no part of that business—we hired the Howlers in the first place so the Deviants wouldn't become a problem.

And if their Prez, Ratchet, finds out that the Kings and their allies are pulling back from the region, he'll step up his operations and run roughshod over the entire Southwest. It'll be a bloodbath.

This is my mess. I chose Hammerhead over Ratchet in the beginning and even though I couldn't have foreseen what's happened, I still bear the responsibility for it. That's the only reason I'm still trying to make this work

with this prick. Old Grim wouldn't hold me responsible for Hammerhead falling off. But my future as VP will be pretty damn uncertain if I don't fix this.

That's why I'm so determined to make this work. And I know that to make this work, I'm going to have to cut things off with Molly. I can't afford to flirt with her, piss off Hammerhead, and blow the whole thing. I need to think with my brain and not my dick this time.

With a sigh, I tuck her note into the inner pocket of my cut, unread. I'll have to dispose of it, but I don't want to do it here. Not where somebody might find it. Hammerhead is so insecure and protective of his little slave mistress, I wouldn't put it past him to go through the garbage, looking for evidence of betrayal. God, this guy is a fucking nightmare.

I tuck the bag of cash into the back of the closet and put a couple of boxes I found in there in front of it, camouflaging it the best I can. I'll know if somebody dipped into it but I'm hoping to avoid that altogether. I just need to get out of here for a while. I need to ride. Feel the sun and wind on my face for a bit and clear my head. I'm feeling a little penned in, to be honest. A bit claustrophobic. Some time out on the road will do me a world of good.

I walk down the hallway and spot Molly in the kitchen. She looks at me, her eyes wide and a startled expression on her face. I'm tempted to stop and talk to her, but I force myself to walk on without acknowledging her in any way. It's tough because I want to turn back and look at her. More than that, I want to take her into my arms and tell her everything is going to be all right.

But that's a promise I can't make. A promise I can't keep.

Truth is, I don't know that things will be all right. Not for her anyway. And it kills me to say that. I hate to think of her scared. I hate even more to think of her in pain. What I hate the most though, is knowing I can stop it—but I can't do a damn thing about it.

I walk through the clubhouse and head for the door. Deadbolt is sitting at one of the tables, his feet up on it with a breakfast burrito in his hand.

"Where are you goin'?" he asks.

"A little town called Go Fuck Yourself," I reply.

He almost chokes on his burrito as I walk out the door and I hear a string of choked, raspy curses coming from the room behind me. Hogwild is outside, squatting next to his bike as he works on it. As I approach, he looks up at me, a grin on his face.

"You damn near killed him in here, sounds like," he says. "What'd you

say to him?”

I shrug. “Just told him where I was goin’.”

“Yeah? Where’s that?”

“Just out for a ride,” I reply. “Need to clear my head.”

“Fair enough,” he nods and gets to his feet. “Listen, I know things with Molly are... weird. Hammerhead’s real protective of her.”

“He that protective of everything he considers his property?”

He gives me a look I can’t quite interpret. “Most things, yeah.”

“Can’t say I approve of how he treats her.”

“Yeah, I don’t either. I don’t want you thinkin’ I do.”

“Then why don’t you do something to stop it?” I ask. “Laying hands on a woman is never right. Not under any circumstances.”

“I agree with you. But it ain’t my place to get into it. No more than it’s yours,” he tells me. “Molly ain’t my business and she ain’t yours either.”

“Yeah. That was made pretty clear to me last night.”

“I’m just tryin’ to give you a friendly heads up,” he tells me. “Hammerhead’s havin’ some real issues with you laying down the law around here. So, he’s clinging to the only thing he can control right now—Molly.”

“Wouldn’t have to be down here at all if he weren’t fuckin’ up so bad.”

“Hey, you’re preachin’ to the choir,” he acknowledges. “As far as I’m concerned, I’m glad you’re here doing what you’re doing. The Howlers are on the verge of extinction but I’m hoping that with your... guidance... we can be back, as good as we ever were.”

“That’s what I’m hoping too. But I have my doubts.”

“So do I,” he nods. “I just want you to know... that thing you mentioned about being ready. I am. I hope like hell we never come to that point but if we do, then I’m ready to do what needs to be done. I’m not ready to give up on the club. This has been my home for damn near two decades. I don’t want to see it burned to the ground.”

I nod. “I appreciate that. We’ll see how things go.”

“Copy that.”

I climb onto my bike and fire it up. As I give her a moment to get warm, I strap on my helmet, my gloves, and my glasses, then ride out, leaving all the shit behind me. I hit a long stretch of blacktop and almost immediately feel my nerves beginning to calm the more I get away from that place. The endless vista of black ribbon in front of me soothes me. This is my form of

therapy. Before I can fully indulge in it though, I need to do something.

It's not long before I take the turnoff and head into Phoenix proper. I want to see some things for myself and without Hammerhead there annoying me. When I had him take me through the territory and show me the streets, I realized he only showed me what he wanted me to see. He showed me the bright spots, such as they were, and things that cast him in a better light. But I know there's more to the story, so I figure I'll check it out for myself.

I'm almost immediately hit by how little of a presence the Howlers actually have in the city. All around me, I see Deviants on their bikes and pass a few bars that even at this hour, are open and have a line of bikes out front—all of them flying Deviant colors. Here and there I see where somebody has spray-painted a Howler logo on a brick wall. What that accomplishes, I don't know. Tagging on the sides of buildings and brick walls seems more like kid stuff than what an MC should be doing.

I have to think it's these prospects Hammerhead keeps talking about that are supposedly coming into the fold soon. And if that's the case, I'm thinking he's going to have a really young core of prospects. That's not necessarily a bad thing if they're mature enough to handle their role in the club. If not, it's a recipe for disaster. The last thing the Howlers need is a bunch of kids riding with them who are only there for the clout and the image. They don't need kids who want to prove they're badasses living the outlaw life. They need solid recruits who can be counted on to do the right thing for their club.

I've seen enough. If this partnership is going to work, there is a hell of a lot more work that needs to be done than I'd originally thought. It makes me wonder if trying to salvage the Howlers at all would be worth it. As I ride out of the city proper and get back onto the highway, pointed toward the horizon with no destination in mind, I let my mind wander, trying to clear it of all the stresses and troubles behind me.

I'm less than ten miles from the city when I catch the glint of chrome behind me. I check my mirrors and groan.

"Son of a bitch," I mutter.

Ratchet pulls up on one side of me, one of his men on the other. I look over and Ratchet's staring back at me with a wide smile on his face. He gives me the head nod.

"Fancy meeting you here, Hawk," he shouts over the roar of our engines. Great. Just fucking great.

"Of all the gin joints in all the world," I shout back.

He points to a strip mall coming up on our side of the highway, indicating he wants to pull in and have a little chat. It's the last thing I want to do, but considering I'm effectively on his turf, there's not much I can do about it. I give him a thumbs up then goose the throttle. We pull into the strip mall and park our bikes. I dismount and peel off my helmet, then drop my gloves and glasses into it. I look around and count the civilians in the area. Not too many, but this still isn't the place I want to have a shootout.

I roll my shoulders and feel the comforting weight of the Sig Sauer in the holster at the small of my back. It'll be tough to get to it as fast as I might need to. I'm not exactly set up for a quick draw, but I can yank my Louisville Slugger from its sheath pretty fast. That might be enough to buy me some time.

"Relax, chief," he says as if reading my mind. "We're not here for that. I'm not even armed, man. See?"

I look and see that he doesn't have a gun on his hip. He lifts his cut to show me that he doesn't have one at his back either. Pretty gutsy to go out unarmed. But then, I look over at his VP, Deke, and see that he's got a distinctive bump on his hip beneath his cut—on both sides. I turn my eyes back to Ratchet.

"Not here for that, huh?"

"Nah. Not today. But never hurts to be prepared, right?" he asks with a grin, then turns to his man. "Deke, go get us a couple of those frozen mocha things."

"I'm good," I tell him.

He waves me off. "Conversations always go better with a wet whistle."

I laugh. "I usually like a little scotch for that."

"Hey, we're law-abiding citizens. There's no drinking and driving allowed around here," he replies with a grin.

"Right," I say.

Deke heads off, leaving me alone with Ratchet. We're leaning against our bikes out in the parking lot and a moment of silence stretches out between us. I look over at him and see him smiling at me. He already knows why I'm in town and he finds it amusing.

"So, what's this about, man?" I finally ask.

He runs a hand through his long dark hair and shakes it out like he's in a damn shampoo commercial. Ratchet's a tall, lean guy with a square jaw, that perfect amount of stylish stubble on his chin, green eyes, broad shoulders,

and high cheek bones. He's not overly muscular but he's fit. Strong. He's a man who looks like he takes good care of himself—a holdover from his days in the Marine Corps, no doubt.

It's almost hard to believe that someone who looks more like a male model could be involved in such abject cruelty, but it goes to show you can't always judge a book by its cover. He knows the Kings aren't huge fans of what he does, but the situation down here is too delicate for either side to risk openly moving against each other.

"Nice VP patch you got there," he starts. "Old Grim finally hang it up? Did he make Reaper Prez?"

"Somethin' like that." I don't want to tell him anything more than he needs to know. This trash doesn't deserve it.

"I take it you're in town to see how far the Howlers have fallen, huh?" he finally asks.

"I came here to talk to Hammerhead, yeah," I say noncommittally.

He chuckles. "That man used to be the meanest son of a bitch in Arizona. I'll be honest, the guy even made me nervous," he says. "But... times have changed."

"Time always changes things."

"Usually not that bad though."

I shrug. "He's not so far gone he can't come back from it."

Ratchet arches an eyebrow at me. "Are we talkin' about the same guy here? Big? Dopey looking? Has gotten really flabby and developed a nasty meth habit?"

"What do you want, Ratchet?"

"I want the business you're doing with the Howlers," he tells me. "I want to be your new keeper of the pipeline."

"And why would we do that?"

"Because Hammerhead's become an unreliable junkie," he says. "Because you're throwing money at him and your territory has only gotten... smaller. A lot smaller."

He gives me a menacing grin, letting me know he's taken large chunks of the city away from the Howlers. As if I didn't already know that on my own. Ratchet is an arrogant and annoying prick but he's a smart leader and he's efficient. He has the balls to come right up to me and challenge me like this, which means he's not afraid of the Kings. The man seems to want to openly provoke me into doing something reckless. I don't know what he's playing

at, but I don't like it.

"If you're taking the city back and taking over the distro corridor, why would you need us?" I point out. "Why not just run the whole territory on your own?"

He gives me a smirk. "You know why. You still control the supply in this area. They're loyal—trust me, I've tried to get them to stab you in the back," he says. "But no joy. They will only work with the Kings. Which means, if I want a call up to the big leagues, I need to work with the Kings. So it seems to me we're at an impasse. You need those lines open, and I've got the territory. We could make a great team."

There it is. And I can already figure out what he's really going for: he wants to tie a rope around the Kings and bring us down with him. We'd never recover if we started plunging our hands into the filth like he does. And then he'd use that as leverage over us to slowly cannibalize us from within, trying to push us out of our home.

Yeah, fat fucking chance. Not as long as I'm alive.

I purse my lips and look off into the distance, folding my arms over my chest. It's not surprising he tried to get the suppliers in the area to turn on me. The fact that they refused him makes me feel better about the situation down here. Not even the instability of Hammerhead and the Howlers has shaken their loyalty to the Kings. And that's a good thing. That gives me a few options to work with.

"Once I control all of Phoenix, we'll be branching out," Ratchet adds. "We'll own the entire southwest eventually."

"Careful that you don't let your reach exceed your grasp," I reply.

"Trust me, I've got a plan."

"Uh-huh," I say.

"The Howlers are a sinking ship, bro. They're making the Titanic look like a pleasure cruise," he says. "You sure you want to tie your business to them? To Hammerhead?"

"We're considering a few things," I tell him.

"Yeah? Such as?"

"The idea of patching over the Howlers and setting up a chapter down here has been floated," I offer.

It's a lie. The idea just occurred to me but putting it out there like that is worth it just for the look I see on Ratchet's face. He pales a bit and licks his lips nervously. The idea of running the Howlers to extinction is one thing.

The idea of having a full Kings charter down here is something else entirely. He knows he can't stand up against us and that all the gains he made at Hammerhead's expense could be lost in the blink of an eye. The prospect of a bloody turf war looms between us, and I can see that for all his shadowy manipulations, he doesn't have the stomach for an all-out conflict. Especially when he knows he'll lose.

He clears his throat and tries to regain his swagger. "Listen, if you want to throw out the trash and take us on as a partner, we'll cut you a sweet deal. We already have the distro network in place, and we can all make a lot of money."

"Or we can get rid of all of you and keep all the money for ourselves," I counter.

He shrugs. "I'll tell you now, we won't just roll over. You're in for a fight if you try to set up a chapter here," he insists. "Why waste the lives and money when we can work together? When we can all make a lot of cash. The pie's big enough for us all to have a big, fat slice."

He's not wrong. And even though the idea of setting up a chapter here seems legit to me, I don't know that Old Grim will go for it. It costs a lot to establish a chapter, plus you need to have men you can trust in place. It would thin out Vegas' ranks if we had to send some of the men we have to set up camp here. But it's a good bargaining tool to use against Ratchet.

"Tell you what, I'll take it back to our table and we'll talk about it," I say.

He arches an eyebrow. "You really gonna blow me off like that?"

I grit my teeth and narrow my eyes, my irritation flashing inside of me. "Don't question my integrity. Ever," I growl, my voice hard and low. "If I tell you I'm going to do something, I do it. You got it?"

He apparently sees that I mean what I say because he nods. "Yeah. I got it. You'll take it back to your table," he says. "That's cool. You know how to reach me."

I nod as Deke walks up and hands me a frozen mocha thing, then another to Ratchet. I shrug and take a drink.

"Damn. That is pretty good," I note.

"Told you."

"I'll be in touch." I won't be.

"I'll be waiting," he says.

I get back onto my bike and fire it up then take off, rumbling down the highway again. I ride along that endless ribbon of black until I find a spot on

a turnout that overlooks a particularly picturesque stretch of desert. In the distance, tall red rock mesas line the horizon, casting long shadows in the morning light. The scrubland between me and those mesas is dotted with color as wildflowers grow on bushes. The sun is gleaming off the red stones, making them seem especially vibrant, and the air is brimming with the scent of the wildflowers. It's peaceful and I can already feel my mind starting to ease as my stresses slowly ebb.

I climb off my bike and sit down on a flat rock at the far end of the turnout. I set the cup of the formerly frozen mocha thing on the ground at my feet and look out at the desert. Molly's note in my pocket feels like it's burning a hole in my chest. The weight of it in my cut is growing heavier. I know I should take out my lighter and burn it. I should tear it into a million pieces and scatter it to the winds when I'm cruising along the highway. I should do anything but what I'm already moving to do as if I don't have control of my own body.

Slipping the paper out of my pocket, I unfold it and read her words:

Hawk,

I know this is unexpected and totally improper. You were right when you told Hammerhead that I am not your business or your concern. I understand that business comes before anything. So believe me when I say I'll understand if you throw this note away or just ignore me for the rest of your time here. I won't hold it against you.

By now, you know that Hammerhead abuses me. I'm treated little better than a slave. Some of the things he does... I guess it doesn't matter. I'm mistreated and you know that. Hammerhead has become unstable. Unsteady. He's deep into drugs and is making bad decisions that have destroyed this club. He's driven some members away and has killed others for no real reason I can see other than they questioned him.

He's been doing things that have made me feel unsafe. I feel as if I'm in danger and I'm terrified all day, every day. I fear for my life from the moment I wake up to the time I go to sleep—not that I sleep all that much.

I know my problems aren't your problems. But I am begging you to help me. I need to get out of this place before he kills me. And I'm sure he will kill me at some point, Hawk. The question in my mind isn't if. It's when.

I would have escaped on my own but the windows in my room are locked. When they go out, they lock the doors from the outside, keeping me in. And I am never allowed to go anywhere on my own. I am watched at all times. Kept

in a cage like an animal.

Please, Hawk. I'm begging you to help me get out of here. To help me escape this captivity. This life is brutal, and it will one day kill me. I did not ask for this. I do not want this. I do not deserve it.

Please, if you can find it in your heart, help me. But if you decide that you can't, please believe me when I say I won't hold it against you. I understand that your business is important and I am not your problem.

~ Molly

“Nothing like sticking me with that dagger of guilt there at the end,” I mutter. “Jesus.”

I fold the note and slip it back into my pocket, her words bouncing around in my head wildly. All I can see is her face. Her smile. Her eyes. Then I remember seeing the fear in them. The terror. And it breaks my heart.

I know I shouldn't have anything to do with this. She's right. This is business and I'm here to see to it. Not her. Not matters of the heart. But I can't help it. My mind keeps going back to her face and the pain I saw in her eyes. And though I try to push it away, an idea starts to form in my mind.

“Don't be an idiot,” I tell myself.

But it's already too late. The plan is forming in my head, and I can't slow it down, let alone stop it.

I'm about to be an idiot.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



Molly

After Hawk left, I didn't know what to do with myself. I paced the kitchen. Sat in my room for a little while. Decided to take a shower and get dressed. And now I'm sitting in the kitchen again, listening to Hammerhead and the others lounging around in the main room of the clubhouse. They're shouting, yelling, and cheering raucously as they watch a football game. It makes me think back to the football games I went to back in high school and a sense of melancholy descends over me.

The way Hawk pointedly ignored me when he left earlier told me all I needed to know. After he'd left, I slipped into his room and looked around. My note was gone so I know he got it. The way he left told me that he's not going to help me. I knew it was a long shot when I wrote the note out last night. Longer than a long shot. But I had a faint flicker of hope as I wrote it and remembered the compassion I saw in his eyes. The kindness.

But that flicker's been extinguished now, leaving nothing but a cold, smoldering pit of ashes. I can honestly say I've never felt this low in my life. And given what I've endured since being abducted, that's saying something. But I let myself foolishly entertain the notion that somebody might help me, that I might have a way out of here.

But my hope is gone.

And now that my hope has been extinguished, all I feel is despair.

Heartbreak.

And complete, utter depression.

"Molly, get in here and bring us some beers!" Hammerhead calls out.

I sigh and fight back the tears that are welling in my eyes. He'll get pissed if he sees me crying. But I'm so depressed and so frustrated, I don't know

what else to do. The last thing I want to be doing right now is playing bar wench for these pigs. Especially when they're in the same room as the beer cooler. That pig is literally ten feet from the bar. All he has to do is stand his fat ass up and walk over to the cooler and get his own stinking beers. But no, holler at me to come serve them instead. Yeah, that makes sense.

"Molly! Now!" Hammerhead screams at me.

Wiping my eyes, I sniff back the tears and walk out into the main room. I avoid eye contact with any of them as I walk to the bar and pull six bottles out of the cooler and set them on a tray. I pop the tops off them, then carry the tray over to the tables where they're sitting, handing them all out.

"Grab us a couple bowls of peanuts too, while you're up," Hammerhead snaps.

The guys all stand up and cheer wildly, almost knocking over their full bottles. A couple of the empty ones do topple over and hit the ground, shattering on impact.

"Clean those up," Hammerhead orders.

Though he hasn't laid a hand on me since Hawk has been here, he's been more demanding than usual. He's been boorish and rude. Somehow he's been even more degrading than before, which is saying something.

"Hurry up!" he snaps.

Still fighting the tears, I set the tray down on an empty table and walk into the kitchen, grabbing the broom and a dustpan. As I sweep up the mess, I hear a motorcycle rumble into the parking lot and feel my heart drop into my stomach. Hammerhead mutters under his breath and all of a sudden, the mood in the main room changes. It becomes heavy and dark. It's coming from Hammerhead but the other guys are picking up on it and it's affecting their mood. The cheering for the game is more subdued. Less enthusiastic.

Hawk's footsteps sound on the porch and Hammerhead's face darkens almost instantly. The only one who doesn't seem bothered by it all is Hogwild.

"Fuck," Hammerhead mutters.

The door opens and Hawk steps in. Our eyes meet for a brief instant, sending an electric jolt through my heart. He turns and looks at the TV.

"Cards, Lions, huh?" he notes. "What's the score?"

Nobody says anything for a long moment, adding to the tension that's already filling the room. Hawk chuckles to himself.

"Twenty-one-seven. Cards are up," Hogwild finally answers. "You a

Cards fan?”

“Nah. Raiders, born and raised,” Hawk answers.

“Sorry to hear that,” Hogwild says with a chuckle. “Must be rough.”

“It can be. But we’re lookin’ good this season,” Hawk shrugs. “Gannon is lighting it up. Mark my words, Raiders are going to be in the Super Bowl in a year.”

Hogwild laughs. “I’ve got a hundred that says you’re high.”

“I’ll take that bet.”

Hawk smiles and heads for the bar. The game comes back on, and the guys, taking their cue from Hogwild, start getting into it again. The cheering, though still somewhat subdued, at least has a little more gusto to it. Except for Hammerhead, who’s still sitting there glowering at the TV, pouting like a child. As he passes me, Hawk gives me a meaningful look then lowers his eyes to his hand. I see a slip of paper poking out of his fist and feel my heart leap from my stomach up into my throat.

I finish sweeping up the broken glass, acting as if nothing out of the ordinary is happening, all the while I’m trying to keep myself from sprinting to the bar to see what Hawk’s note says. My heart is pounding so hard, I’m surprised they can’t hear it over the TV. But I somehow manage to control myself, though I glance over at Hawk. He’s looking back at me to make sure I’m seeing him slip his note under a rag. I glance around and nobody seems to be paying any attention, which is good.

Carrying the dustpan over to the trash can behind the bar, I pass Hawk, who doesn’t even glance at me. He’s playing it incredibly cool, and I feel like I’m on the verge of exploding. He sits down at one of the tables and starts to joke around with the guys as they watch the game.

The iciness that marked his entrance soon fades and even Hammerhead’s mood lightens. It’s not long before they’re all into the game, hollering, screaming, and talking crap to one another. It’s such a normal scene I’m watching. One I’m sure is playing out in countless living rooms around the country right now.

I casually pick up the rag and find his note. My hands trembling, my heart thundering, I open it and almost cry out when I read it.

Molly, we need to talk. Be at your window at midnight. I’ll unlock it and help you out. Midnight. And make use of these...

He’d managed to slip a pill bottle under the rag without me seeing him do it. He’s smooth. Lorazepam. Sleeping pills. Though he didn’t explicitly say

it, perhaps fearing somebody other than me would see his note, I get what he wants me to do. It brings a little smile to my face.

Finally, a little revenge.

Slipping the bottle into the pocket of my jeans, I walk through the main room and into the kitchen. It's only the second quarter so I'm sure they're going to be wanting food by halftime. I look in the refrigerator and the pantry, trying to figure out what I can make them. Of course, given the lack of groceries, there really is only one thing I can make.

"Spaghetti it is," I call out.

I put the pot of water on to boil then set about making the sauce. We've got a large jar of some garlic and herb sauce, so I use what vegetables we have, along with a chunk of Italian sausage to dress it up a little bit. Once I mix everything together, I look to the doorway. Nobody's there and they're all still screaming in the main room, so I make my move. Grabbing a meat tenderizer, I shake the pills out of the bottle onto the cutting board and crush them all up, making sure it's a fine powder. Once it is, I scrape it all into the sauce and stir vigorously, blending all the Lorazepam into it.

I honestly don't know anything about dosages, so I just hope I don't accidentally kill somebody. Except for Hammerhead. I wouldn't mind seeing him OD on my special batch of spaghetti sauce. Once the noodles are done, I drain them and use the colander to shake off as much of the moisture as I can. After that, I dump all the pasta into the pot of sauce and mix it all up really well, humming a happy tune to myself as I do.

Since plates are in such short supply right now, I grab half a dozen bowls from the shelf, forks from the drawer, and a stack of paper napkins. I grab a bag of garlic rolls then carry that all out to the main room and set it all down on one of the empty tables. After that, I return to the kitchen to grab the pan of spaghetti and some tongs, then take that all out too. I set the pan down just as the second half ends and the halftime show comes on.

"Perfect timing," Hogwild says with a grin.

"About fuckin' time," Hammerhead mutters.

I catch Hawk's eye and give him a subtle shake of the head, silently telling him to not eat the pasta. He turns back to the TV, his demeanor icy, and takes a long swallow of his beer. The guys all get up and dig in, Hammerhead dishing up the first bowl, of course. I stand there watching them eat like an idiot, simultaneously terrified and amused.

"Ain't you gonna eat, Hawk?" Hammerhead asks around a mouthful of

food.

“Nah. I’m good,” he shakes his head. “I ate when I was out.”

Hammerhead turns to me, chewing with his mouth open and sauce all over his chin. He swallows, then takes a piece of a roll and wipes the sauce off his face and stuffs it into his mouth.

“Why are you standin’ there like an idiot?” he asks. “You need somethin’?”

I shake my head, his voice breaking the paralysis that had gripped me. “No. Nothing.”

“Gimme another beer,” he growls.

“I’ll get another round,” I tell him, and turn on my heel back to the cooler. The bottle of pills said in very bold letters, “Warning: do not mix with alcohol.” I sure would hate for the guys to feel some really horrible side effects tonight. So I happily crack open another round of beers and pass them out.

“Here you go,” I tell him as I hand him his drink. He looks down at the bottle and back up at me.

“You can go,” he grunts. “I’ll call you when it’s time to clean up.”

I turn and walk out of the room without another word, trying to hide my smile. I’m practically skipping down the hallway, barely able to contain my laughter. Stepping into my bedroom, I close the door and wedge the piece of wood underneath it to keep it shut. I jump onto my bed and bury my face in my pillow, laughing like a maniac into it. It feels good to finally let it all out. And when my laughter finally dries up, I feel my heart swelling. That spark of hope I thought was cold and dead suddenly has burst to life once again.

I don’t know what’s going through Hawk’s mind, but I have a feeling he’s going to help me. At least, I hope that’s what’s happening here. I can’t see him having me drug the club if he wasn’t going to help get me out of here. Hawk’s note breathed new life into that spark, building it into a small flame. And I’m hoping at midnight, Hawk will tell me something that will turn that flame into a roaring fire.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



It's just about midnight and all the guys are already out. Hammerhead managed to stumble back to his own room, but the rest of the guys basically conked out where they sat. Jammer made it over to the couch and crashed. Deadbolt and Hogwild claimed the other two rooms in the clubhouse. And two guys I'm not familiar with just laid down on the floor and went to sleep. The Cards won, and I kept the drinks flowing all night knowing the combination of alcohol and medicine is absolutely going to fuck them up. I have no doubt they're going to feel like shit come morning and it makes me smile.

With everybody asleep, I know this is my chance, so I slip out the side door and make my way around to Molly's window in the back. I knock softly on it, and she quickly pulls back the ratty old curtain, a wide smile on her face. For a second I feel like I'm in some teenage romantic comedy. Like she's the girl next door and I'm standing outside her window. I definitely can't blast a boom box though.

There's a latch lock on the outside of the window, keeping her from opening it from the inside. It makes me sick and all I can do is shake my head as I unlatch it. She quietly slides the window up and climbs out. Reaching up, I help her down, setting her on her feet in front of me.

"Where can we go to talk?" I ask.

She grins and takes my hand, leading me through the darkness. At the far end of the lot is a storage shed. Molly leads me around behind it to a park bench that's butted up against the shed. There are empty bottles, cigarette butts, and all manner of debris back here. We step up onto the seat then sit down, side by side, on the bench. I look around at the garbage that surrounds

us and frown.

“What a dump,” I comment.

She laughs softly. “I used to try to keep it clean, but it never stays that way very long,” she says. “These guys are pigs.”

“I’ve noticed.”

“This is where I come for my yard time... when I’m allowed out of the house.”

“That is depressing.”

She shrugs. “During the day, it’s beautiful, I think. Granted, I’d rather be able to go new places and see new things,” she tells me, her voice thick with sadness. “But, when you’re in the position I’m in, beggars can’t be choosers.”

I look out across the land in front of us. It’s a clear but cold night and I pull my jacket around myself a little tighter. The moon rains down, casting a silvery radiance over the world, highlighting some areas while leaving others in thick pockets of shadow. Somewhere out there, a coyote howls a long, plaintive note. It makes me wonder how many times Molly has heard that same coyote sing that same lonely song and found herself relating to it.

In the distance, I can see craggy peaks and tall mesas I’m sure are that same vibrant red as the land I was looking at earlier today. It is beautiful, I can’t deny that. The desert has always brought me peace. But the fact that this is all she gets to see makes me sad for her.

“Where would you go?” I ask. “If you were given a choice and could go see something new. What would it be?”

“The ocean,” she says without hesitation.

I nod. “Good call,” I nod. “What’s your second choice?”

“A museum.”

I laugh softly. “You’ve given this some thought.”

She frowns. “When you’re locked inside a house all day, all you can do is think about things like that.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s not your fault.”

“No, but I’m sorry you have to live this way.”

“Thanks. Me too.”

There is so much I want to know. So many questions I have for her. But I know our time is limited so I have to keep it short. Well, shorter than I’d like. Now that I’m out here with her, sitting beside her, I find that I don’t want this moment to end. I want to stay here with her all night and learn her most

intimate secrets. There isn't anything I don't want to know about her. I know I need to confine my questioning to the most pertinent things tonight, though.

"How did you end up here?" I ask.

"That's a long story."

"Give me the condensed version."

She sighs and the look of sadness on her face is so poignant, it hurts me to see. Molly looks as if she's seeing back through time, looking at her life and all the roads that led her here. Maybe it was the wrong guy. Or maybe it was a string of bad decisions. Whatever it was, I can see that it's haunting her.

"I was abducted. Shortly after I graduated from high school," she admits quietly. "I was trafficked. I spent a year or so being passed from buyer to buyer, each one of them moving me further and further west. Eventually, I was given to Hammerhead. A peace offering."

"Jesus," I whisper.

"Yeah, I stopped believing in him a long time ago," she says. "If he were real, I can't believe he'd let me suffer through this."

That was the last thing I would have guessed, and it leaves me completely dumbfounded. It's such a horrific story that I look at her and don't know what to say. She seems to pick up on that because she laughs quietly.

"Don't worry. I wouldn't have the first clue what to say to that either," she tells me.

"How have you managed to... to... I don't even know how to phrase it," I say. "I mean, you still seem so balanced. So... normal."

She shakes her head. "I don't know. I've just held onto small pieces of myself," she says. "This... what I've endured... am enduring... it's something that's happened to me. It's not who I am. The things I've been forced to do... I'm more than that."

"Yeah, but... how?"

"Hope," she says simply. "Somehow, I've been able to hang onto hope. Hope that one day, I'll be free of all this. Free to get back to my life. I mean, I know nothing will ever be the same. I know that I'm going to be different forever. But that doesn't mean I can't be who I used to be. More or less."

I shake my head, marveling at her. To go through what she's gone through and to still be able to hold on to hope—on to herself—it's simply incredible.

"The strength to do what you've done is unreal," I say. "I can't even imagine the resilience it would take to not let this destroy you. I'm in awe,

Molly. I mean that.”

Even in the dim lighting, I can tell she’s blushing. She looks down at her hands and doesn’t speak for a long moment. She’s obviously not good at receiving compliments. Not that she’s heard all that many over the last few years, I’m sure. I have a feeling, though, she was like that well before her abduction. She doesn’t seem like the sort of woman who goes out of her way seeking praise or glorification. In fact, she seems the type who’d run away from it.

“I don’t think it’s necessarily a matter of strength,” she says softly. “It’s just a matter of not wanting these bastards to win. If they break me, if I let my circumstances beat me down and break me, they win. I lose. And I refuse to lose. That is not an option for me.”

I’m still awed by her. To be honest, in her place, I don’t know that I’d have the strength she does. I don’t know that I would be able to have her attitude and not let my circumstance beat me down and break me.

“I know that eventually, they’re going to wear me down. Eventually, they’re going to break me,” she says, her voice barely more than a whisper. “I’m not saying that to freak you out or make you feel bad. It’s just fact. Even the strongest rock is eventually worn down by the river that flows around it.”

I give her a smile. “Did you read that in a fortune cookie?”

“Nah,” she replies, returning my smile. “A book on Eastern philosophy.”

“Wow. Look at you droppin’ knowledge on me,” I chuckle.

“I read a lot. Always have,” she tells me.

“Still do?”

She nods. “Hogwild brings me books,” she replies. “He’s the only one in this place who’s ever treated me like an actual human being.”

“He seems like a decent guy.”

“I think he is,” she replies. “Except for the fact that I’m getting the idea that he has plans of his own in motion.”

I cock my head and look at her. “What sort of plans?”

“It’s just a guess but I’m thinking he believes he’s going to be replacing Hammerhead sooner, rather than later. And he thinks everything’s going to be the same and nothing’s going to change. Like I come with the president’s patch or something.”

“That’s sick,” I frown. Typical. The one half-decent guy down here still turns out to be a waste.

She nods. “Yeah. It really is.”

“I put the idea that he’d be the club’s new Prez in his head. Hammerhead’s unreliable and I don’t know that he can fix his issues,” I admit. “But I never said anything about you being part of the deal.”

“No, he won’t. He’s too deep into drugs,” she says. “I guarantee you that once you leave here, he’s going straight back on the meth.”

“Yeah, I was a little worried about that. I wanted to put him on stable footing though. I wanted to at least give it my honest best shot,” I tell her. “But I think deep down, I know he’s going to fail. He’s going straight back on the pipe. Still. This is me giving him every opportunity to come correct.”

“I’d like to say there’s a chance he’ll surprise you. But there’s not,” she says.

“No, you’re probably right.”

We lapse into silence for a few moments, both of us staring out into the cold beauty of the desert. There are so many things running through my head that I don’t know where to stop and start sorting them all out. And this is just the tip of the iceberg. I know there is so much more below the surface, and I want to know it all.

“Where is your family?” I ask.

She shakes her head. “I don’t know. It was just me and my parents growing up. We lived in the same house my whole life,” she tells me. “But I don’t know where they are now. I tried calling them once when I stole a phone, but they were gone. The home I grew up in is owned by somebody else now and I have no idea where they went. As far as I know, I’m all alone in the world now.”

“Christ, you’ve had a hard fuckin’ road,” I mutter.

“It hasn’t been easy.”

“You are a remarkable woman, Molly Sanders.”

She shrugs. “I’m just me,” she says. “What about you though? You don’t sound like the typical biker to me.”

I laugh. “And what does the typical biker sound like?”

“Not very intelligent,” she explains. “Really coarse language—”

“Hey, I cuss. I cuss with the fuckin’ best of ‘em.”

She gives me a smile. “Yeah, but you actually sound educated. Not like most of the cretins around here.”

“I used to be a pretty alright student, believe it or not.”

“I believe it,” she says. “How’d you end up with a club and not in college?”

“My dad passed when I was a teenager.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. Man was a waste of fuckin’ space. About the only good thing he ever did for me was give me a shitty old bike I had to learn to fix up. Mom wasn’t around, and suddenly it was just me and my little sister. I had to take a job at a garage to pay the bills, and the fuckin’ minute Trixie turned eighteen we got the hell out of Dodge. Eventually, we found our way to Vegas and I hooked up with the Ruthless Kings. Been riding ever since.”

“That sounds like it must have been tough for you,” she says.

I level her with a raised eyebrow. “Come on, Molly. That ain’t shit compared to what you’ve gone through.”

“It’s still tough, though. Takes the same kind of strength.”

“I laugh. “I still don’t agree, but that’s beside the point.”

We lapse into silence once more but it’s comfortable. Companionable. Sitting here with her feels so natural to me. It just feels right. It’s bizarre, I know. We barely know each other so I have no idea where this comfort is coming from. But I don’t want to question it. I just want to enjoy it. Enjoy her.

Molly finally turns and looks at me again. “Hawk, I want to ask you—”

“Of course I’m going to help you,” I cut her off. “I’m definitely not leaving you in that guy’s hands.”

She smiles wide and I see the glimmer of hope in her eyes flare to life. “You’re taking me out of here?”

I nod. “I am. You’ve endured enough and your suffering needs to stop.”

“Thank you, Hawk.”

“It’s not going to be easy. And I can’t promise you we won’t fail. But I’m going to do everything in my power to make sure you never have to endure this life instead.”

The moonlight glints off the tears shimmering in her eyes and a look of sheer gratitude crosses her face.

It only makes what I’m about to say feel even worse.

“But first I need to go back to Vegas. I need to fill my Prez in on everything happening down here,” I tell her. “I need to...”

I let my voice trail off as I see the look of horror on her face. She shakes her head.

“No, please,” she says. “You can’t leave. If you do, Hammerhead is going to kill me.”

“Molly.”

“Please. Can’t you just call and tell him?” she pleads. “I really don’t want to be here alone with him.”

I’m torn. I need to tell Reaper and Old Grim what’s happening and what I’m planning to do. Like it or not, I need their blessing. Not that I wouldn’t still do it even without them giving me the green light. Molly needs to get out of here. She needs to get out from under Hammerhead’s thumb, by force if necessary.

And that’s what I intend to do whether my club approves or not. I know it will touch off a war with the Howlers and we’ll need to find a new distro network and enforcers, but that’s a bridge I’ll cross when I come to it.

Right now, my only priority is to get Molly out of this hellhole. I know it’s going against everything I said when I got here. I know it’s bad business to do what I’m doing—taking a Prez’s ol’ lady. But I can’t abide what she’s enduring. I can’t sit back and do nothing while she’s being beaten and treated like she’s not even human. Like the only things she’s good for are slave labor and pleasure. It’s wrong. On every fucking level it’s wrong. I can’t see this and do nothing.

I have to believe that Old Grim is going to understand and give me the green light to do what I want. He can be a bastard, but he’s not a heartless prick. When I tell him what’s been happening here, he’ll understand. He’ll approve. And if not, he’ll take my patch. That’ll hurt like a bitch but I can’t say it still wouldn’t be worth it, knowing Molly is free and out from under Hammerhead’s boot.

I look at her and nod. “All right. I’ll make some calls and get this thing in motion,” I tell her. “Everything’s going to be okay.”

The look of relief on her face is instant and that smile I’ve come to adore returns. Her eyes are still shimmering with tears, but this time I get the idea they’re tears of joy as she realizes her hopes are being fulfilled. That she’s being rewarded for being able to hold onto them.

“We should get you back,” I tell her. “Here, take this.”

I hand her a small plastic baggie with a fine brown powder in it. She takes it from me and holds it up, looking at the contents.

“What is it?” she asks.

“Part of the plan,” I explain. “Make breakfast for Hammerhead tomorrow and sprinkle this all over the food. Make sure to mix it in well.”

She looks at me with a devious grin. “Where did you get all this stuff? I

mean, the Lorazepam and now... whatever this is?"

"After I read your note yesterday, I had a long time to think. To put a plan together," I tell her. "But to make it work, I needed some supplies. So I got them."

Her eyes are filled with gratitude, and she looks like she's about to cry. I give her a gentle smile and softly stroke her hair.

"Everything's going to be okay," I tell her. "Trust me."

"I—I do trust you."

She says those words as if they're unfamiliar to her. As if she hasn't told anybody she trusts them in a long time. She probably hasn't. I'm glad she's decided she can trust me though. Sitting there with her, I have the almost overwhelming urge to kiss her. I manage to restrain myself. This isn't the right time. I don't want her to think I'm only doing this because I want to fuck her or something.

"Let's get you back now," I say.

She nods and together, we walk back to her window. I reluctantly lift her up and help her through it. But Molly turns around and leans out, planting a soft kiss on my cheek. It's tender and sweet, and her lips on me make my skin tingle. I've never had a reaction like this to any woman before. It's confusing and makes my head spin... but in the best way possible.

"Thank you," she whispers.

"Don't thank me until this is over."

She gives me a crooked grin. "I'll thank you whenever I damn well please."

I laugh softly. "Well then, in that case, you're welcome."

Molly smiles as she closes the window. I relatch it, locking her inside, and hating myself for doing so. I know I have to, otherwise we're both going to be in deep shit when it's found unlocked. But I still hate the idea of locking her in. She smiles and waves at me once more then closes the curtains, leaving me standing there, pondering everything that just happened. And everything that's going to happen.

For better or for worse, things are in motion. There's no stopping this train now that it's rolling.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



Molly

When I hear some of the guys start moving around, I know it's time for me to get up. Not that I've slept at all. How could I? I've been too wired since spending time with Hawk last night. It's not just that he promised to help get me out of here that has me all wound up, it was just being near him. Sitting beside him last night made me feel a sense of calm and peace I haven't known since I was taken. I feel so safe around him.

Those are strange words. Words and thoughts I've neither had nor spoken in a very long time. Nobody has made me feel safe in so long that I often wondered if I ever would again. But almost from the start, Hawk has made me feel that way. He's shown me that I can trust him—another thing I haven't felt in ages.

As I look back on it, I see how sad and depressing it is. There hasn't been a single person in my life since I was taken who's ever made me feel as I could trust them or made me feel safe. Not even Hogwild. He's been good to me, don't get me wrong. He's treated me like a human being. Sometimes. But I've always suspected there was some ulterior motive. That he wants something from me. And when he subtly suggested that I become his ol' lady if and when he takes control of the club from Hammerhead, it told me exactly what his game was.

That's why I never openly trusted him. Why I've always held back. I pretended that I did. I realize now that all the buttering up he was doing was just to lower my defenses. He just wanted the same thing Hammerhead wanted, and what all those men before him wanted. They all wanted to use me for their own purposes. They didn't actually view me as a human being but just as something to be used for their pleasure. Hogwild hasn't been as

overt about it, nor has he been cruel. But I can always tell in the little moments. He'll make a show of being a gentleman, but he won't actually do anything to help more than the bare minimum. He'll paint himself as such a better guy than Hammerhead, but he's more like a wolf in sheep's clothing

Hawk, though... he's different. I've felt as if I could trust him from the start. I will never understand why but I've felt a connection to him I haven't felt to anybody before in all my life. Not even before I was taken. There is just something about him that breaks down the walls inside of me. There's something about him that makes me want to let him in and tells me that it's okay to do so.

He could have easily leveraged this situation to his advantage. He could have demanded sex for his help getting me out of here. Most guys—at least the ones I've been exposed to—would have demanded a blowjob or something for even considering helping me. Which says a lot about the men I've had to deal with in my life.

But not Hawk. He hasn't asked anything of me. He's only ever spoken about how terrible he feels for what I've gone through. He doesn't talk about rescuing me because he wants me. Just because he'd be doing the right thing. He seems genuinely worried for me and his desire to help me comes not from a place where he thinks it'll benefit him. It comes from his heart. From his compassion and his kindness. I think he's helping me because he believes it's the right thing to do and nothing more than that.

That's why I've opened up to him. Why I took the gamble of slipping him that note in the first place. I believed, deep down in my heart, that he was never going to betray me to Hammerhead. I believed he would look out for me, even if he decided that he couldn't help me. It scared the crap out of me, don't get me wrong. But I thought it was worth it.

And I was right. Yeah, I may have laid on the guilt a little thick, but he seems to understand why I did it. I mean, this is my life we're talking about, and I don't feel bad for using a little manipulation and a heavy guilt trip to save it. I'm pretty sure nobody else in my place would either. If they say they do, they're lying.

When you're in a situation like I am, and you have one shot to get out, you're going to do whatever you have to do to make that a reality. You will lie, beg, manipulate, and probably even kill to get out of the sort of hell I've endured for so long. You'll do things you never imagined yourself capable of doing. Things you may come to regret later, but you can at least take comfort

in knowing that you will have a later in which to regret those things.

Right now, though, I don't regret a thing. I've been honest with Hawk. It doesn't even really count as guilt-tripping someone when it's true. I can tell Hawk respects me as a human being, for fighting instead of just rolling over waiting to die. It's obvious in the way he talks to me but especially in the way he looks at me. I can see it in his eyes.

With a sigh, I push myself out of bed and put on my jeans and a black t-shirt, then my thick socks and tennis shoes. It's chilly this morning so I pull a black hoodie over me then pull my hair back into its usual ponytail. That done, I head out of my room and into the kitchen. I hear some of the guys in the main room speaking to each other in slow, slurred words. They sound like guys with the worst hangover ever who are trying to piece together what happened the night before.

Smiling to myself, I put on a pot of coffee then scrounge through the cabinets and refrigerator, looking for something to put together for breakfast. I strike gold when I find a couple packets of instant gravy in the pantry and a couple tubes of biscuits in the back of the refrigerator. Don't know how old they are or if they're past their expiration date, and I don't really care. In their condition, they're probably not going to notice anyway. I set about making breakfast, humming a tune, the weight of the plastic baggie Hawk gave me sending an electric charge through me.

A few minutes later, Hawk enters the kitchen and gives me a knowing glance. Hammerhead is right behind him. I pour them both a cup of coffee and secretly dash a little bit of the powder Hawk gave me into Hammerhead's mug, then cover it with sugar and creamer, fixing it the way he likes. I turn and hand it to him. He snatches it from me without so much as a thank you. Hawk takes a sip of his own coffee—that he poured himself—and is trying to suppress his smile. Hammerhead takes a long swallow and grimaces.

"This tastes like shit," he mutters then looks up at me. "How can you fuck up coffee?"

I shrug. "I didn't do anything different. It's the same way I always make it."

He frowns and looks down into his mug and I feel a white-hot bolt of fear that he'll see some of the poison or whatever is in that baggie floating on the surface of the dark brew. He doesn't say anything and takes another drink. I blow out a silent breath of relief as I turn back to the stove and stir the gravy.

"I feel like shit this morning," Hammerhead mutters.

“You were hittin’ it pretty hard last night,” Hawk tells him.

“Was I?”

“Yep,” Hawk confirms. “You don’t remember? Cards won. We practically had a rager.”

I look at him from the corner of my eye and see the confusion on Hammerhead’s face. He’s trying to recall what happened last night but can’t seem to make the connections. I can see the frustration on his face as he struggles with his memory and it makes me want to laugh. Somehow, through a Herculean act of sheer will, I manage to keep myself in check. Hammerhead drains his cup of coffee then pours another himself.

“You all right?” Hawk asks.

“Fine. I’m good,” Hammerhead replies. But he’s looking clammy and his eyes are sunken—even more than usual

I listen to them talking about mundane things—last night’s game, whose team is better, all the usual bullshit male banter. Hammerhead can’t hear the patronizing tone in Hawk’s voice, but I can. He’s humoring him. Hawk doesn’t give a damn about sports. He may like them, but he doesn’t live them the way Hammerhead and the Howlers do. Hawk is just passing the time, waiting for me to dose Hammerhead with whatever is in this plastic bag. I can see in his eyes that he’s got something up his sleeve and I’m just waiting for him to play his cards.

With Hawk distracting him, I drop a couple of biscuits onto a plate then layer the gravy over them. I glance behind me and see that Hammerhead has his back to me, so I pull the baggie out of my pocket and dump it onto the gravy, stirring it with my finger. I avoid licking my finger—though just barely. Instead, I wash it off under the sink. I glance at Hawk over Hammerhead’s shoulder and nod then walk over and hand him the plate. Hammerhead takes it from me and frowns.

“No fuckin’ bacon or sausage?” he growls.

“We didn’t have any in the refrigerator,” I reply. “And it’s not like I can run down to the store and pick some up, now, can I?”

He glares at me and mutters under his breath then walks out of the kitchen. I then hand a plate that hasn’t been laced with whatever was in that baggie to Hawk and send him on his way with a big smile. The rest of the food, I bring out and set down on the table where the spaghetti had been last night. Unlike last night, though, there isn’t a stampede to get to it.

All the guys are sitting around, most of them looking like something dead

on the side of the road. They're all groaning and looking miserable. Hogwild has a bag of frozen peas held to his head and looks a little green around the gills himself. They all look like they might throw up and the sight of the food I brought out only seems to make that worse.

Hammerhead and Hawk take a seat at a table near the back, eating and talking in low tones. I can see in real time that Hammerhead is already starting to feel bad. Not wanting to miss the show, I start dishing up the biscuits and gravy then handing them out to the guys. Most of them look at the plate like I'd just handed them a heaping helping of rat poison. Jammer actually gets up and sprints for the bathroom, retching the entire way. It's getting harder for me to keep from laughing as I edge closer to the table where Hammerhead is sitting.

"I'm telling you, man, you look like shit," Hawk says. "You look like you're getting worse by the minute."

"Didn't know you cared, Hawk."

Hammerhead shovels a big helping of gravy-soaked biscuit into his mouth and chews loudly, smacking his food, which totally grosses me out. But as long as he keeps devouring the food and our secret little ingredient, I don't care. Hammerhead is sweating now and seems to be having trouble keeping his focus.

"It's not that I care. I don't even really like you," Hawk replies. "But from a business standpoint, I've got a vested interest."

"Yeah, whatever."

"Dude, you're comin' down off a nasty addiction. You're going through withdrawal. Obviously," Hawk presses. "Going cold turkey like this... it's dangerous. It can fuck with your heart, man."

A bitter laugh bursts from Hammerhead's mouth and he points to me. "Ask the bitch over there if I have a heart or not," he says, glaring at me. "By the way, this tastes like shit too. Did you forget how to cook or somethin'?"

I open my mouth but when I see Hawk give me a subtle shake of the head, I let the scathing reply I was about to unleash die on my lips.

"I'm sorry," I tell him instead. "I'll do better next time."

"Yeah, you better."

Hammerhead turns back to his plate and finishes the last of it. He's pale and the sweat is pouring off him in sheets. He sways in his seat and looks like he's about to fall out of it when Hawk jumps up to steady him.

"Hammerhead, you all right, man?"

“I don’t feel so good,” he croaks. “My fuckin’ heart feels like it’s about to explode.”

“Christ,” Hawk mutters, playing the part perfectly. “Hogwild. Hogwild, get over here!”

Moving as quickly as he can, Hogwild gets out of his chair and comes over. He instantly blanches when he sees Hammerhead’s condition and looks up at Hawk, as if he has no idea what to do. Hawk looks back at him. I step off to the side, pressing my back against the wall beside the bar, watching everything unfold. I’m doing my best to keep from smiling, but it’s tough. All I want to do is cheer and shout for joy—but I think it might be a little obvious I had something to do with this if I went nuts like that.

“Do you guys have a van? A car? Something?” Hawk demands.

“Yeah, yeah,” he replies. “We’ve got a van.”

“Get it. Pull it around front,” Hawk orders. “You have got to take him to the hospital.”

Hammerhead shakes his head. “No. No hospital.”

“Dude, if you don’t go to the hospital right now, you’re gonna die,” Hawk tells him. “Is that what you want? You want to die on the nasty-ass floor of this clubhouse?”

“No,” he gasps.

“I tried to warn you about going cold turkey, man. I told you it was dangerous,” Hawk continues. “Tried to tell you what it can do to you—”

“Save the lecture,” Hammerhead wheezes. “Get me to a hospital.”

“Now you’re thinking clearly,” Hawk says then looks up at Hogwild. “Van. Now. Go!”

The VP jumps up and runs across the clubhouse, banging through the side door. A moment later, I hear the sound of the van trying to start. Its condition is as bad as the clubhouse, and it hasn’t been properly serviced in a while, so it’s no wonder Hogwild is having trouble getting it to turn over. I catch Hawk’s eye and he gives me a faint smile. He’s calm and collected, as if everything is playing out just as he’d thought it would. That sends a surge of excitement flowing through my veins, making me feel like I’m on fire inside.

The van finally roars to life and pulls up in front of the clubhouse. Hawk helps get Hammerhead on his feet. Jammer gets one of his meaty arms around his shoulders and Hawk takes the other side. Together, they walk him out of the clubhouse and into the van. The others are gathered around, watching. I notice that nobody seems especially concerned whether he comes

back alive or not. Nobody except for Deadbolt anyway. He's on the edge of his seat and looks as if he's wondering if all the stroking and sucking up he did to get on Hammerhead's good side will now be all for naught.

The van roars away and Hawk steps back into the clubhouse, followed by Jammer. Hogwild must have been the one driving. Everybody is looking around at each other, nobody seeming to know what to do, say, or think. I personally don't think many people would miss Hammerhead if he were to die. At least I'd have that in common with them. What the guys seem to be more concerned with is what happens to the club if he kicks off?

The logical answer is that Hogwild takes over. I think everybody seems to know that and judging by the look on their faces, they're debating whether or not they can live with that. I've always thought Hogwild was well-respected by the guys but the looks on everybody's faces make me think I've been wrong. Maybe. It could also be that everyone else is deciding whether or not they want to try for the President's chair.

I don't really give a shit about what they're thinking, though. Not anymore. Because when I look at Hawk, I see an expression of calm, icy determination. His face tells me that his plan is coming together just as he'd laid it out. All we have to do now is wait for the next piece to fall into place.

I don't know what it is, or what's going to happen.

But I can hardly wait.

CHAPTER NINETEEN



Everything is going according to plan so far. Molly got the drugs into Hammerhead's food and as predicted, he finished every last bit of it, causing him to feel ill. I'm not a pharmacist so I can't say whether or not I gave him too much. It's entirely possible I did and he's going to die as a result. I don't think the world would miss him. In fact, it would probably be a better place. It would also make the fallout of all this a lot less messy. Not that I'm afraid of a little mess. But I would actually like this to go smoothly and cleanly.

Although, given what the second part of the plan is, I don't know if hoping things go smoothly and cleanly is wise. That might just be setting myself up to be disappointed. It is a good plan, though. I'm kind of proud of myself for thinking it up on the fly like I did. It's got some holes and we're going to need a lot of luck to pull it off, but I still think it's going to work. It would just be a lot easier if Hammerhead croaked.

Molly walks into the kitchen with a bunch of dishes. I look at her and she gives me a nod—nobody's coming. Perfect.

"All the guys are still feeling like crap and are laying around in the main room," she tells me quietly as she's setting the dishes down in the sink. "I don't see anybody getting up and walking in on us. Besides, we'll probably hear them coming."

"That's good. Let's hope not," I nod. "Everything is going well so far."

"What was in that baggie?" she asks. "What did we give him?"

"A pretty heavy dose of arsenic," I tell her.

"Is he going to die?"

I shrug. "He might."

“I hope he does.”

I give her a smile. “I don’t blame you.”

We stand there looking at each other for a moment. I still can’t believe this is happening and that I’m doing this. But as I look into her eyes and feel my heart flutter, I know it’s the right thing to do. It’s not because she’s the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen, with a fire in her like no other. I keep telling myself that.

But that isn’t what this is about. I refuse to be just another man who wants to take advantage of her. I have no illusions about she and I getting together after this. Once she’s free, she’s free. She doesn’t owe me anything and can go start her life wherever she pleases. All I want is to get her out of here. Out of this situation. I want her to have her life back. She deserves that. She deserves more than I can give her, to be honest. But I’m doing what I can for her.

I would love for nothing more than for her to be with me when all the dust settles. There is a connection between us I’ve never felt for anybody before, and though we still barely know each other, I can tell already that she’s special. Something about her draws me to her and doesn’t want to ever let her go. But that would never be fair to her. She’s got to want to be with me. I’ll never take advantage of Molly or hold her captive the way Hammerhead did—not even emotionally.

I can’t ever make her feel like she owes me for helping her escape. I would never do that to her. I would never emotionally manipulate her that way. That would make me as big a piece of shit as Hammerhead and all the men who came before him. What has been done to Molly is monstrous. And that’s going to end just as soon as we’re out of here. She will never be kept in a cage again, not physically, not mentally, and not emotionally. When we walk out that door, Molly is free to do with her life as she sees fit.

Of course, that doesn’t mean I can’t hope she swings my way. That doesn’t mean I can’t hope that she’ll choose to ride with me. Looking into her eyes brings me back to the conversation I had with Reaper the morning I rode out here. That longing for something more I’d talked about. That feeling that I want more out of life than what I have right now. When I look at Molly, I feel all those boxes in my head being checked. It feels like when those feelings and longings for more in my life were at their highest point, fate stepped in and threw Molly in my path to show me: yes, I can have more.

It’s beyond insane. I know this. We don’t know each other and only met a

few days ago. How could I have gone my whole life never knowing the feelings that are rampaging through me right now, but then start having them for a woman I've known less than a week? Insane isn't even a strong enough word.

But then I think maybe it's because I haven't ever had feelings like this for anybody in my life, certainly not this strongly and not this deeply, that tells me maybe it's right. Maybe I should stand up and pay attention because the universe is obviously slapping me upside the head.

I've lived my life trusting my instincts. My gut kept me safe when I was raising my sister on my own, has kept me safe living this crazy, dangerous life I'm living, and has never led me astray. There is nobody on this planet I trust more than my gut.

But doesn't my heart play a role in that too? Isn't my heart part of the instinctual process that's kept me safe all these years? Doesn't my heart help inform my gut? And if so, doesn't my heart deserve to be heard? Shouldn't I trust it every bit as much as I trust the fire in my belly?

Or am I simply rationalizing things? Am I just attracted to Molly in ways I haven't been attracted to anybody before, and so just putting more emphasis on those feelings than I normally would? I've had a few relationships that started off strong. They made me think, okay, there might be something there. But every time, those feelings faded. Usually pretty quickly, too. Granted, what I feel for Molly is a hell of a lot stronger than anything I felt for any of the others. But that's not a guarantee that it won't fade in time too.

But then, what in life is ever guaranteed? Not even tomorrow is guaranteed to us. All I know right now is that Molly is making me feel things I've never felt before. Those feelings are making me do something I've never considered doing before: breaking one of the unwritten laws that govern the MC world. Okay, to be fair, I'm breaking at least a dozen of them I can think of off the top of my head. Maybe more.

But the heart wants what the heart wants.

And right now, my heart wants Molly.

My soul wants Molly.

Everything in me wants Molly.

I have no idea if this is real or if this won't just fizzle out in a week. We never know these things going into them. All we can do is lean back, feel the sun on our faces, the wind in our hair, and enjoy the ride. Which is what I'm going to do.

Whether it lasts a day, a month, or a decade, I plan on enjoying whatever time I get to have with Molly. She is already so special to me that I'm blowing up an entire MC for her.

Although, the whole blowing up the MC is probably a nice byproduct of this whole thing. If we can get Hammerhead out, we can start over with Hogwild in command. That will prevent us from having to deal with the Deviants and spare the expense and blood of trying to patch over the Howlers and set up a chapter down here. Like I said, I like things smooth and clean. I just hope this whole exercise can be that.

"All right, I need you to stay in here," I tell her. "Whatever is going on out there, just stay here and get ready. When it happens, it's going to happen fast, and we need to be ready to move."

"What's going to happen?" she asks.

"This is where the fun starts."

"Why do I get an ominous feeling when you say that?"

"Probably because you're smart and perceptive."

She chuckles darkly. "That doesn't make me feel better."

"Don't worry, this is going to work," I insist. "And when it does, you are going to be free to live your life your way again."

Molly gnaws on her bottom lip as she ponders the word 'free'. She's got a look on her face that says she never expected to be able to walk free and live her life the way she wanted. I can see she hoped for it. Desperately hoped for it. But now that we're on the cusp of it happening, she's scared.

I get it. I know guys who've been locked up in the joint for a long time who are suddenly released... they don't know if they can trust it. Or trust the person in front of them. I see a wide range of emotions scrolling across Molly's face right now and she looks up at me, her eyes wide.

"Free," she whispers. "What am I going to do then?"

I take her hand and give it a gentle squeeze, holding her gaze firmly. "Whatever the fuck you want to do," I tell her. "And just to help get you acclimated to your freedom, I've got a few things planned."

She cocks her head. "You do, do you?"

I nod. "I sure do."

"Like what?"

"Guess you'll have to wait and see," I tell her.

She laughs. "So mysterious."

"That's me," I reply. "Just remember. Stay in here and stay low."

“Low?”

I nod. “Just a precaution. I’m sure I’m just being overly careful,” I say. “But that’s why they call me Hawk. I always keep my eyes out.”

She laughs. “You are a very strange man,” she states. “But trust me, I mean that in the best way possible.”

“Don’t worry, I would have only been offended if you’d called me normal.”

“I will never make that mistake. Believe me,” she replies.

I take a deep breath and let it out. “All right. Do you trust me?”

I don’t even need to ask. I know she does. But before we begin, I need to know. I need to hear her say it.

“With my life,” she whispers.

I give her a slow nod. Here is the moment that could make or break both of us. Here is the moment she could escape—or that we could both die.

Her life is in my hands and I’m not about to take that lightly.

“Are you ready?”

She hesitates for just a moment and then nods. “I am.”

“Good.”

I slip my phone out of my pocket, press the button and hold the phone to my ear. The call is picked up before the first ring even has time to finish. I look over at Molly and give her a smile and a wink.

“It’s showtime,” I say into the phone.

Disconnecting the call, I slide my phone back into my pocket then turn to her, my expression sober.

“Get ready to go,” I tell her. “And remember to stay low.”

She nods. “Got it.”

I walk out of the kitchen and go stand in the main room. The guys are all still slumped in their chairs or lying with their heads down on the tables. The ones who are awake are all glazed over, staring at some dumb cartoon on the TV, all of them still feeling the side effects and sluggishness of the Lorazepam. I’d made sure to get Hogwild out of the clubhouse before triggering the next part of my plan. He seems decent and the last thing I’d want is for him to get hurt accidentally. Plus, he’s the smartest one in the entire MC and I feared he’d see right through it and sound the alarm. It’s better that he isn’t here for this.

Over the sound of the cartoon characters bonking each other over the heads with frying pans, I hear the throaty roar of a bike coming this way. I

cast a glance around the room but nobody else seems to be hearing it, so I step back and do my best to act casual. The sound of the bike is growing louder and only when it turns into the clubhouse parking lot do any of them take notice. A moment later, the crackle of an automatic rifle sounds.

Everybody dives for cover—as do I—hitting the ground and turning over tables they shelter behind. The guys are all wide awake now. It’s amazing how a little gunfire can sober somebody right up.

As chaos ensues in the clubhouse with everybody screaming over each other, trying to shout orders and establish some sort of control, I’m doing my best to stay out of the way and be as unobtrusive as I can.

After what seems like hours but is really only a few minutes, the automatic rifle falls silent. The bike revs its engine, almost challenging the Howlers to come out. Jammer, showing a lot more courage than I thought he had in him, jumps to his feet and dashes out the door. Of course, as he’s yanking his pistol out of the waistband of his jeans, he stumbles over his own feet and goes down hard on the stairs. I can hear the shooter outside laughing over the rumble of his engine.

A moment later, the bike gives a throaty growl and races off. Jammer is back on his feet and fires a couple of futile shots anyway. But then he runs back in, his eyes wild, his face twisted in a mask of rage.

“Let’s go!” he shouts. “Nobody shoots up our clubhouse and gets away with it. We need to run this prick down now!”

That seems to rally the troops a bit. No one is quite as enthusiastic as he is, but they all run out the door. I follow them and see the front wall of the clubhouse is pocked by bullets and some of the bikes have been hit. Nothing is too damaged to ride though, and the Howlers jump on and fire up their bikes. They’re peeling out of the lot in a matter of seconds, chasing the shooter, determined to put an end to him.

When they’re gone, I finally let out the laugh that has been building up inside of me. Knowing time is of the essence, I walk briskly back through the clubhouse, guffawing to myself.

CHAPTER TWENTY



Molly

When the sound of gunfire erupted, it scared the crap out of me. I dove behind the wall in the kitchen, remembering Hawk's warning to stay low. Now I understand why. It would have been nice if he'd told me somebody would be shooting up the clubhouse though.

Out in the main room, all I can hear are the guys shouting over each other, all of them freaked out and on the verge of panic. A smile creeps across my face and I don't bother stopping it. The sound of the chaos is amusing to me.

A couple of moments later, I hear the stampede of booted feet heading for the door and a moment after that, the growl of their engines firing up as they ride out. I jump to my feet and run to my room, grabbing a bag to throw what few things I have into it. Hawk's laughter echoes through the clubhouse though and when he steps into my room, even though I know it's him, it startles me anyway.

"We have to go," he says.

"Who was shooting? What's happening?"

"I'll answer your questions later," he says. "Right now, we just need to go. It won't be long before they're back and I want to be long gone by then."

"Where are we going? What's the plan? How will we get out without them noticing?"

He stops, and though I can see he's frustrated by me peppering him with questions, he's doing his best to be patient with me.

"I'm sorry. I just... when I get nervous, I ask a lot of questions," I tell him.

"That's all right. But this distraction won't hold them forever, so we

really need to go,” he says. “This is our window to get you out of here. Let’s not let it close on us.”

I nod and reach for some things to throw into my bag to take with me, but Hawk stops me and shakes his head.

“No, leave everything. We can pick up new things as we go,” he says.

“But why?”

“Because it’s all part of the plan.”

I chew on my bottom lip nervously. This is a day I have waited for longer than I can even say. The day that I am given my freedom. All I need to do is walk out that door with Hawk and I can begin my life again. It’s so close I can taste it.

I can do all the things I’ve dreamed of and be the person I’ve always thought I’d become. I’m still young and life is still fully ahead of me. It’s an exhilarating thought that fills me with a fire of excitement.

At the same time though, I’m terrified. I know how ridiculous it seems, but I’m scared to walk out that door. As terrible as this place is, at least here I know what to expect. I know the rules. I know what I can and can’t do. Out there in the world though, I’m going to have to learn an entirely new set of rules. I’m going to have to learn what I can and can’t do all over again. Out there, beyond that door, I have no idea what to expect. And it scares me.

Hawk takes my hand and looks me in the eye. “I know you’re afraid. Starting over is always scary,” he says. “But you deserve to have your life back. You deserve to get away from this misery. You deserve to be who you want to be—not who Hammerhead tells you that you are. And you most definitely deserve to live a life where you don’t have to fear getting smacked around for the smallest thing.”

A tear spills from the corner of my eye and my lips are trembling. I have no idea why this is so hard for me. I hate it here. I hate the people here. I live in fear twenty-four hours a day. I wake up miserable and go to bed the exact same way. There is absolutely nothing but pain and anguish for me here. And yet even knowing that, I’m afraid.

“The balls are in motion, Molly. If we don’t go right now, they are going to figure out what happened and rain shit down on us when they get back,” he says. “I don’t want anybody hurting you ever again. You deserve better than that.”

I nod but feel my stomach churning, a sick, queasy feeling spreading through my body. My fear of leaving, though, is as great as my fear of

staying. But I know Hawk is right. They'll eventually figure out what happened and there will be a reckoning.

This is my only chance. I won't get another one.

I look up at him, putting as much resolve into my expression as I can. He sees it and leans forward, placing a gentle kiss on my forehead. I take his hand and let him lead me toward the door.

"Wait," I stop him.

I pull away then go to the dresser. I squat down and pull the drawer out, fishing into the empty space until I feel the leather cover of my diary. The one thing I've had that's kept me sane all this time. I grab it then replace the drawer and look at Hawk.

"I can't leave this," I tell him. "It's too personal."

"Fair enough. Let's go."

I take his hand and let him lead me through the clubhouse. When we step outside, there's a man I've never seen before taking a bike off a trailer hooked to a black van. Another man sits behind the wheel and gives Hawk a wave. The first man is maybe in his early twenties, but he's got a hell of a presence around him that makes him seem larger than life. He has dirty blond hair and a neatly trimmed mustache and beard the same color. He's tall and lean with dark eyes, a sharp, angular face, and tattoos covering most of the skin I can see. He's handsome in that bad boy way.

He closes the gate on the trailer then slaps the back of the van twice. "Good to go," he calls to the driver. "Thanks, brother."

"I owe you," Hawk calls while giving him a thumbs up.

"Yeah, I'll be collectin' too. Don't think I won't," the driver shouts back.

As the van pulls out of the driveway, the other man walks up to us and flips Hawk a set of keys. Hawk steps forward and pulls the man into a back-slapping embrace.

"Thanks for doing this, Prez," Hawk says softly.

"You're my brother. Who would I be if I didn't help you in a time of need?"

Hawk turns to me. "Molly, this is Reaper. New Prez of the Ruthless Kings. Reaper, Molly."

Reaper smiles wide at me as he shakes my hand. "You are a beautiful woman, Molly," he starts. "But the fact that you're associating with this guy makes me question your judgment. And your taste."

I laugh. "I've been in captivity for years. My judgment and taste have

suffered terribly. Obviously,” I say, giving Hawk a wink.

“Hate to break up the yuk-fest, guys, but we’ve gotta move. We’re up against it. Let’s get this done.”

“What are we doing?” I ask.

Reaper sets his intense eyes on me with a wolfish grin. “Trashing this place.”

A wide smile crosses my face and I bounce on my feet, excited to get started.

“Break, smash, and destroy anything and everything you can get your hands on,” Hawk tells me. “Prez, spray paint up some of the Deviant logos on the walls, yeah?”

“On it.”

We head back into the clubhouse, and I grab the metal pipe leaning on the wall next to the door. A while back, somebody put a rubber handle on it. To make it easier to swing, they said. And as I smash the TV, I have to agree. The sound of destruction is loud and sounds like we’re doing a total demo on the house. Reaper is using black spray paint to put the Desert Deviants logo on the walls and Hawk is a whirlwind of destruction.

I storm my way into the kitchen and take a perverse pleasure in smashing up the shelving rack and throwing the rest of the dishes on the floor, where they shatter into a million pieces like one final fuck-you to Hammerhead. Hawk comes in and rips the microwave out of the outlet, then tosses it hard against the wall, making it crash with a heavy boom and crumple the drywall. He pulls out a pocketknife and hands it to me, and I make quick work of the couch and all the chairs, yanking stuffing and upholstery out of them.

Reaper kicks open the cooler and starts passing out bottles of beer and liquor—not to drink, but to smash against the walls and the floor. Shards of glass fly through the air and the stuff spills out, staining the carpet with sticky, smelly liquid.

The clubhouse is destroyed in no time flat.

Hawk and Reaper run outside while I stay in and smash a few more things. It’s like everything I break lets out a little more of the anger that’s built up in me over the years. I swing the metal bar, putting holes in the walls, shattering windows and glasses, and pulverizing anything I can find.

I’m panting hard. The work is exhausting, but it’s fun as hell. Destroying this place that has been my prison for so long is kind of cathartic in a way. It’s liberating and very symbolic for me.

The door opens again, and I see Reaper and Hawk carrying a body in. When I see it, I gasp. And when I see that it's headless, I feel like I'm going to throw up.

"Who is that?" I ask, my voice wavering.

Hawk looks up at me and frowns. "I'm sorry you have to see this."

"Wh—who is that?"

He gives me a tight smile as he pulls his cut off. "It's me."

My heart is pounding, and my legs are quivering as I watch them dressing the corpse in Hawk's cut and his plan finally falls into place for me. I see what he's doing. As horrific as it is, I know it serves a purpose. I just hate that somebody had to die so that I could be free.

Reaper doesn't seem like a cold-blooded murderer. But as I see him talking with Hawk, I can see that he's a loyal friend—one who would obviously do literally anything for him. And I guess by extension, he did what he did for me too. But saying "thank you" for killing somebody on my behalf just seems... weird. Not quite right. So I don't say anything right now.

"All right. I think we're done here," Reaper says.

"It's hasty and anybody with half a brain is going to see through it," Hawk replies. "But it's the best we can do right now. If nothing else, at least it's going to buy us some time."

Reaper laughs. "If anybody with half a brain can see through it, I think we'll be fine," he says. "Those morons I ditched don't have half a brain between them. Seriously, they're morons. I've never advocated for an IQ requirement to join the Kings, but I think I'm going to bring that up at Church."

Hawk laughs and I nod. "I couldn't agree more. Most of these guys are just blind followers and suck-ups. They're idiots."

Reaper gives me a smile. "I like her."

Hawk grins and gives my hand a squeeze. "Yeah, so do I," he says. "All right, let's hit it. We have to go."

Reaper grabs a can of lighter fluid and douses the living room floor, adding to the already-flammable liquor strewn everywhere. It's not really enough to burn down the entire house, just enough for one last kick in the teeth.

Hawk taps my shoulder, and I turn around to see he's produced a match out of somewhere.

"Would you like to do the honors?" he asks.

“I’ve never wanted anything more.”

I strike the match and watch as the tiny head erupts into flame. I hold it in front of me for a moment, thinking of how this little match is just like that spark I’ve held inside of me for so long. My mind is instantly filled with memories of the pain, the humiliation, and the suffering I endured there. There are no good memories. No happiness or joy. It was nothing but constant suffering.

I toss the match into the fire and watch it take hold with a loud woosh, mirroring that very feeling inside of me. My own spark of hope is now a roaring flame, and it’s growing higher and hotter by the second.

We all head outside as the flames start to climb up to the ceiling, and Reaper climbs on his bike and points to the one that belonged to the former Deviant turned Hawk stand-in.

“There’s your ride, man,” Reaper calls.

Hawk nods. “She’s a beaut. But she’s not mine,” he says sadly.

I see him turn and look toward his bike, which is parked off to the side of the lot. It’s been beaten up by the gunfire from earlier. A look of sadness crosses his features, and he frowns. I can see how much his bike means to him and it sends a lance of pain straight through my heart to know he has to give it up because of me. Because he’s helping me escape.

“Thanks for everything, old girl,” he whispers.

Hawk hands me a helmet and a pair of glasses, which I quickly put on. He puts his own on as well as pair of gloves then mounts the bike. He starts it with a thunderous roar and helps me onto the back of it. I feel my belly and heart both fluttering wildly. I’ve never been on a bike before and I’m kind of scared. Okay, I’m really scared. He turns his head, giving me his profile so I can see he’s speaking.

“Hold on tight,” he calls over the rumble of the engine.

I slide my hands around his waist and grab onto him tightly. He revs the throttle again then turns and rides out with Reaper falling in next to us. I turn and look back at the old clubhouse, watching the flames dance and flicker as we pull away.

That place can never hurt me again. The entire world is open to me, stretching on into eternity. It will be what I make of it. My life is now my own again.

I dreamed of this moment for so long. I dreamed of what I would do or say when I finally escaped. But all the words I ever thought I’d say don’t

come out. I have no idea what to say.

So I give it the finger.

I hear Reaper laughing over the roar of the engines and see him looking over at Hawk.

“I really like her,” he shouts.

I give him a smile then lean my cheek against Hawk’s broad, strong back as I tighten my grip around his waist, turning my face toward the road ahead. The road that represents hope. The new horizon of my life where anything is possible.

I can’t wait to get started building my new life.

I can go anywhere. I can do anything. I can live my life any way I want.

I’m free.

I’m finally free.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



We rode most of the way back to Vegas before we stopped. I figure the sooner we put some real distance between us and the Howlers, the better. We pull off the road in a small town and hit a diner. After helping Molly off the back of our borrowed bike, Reaper leads us to the restaurant. She surprised me by taking my hand as we walk across the parking lot. I give her a smile and she bumps me with her hip playfully and I can tell she's already feeling better.

Don's Diner is the same kind of greasy spoon you see on the side of highways all across the country. There's nothing special about it. Black and white tile, chrome, and red vinyl seats meant to conjure some sort of nostalgia. I'm pretty sure this is just how the place was when it opened a thousand years ago and they're not actually trying for that sort of affectation. It must be a hit with the tourists.

We take a booth near the back, one that affords me a view of the front door and the diner as a whole. A moment later, a waitress approaches our table with a warm, wide smile. She sets some menus down for us. Her nametag says Dawn and she's probably in her fifties or so, but she could probably pass for ten years younger.

"How we doin' today, folks? Just passin' through?" she asks.

"Yep," Reaper replies. "On our way back to Vegas."

She nods. "Seems to be most people who come through here are either comin' from or goin' to good ol' Sin City."

"It is a destination," Reaper says.

"Sure is," she replies. "Can I get you folks somethin' to drink? Somethin' to wash that road dust out of your mouths?"

“I’ll take an iced tea,” I say.

“Same,” Reaper adds.

I look over at Molly who seems to be having trouble deciding. It hits me then that this is her first time in a restaurant in a really long time. She’s had to survive on whatever they had in that shitty clubhouse. She looks at me and I give her a smile.

“Get whatever you want. The sky’s the limit,” I tell her.

A slow smile crawls across her face as she looks at me. “I always used to love strawberry shakes when I was a kid.”

“Strawberry shake it is then,” I say.

“Lucky for you, we got the best shakes in all the Southwest,” Dawn smiles. “I’ll get those started for you.”

She leaves the table, and an awkward tension immediately descends. Reaper and I exchange a look as Molly looks around, a smile and an expression of astonishment on her face. I swear to God, she looks like a kid at Disneyland. I guess that’s what being cooped up for however many years they had her will do to you. Hers is a sad story that makes me really feel for her. But I don’t want to make her feel awkward about any of it. I don’t want her to feel like any of this is her fault or that she has anything she should be ashamed of. I think the best thing I can do is act completely normal. Like this is just any other day.

“How’d your dad take all this?” I ask Reaper.

He grimaces. “I’ll be honest with you brother, he’s not real thrilled with this,” he says. “But that was part of the deal. I told him if he didn’t trust your judgment as VP, that meant he didn’t trust my judgment in making you VP.”

I let out a low whistle. That’s a shocker. Reaper has been acting President for a bit now, but he’s never outright contradicted his father like this. He’s never asserted the privileges that come with his new rank. The fact that he’d do that for me is... well, I’ll always be grateful.

I’ll always have a hell of a lot of respect for Old Grim. He’s been a damn good Prez for a long time. But he’s a little too attached to the old-school ways. To the old alliances that were made decades ago. And that’s just not what’s going to help this club anymore. If he’s handing over the reins, that means he needs to let Reaper—and me—do what’s best for the future of this club.

Was my saving Molly more about what I wanted than really doing what’s best for the club? Sure. Probably. But the fact remains that the Howlers were

never going to work out long term. In a certain way, I killed two birds with one stone.

I nod. “Yeah, I get that. If it makes him feel any better though, tell him Hammerhead wasn’t going to work out anyway. I tried to get him to see the light. Had the come-to-Jesus meeting with him and everything,” I tell him. “And he was sayin’ all the right things and whatever, but I could tell the instant I left, he was gonna go right back to what he was doing—all the things that took me there in the first place.”

“Think so?”

I nod. “I know so. Finally got him to admit he was doin’ crank. Tried to get him into a program but he was resisting,” I say. “Really, we were going to end up cuttin’ ties with him sooner or later. At least this way, it’s done and over with.”

“And if we’re lucky, they’ll go after the Deviants, start a war, and they’ll take each other out for us,” Reaper muses.

I shake my head. “Had a run-in with Ratchet. I guess he heard I was in the area and tracked me down,” I say. “They gu is organized. His shit’s tight down there and he’s already taken back all the gains Hammerhead made early on. The Deviants are going to control that corridor in no time.”

Molly is idly flipping through her menu, but I know she’s listening in on us. I know I shouldn’t be talking club business in front of her but to be honest, I don’t feel like there’s anything I can’t tell her. I don’t want to keep things from her. I want Molly to know me for who I am, not some artificial construct of who she thinks I am. I want her to see me as I am, warts and all. And if by chance she wants me after that, then I’ll know it’s real. Reaper seems to pick up on that, which is why I think he’s cool talking about it in front of her.

“What are we gonna do when they take control of it?” Reaper asks.

“We’re either going to have to make a deal with Ratchet—which we can’t fuckin’ do—or if there’s anything left of the Howlers, we patch them over and set up a chapter,” I reply. “Even if I hadn’t done what I did, we were comin’ down to those two choices already. Hammerhead is a lost cause, man.”

“I heard him talking once about using the money you guys give him to start his own pipeline,” Molly chimes in softly. “He said he was going to eventually cut the Kings out. You’re the Kings, right?”

We both turn to her, our faces mirrored in expressions of surprise. Her

cheeks flush and she gives me an awkward smile.

“Sorry,” she says. “I shouldn’t be talking—”

“No,” I tell her firmly. “You never have to worry about speaking your mind whenever you want anymore. You are a free woman, Molly. Free to speak your mind, free to do as you please—you’re free.”

“I guess it’s going to take a little getting used to.”

I nod. “It probably will. And it’s probably going to feel real weird at first,” I tell her. “But in time, I know you’ll be able to assert yourself. You deserve that.”

“Far as I’m concerned, you never have to apologize for speaking your mind,” Reaper adds, surprising me. “You’re entitled to your words and your opinion just as much as any of us are.”

She gives us both a smile and a look of gratitude. I can’t imagine what it must be like for her, to have lived in a world where she wasn’t free to speak without consequence, then find herself in a place where we’re telling her to speak freely. The dissonance has got to be making her brain hurt. But if there’s anyone I know can handle it and adjust to her new circumstances, it’s Molly. To have endured what she did and still hold onto who she is, never giving up hope—it’s truly remarkable. It takes somebody with boundless strength.

Strength I know she’s got in spades.

“So what was he saying?” I ask.

“Well, I heard him talking to Deadbolt and Hogwild about it. More than a few times,” she tells us. “He said he was eventually going to take over your suppliers and deal directly with them. That was his plan.”

I nod and turn to Reaper. “He actually does have some balls.”

“But no brains,” he replies. “That changes things. I’m sure Dad’ll shut up now. Knowing your supposed partner is looking to stab you straight in the back has a way of changing one’s perspective.”

“Yeah, I hope so. I really don’t want him pissed at me.”

Reaper gives me a firm glare. “Let him be mad. But you’re right, and he’ll know that soon enough. I got your back, and that’s what matters.”

“I just don’t want to screw the club, Prez.”

“I know that, and he knows that,” Reaper says. “Everybody knows that. We all know you’d give your life for the club.”

I nod. “I would.”

“I hope it never comes to that,” Molly says softly.

“Same here,” I reply, letting my eyes linger on hers.

Dawn comes back with our drinks and when she sets the shake down in front of Molly, her eyes light up. She really does look like a kid on Christmas morning as she tears into her shake, making an array of nearly pornographic noises as she enjoys it.

“I guess that means she likes it,” I comment.

Dawn shrugs and gives Molly a grin. “That’s the reaction most people have. Don’t you worry about that,” she says. “Now, what can I get you folks to eat?”

We all give her our order. Molly hems and haws for several between fries and onion rings, not sure what to get, until I finally tell her she can just order both, which makes her gasp in surprise as if she hadn’t thought of that. Dawn finally gives Molly a curious look, probably not sure why a twenty-something is acting like she just landed on the planet. But she favors us all with a smile before she leaves the table, probably realizing it is none of her business.

We all make small talk for a little while as Molly gradually becomes more comfortable with the whole being social thing again. I can tell that when she was younger—before she was taken—she was a social butterfly. There’s just something about her that’s instantly likable. Something that makes you just want to be around her. She’s got this big, bright light inside of her. When it shines on you, the feeling is incredible. She’s warm and funny. Molly’s got a quick wit and a quicker tongue—the girl is sarcastic as hell and can skewer you with her words.

I’m surprised that she’s been able to come out of her shell so quickly. I mean, we’re not even finished with our burgers yet and she’s talking to us as if she’s known us her whole life rather than less than a week—for me anyway. Barely a few hours, for Reaper.

But I think that’s part of her charm. Part of what makes her so special. No matter what room she’s in, I imagine that people gravitate to her. And when they’re in her orbit, it’s easy for me to see just how special she makes each and every person feel.

Molly is one of those people who’s able to connect to everybody around her on some level and make whoever she’s talking to feel heard and seen. It’s a rare gift. It’s certainly not one I have. But to be in the presence of somebody who does is an incredible feeling.

Even more than that though, I feel like she and I are connecting on an

entirely different level. I really felt it when we were sitting on that bench behind the clubhouse. It wasn't just stories and the usual getting to know you garbage we were sharing. We were talking about things that mattered to us. Things that hit each of us on a deep level. I can't say we totally bared our souls to each other but if we'd had more time, we very well might have.

Our connection is genuine and strong. When I notice the way she looks at me, I don't think it's simply misplaced affection for somebody who's saved her life, as sometimes happens. At least, I hope not. When I look into her eyes, I see something deeper. I see something real. That's what I keep telling myself anyway. It just feels like she has the same feelings I do when she looks at me, when she holds my hand, when she lays her head on my back and squeezes me tight as we ride.

I want to believe she feels the connection between us every bit as strongly as I do. There's still so much up in the air and to be sorted out. I suppose we'll see what happens. But it's like I said earlier: whether it's a day or a year, I'm going to enjoy every single minute I have with her.

We finish up our meals and thank Dawn for her outstanding service. After we pay our bill and make sure we leave a healthy tip for her, we head out to the parking lot. We get to our bikes and start to gear up with our helmets and gloves.

"Probably best for us to lie low for a little bit," I tell Reaper. "We don't want the Howlers showing up in Vegas and finding us there when they thought they found my dead body."

"Good point," he nods. "Probably best to let things cool down before you start poking your face around town. I'll head back to the clubhouse and catch up Old Grim on everything. It's all good. And if they come out to Vegas with questions, I'll contact you."

"I appreciate that, Prez. I owe you big time."

"So do I," Molly says. "So, thank you."

He shakes his head. "No you don't. Just keep yourself safe—and keep her even safer."

"I'll do that," I nod. "Thanks for everything, brother."

"Hey, if you really want to pay me back, if you've got a sister..."

We all share a laugh before I pull Reaper into a tight hug. He claps me on the back, and we wish each other well then climb onto our bikes and head out. Molly and I are racing down the road and I hear her laughing as she enjoys the sun on her face and the wind in her hair. It's all just as it should

be.

“Where are we going?” she has to shout in my ear.

I turn my head. “You’ll see.”

“You have a plan, huh?”

I nod. “I have a plan.”

“You always do.”

I give the bike a little more throttle and we tear off down the highway, chasing the sun.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



Molly

After stopping at an outlet mall to get some clothes and other essentials on the way out of Nevada, Hawk stops at a small hotel after we crossed into California. We dismount and I have to say, my legs are a little shaky. Riding on the back of a bike is thrilling and scary all at the same time, but it's also hell on my legs and back.

He gives me a smile and leads me to the office. I walk in and the first thing that I notice is that this place is nice. Very nice. It's not a resort or anything, but I don't think I've ever been inside a hotel this nice, even in my life before. There are plants artfully arranged throughout the lobby and jazz music softly tinkling from hidden speakers somewhere.

Hawk takes one look at my dazzled expression and chuckles. "Nobody would expect a biker to come to a place like this, right?" He taps his forehead with one finger. "Even if the Howlers somehow regrouped and found their way out west, they'd think we stopped at some ratty-ass motel. Not a fine establishment like this."

A bell above the door chimes as we step forward and an older man steps out of a back room and greets us with a warm expression. He's about average height, slim, and has a head full of iron-gray hair. He kind of reminds me of how I think my dad would look at his age. It's a thought that sends a ripple of sadness through my heart. More than almost anything, I want to know where my folks are right now. I want to know what happened to them after I was taken. I want to know they're all right.

"How we doin' today, folks?" he asks.

"Doin' well," Hawk answers.

"That's good to hear. Now, what can I do for ya?"

“We’d like two rooms for the ni—”

“Actually,” I interrupt. “Do you have a room with two beds?”

The man nods. “Course we do. I’ve got one with two queens in it. How’d that be?”

“Sounds perfect,” Hawk says.

As safe as I feel with him, the thought of spending a night in a room by myself is terrifying. I know it’s like asking to have a nightlight turned on like a child, but everything is still so fresh and raw on me right now that I don’t want to be alone. I can’t banish the image of Hammerhead breaking his way into my room and carrying me off. I know it’s not logical, but the full weight of what I’ve gone through is starting to press down on me so hard, I’m finding it hard to breathe.

Hawk just makes me feel so safe and cared for. I know I’d sleep a lot better if he were nearby. If he were there to keep anything from happening to me—even if it’s just to tell me that everything’s okay if I’m torn from sleep by a nightmare. Sitting on the back of his bike, watching the world go by, filled me with a lot of hope. But not even riding as fast as we did is going to allow me to outrun the bad dreams, which is something I’m already expecting.

“Where can we go for a good steak around here?” Hawk asks him.

“Oh, for that you’re gonna want to go over to Busters,” the manager says. “Best steaks in Southern California as far as I’m concerned.”

“Sold,” Hawk nods with a smile. “Thanks very much.”

“You bet.”

Hawk takes the key to our room, and we grab our bags from the back of his bike, then head up. It’s a u-shaped building with a pool in the center. This time of year, though, the chill in the air is keeping anybody from doing any sunbathing out there.

“Up for a swim?” he asks as if reading my mind.

“Oh hell no,” I say with a laugh. “But I wouldn’t be opposed to giving that jacuzzi a shot later on tonight. It’s been a long time...”

I let my voice trail off as the realization of how long it’s been since I’ve done anything normal, anything I used to love doing. Back in the day, my girlfriends and I would regularly sit out in the hot tub on cold nights just because that contrast was nice to feel. Hawk bumps me gently with his elbow and gives me a smile.

“Go easy on yourself,” he says. “Everything’s going to feel normal again

soon. I promise.”

“So, you’re a professional mind reader then?”

“Strictly amateur,” he says. “Never went pro.”

I laugh and feel the tension of a moment ago start to melt away. He has that effect on me. He seems able to lift me out of the darkness I’m swimming in with barely any effort at all. Hawk seems to be able to make me laugh when I need it most. And I’m grateful for that. We get to our room and he unlocks the door then steps aside, letting me go in ahead of him. I notice that he’s looking around outside, his eyes darting everywhere before he gives himself a small nod. Seemingly satisfied, he finally comes in and locks the door behind him. Glad to know I’m not the only one being hypervigilant.

The room itself is gorgeous. It’s got tall ceilings and lamps in soft yellow light. There isn’t exactly much of a view out the window, but I don’t care. There’s a big-screen TV on a dresser and a mini-bar stocked with all sorts of goodies. But what I care most about are the beds. They’re large with sheets so soft they look like clouds. The bedspread is expertly made and there are even little mints on the pillows. I’m almost overwhelmed by the difference. Only a few hours ago I was sleeping in a dirty hovel. But now all this?

It’s all I can do to keep my jaw from falling onto the floor as I walk into the room, amazed at the amenities. I’d forgotten places like this exist.

“Hawk, you didn’t have to do all this for me.”

“Think nothing of it, Mols.”

Something about the nickname sends shivers down my spine.

“But this place must be so ex—”

“Don’t worry about that,” he cuts me off. “I can afford it. Remember?” He lifts up the heavy duffel bag of cash up in his hand. “It’s worth the expense.”

I look around, still marveling at even the littlest things like the down pillows.

He laughs softly. “Why don’t you go hit the shower?” he suggests. “We’ll get cleaned up and go see about having a steak over at Busters. I hear it’s very highly recommended.”

“You know, I’ve heard that too,” I reply. “I hear they have the best steaks in all of Southern California.”

We share a laugh and I gather my things and head to the bathroom. Before I step inside though, I pause and look back at him. He’s pulling his cellphone out of his pocket to check it when I make him pause.

“Hey,” I say.

“Hey yourself.”

“I just want to say thank you,” I tell him, fighting to keep the tears from spilling. These wouldn’t be tears of sadness, though, for the first time in so long. They would be tears of joy.

I brush them aside and focus on what I’m trying to say. “I know everything you’ve sacrificed for me, and I just want you to know how much I appreciate it. How much I appreciate you. I’m grateful, Hawk. And I know that’s a debt I’ll never be able to repay.”

“It’s not a debt and you have nothing to repay,” he replies. “And anything I might have sacrificed is more than worth it just to see you smile.”

As if on cue, a smile splits my lips and a giggle bursts from my mouth. He grins in return.

“That’s the one,” he grins.

Blushing furiously, I walk into the bathroom and close the door. I turn on the shower and instantly fall in love with the water pressure and with how quickly it gets warm. In no time flat, the small room is filled with billowing clouds of steam. I set all my things down on the toilet, get undressed, then step beneath the spray. I revel in the hot water washing all the road dust off my skin and out of my hair.

This is truly luxurious—especially compared to the Howlers clubhouse. Back there, the water was little more than a drip and it took almost ten minutes to get warm. And once it did, you had about five minutes of warmth before the water felt like it was being piped straight in from the Arctic Ocean.

As the water washes over me, I’m hit by a wave of emotion so powerful and deep, I feel like I’m being pulled down to the depths. I sink to my knees and bury my face in my hands and sob wildly. I don’t know where this is coming from or why I’m crying but once it starts, I can’t stop. My entire body is shaking and heaving, my sobs long loud, even though I’m trying to stifle them.

It’s like everything I’ve endured is pressing down on me. All the painful memories of the pain and torment I’ve suffered are choking me so hard, I can’t breathe. All I can do is sob. And I do.

I cry until I’m all cried out—which seems to take forever. But eventually, the tears stop, and I suddenly feel free. Lighter. It almost feels like the band-aid has been ripped off and my wounds, though still fresh and spilling blood, are beginning to heal.

I know it's going to take some time before I feel right again. But I cling to that hope that I'll get there even harder. And with somebody like Hawk by my side, I feel like it not only can happen, but will.

“What are you going to have?” he asks.

I shake my head and smile. “I have no idea. There are just so many different choices,” I say. “How is somebody supposed to choose?”

“Usually by picking something that sounds good.”

I give him a sarcastic grin and shake my head. “Gee, thanks for that. You're a real help.”

“I do my best.”

Busters looks like an old ski chalet. It's a high pointed A-frame building with fake snow all over it and exposed beams above us. On the wall to our right is a giant, oversized fireplace, complete with a log fire that's pumping out the warmth. It's supposed to look rustic and rural, but it strikes me as kitschy. Yet it's got a fun atmosphere and the aromas that fill the place are heavenly.

“What are you getting?” I ask.

“The tomahawk with mushrooms and onions on top and a loaded baked potato on the side,” he tells me.

“That sounds good. I'll do that too.”

He raises a skeptical eyebrow. “You're going to eat a tomahawk?”

“What?”

“Oh, nothin',” he says. “It's just that the cut of meat's about as big as you are.”

“I'm a girl who can eat.”

“I guess we'll see.”

I laugh and look into his eyes. The fire casts flickering shadows across his face and makes his eyes sparkle like polished chips of onyx. He's such a handsome man that he gets my heart racing without even trying.

“So, I heard you in the shower—”

“Yeah, I'm sorry,” I cut him off. “I was trying to be quiet, but I just felt a little overwhelmed. I'm really sorry.”

“There is nothing for you to be sorry about, Molly,” he replies. “I only

mentioned it because I want to make sure you're all right."

I shrug. "As all right as I can be right now."

He nods as if he understands. Maybe he does. He is so compassionate about my feelings that I can't help but feel grateful. I don't know what I ever did that merited this sort of man coming into my life when I needed him most, but I'm grateful to whatever forces put him in my path. I sometimes feel like I don't deserve it, but I'm going to take it and run with it.

"To be honest, that crying... it was cathartic in a way," I tell him. "About as cathartic as smashing up the Howlers' clubhouse. Different emotions but the same kind of release."

"I imagine you're going to need those kinds of releases for a while."

"Maybe. I mean, as much as I held onto hope that I'd get out of that place, I'm realizing there's a part of me that never thought it would happen. A part of me that was resigned to being there forever. Or at least until he killed me," I say bluntly. "And now that I'm free—thanks to you—I'm just really overwhelmed. It's like I don't know what to do with all these emotions now. They're coming at me from every direction, and I can't get out of their way fast enough. So, smashing things and sobbing will apparently be my coping mechanisms."

"Trust me, that's a lot healthier than some of the alternatives," he offers. "I just want you to know that you can always talk to me, Molly. When things are getting to be too much and you're feeling overwhelmed, you're scared, or you're just pissed off, I'm here to listen."

I give him a smile and open my mouth to ask him a question that's been nagging at me for a while now when the waiter walks up. He takes our order and politely leaves the table, as if sensing we're in the middle of an important discussion.

"So, tell me something," I start.

"Anything."

"What's your name?"

"Hawk."

I laugh. "Your real name. Your given name."

"Oh, that," he replies with a grin. "Tyson. Tyson Richards."

"Tyson Richards," I say, liking the way it sounds coming off my tongue. "And why do they call you Hawk?"

"Like I said. I always keep an eye out."

"What does that mean?"

“You’ve seen biker life, Mols. You know that things aren’t exactly sunshine and roses on this side of the world. I’m always watching. Nothing escapes my notice. Came in handy one day back when I was prospecting for the Kings.”

His eyes glaze over as if he’s seeing it play again in his mind’s eye. “Reaper and I were on a run, dropping off some product in the desert. Way before all this. We were just kids back then. But just before we finalized the deal, I noticed the quick flash of a sniper’s scope in the distance. I pulled Reaper back with barely a second to spare. Saved his life.”

“What happened?” I ask.

“Well, we survived. Obviously. But the bastards who double-crossed us... let’s just say we made sure they couldn’t hurt us again. But if I had noticed a split second later, his—and my—heads would have been piles of bloody goo on the Mojave floor. So I got patched in as Hawk, because I have eyes like one.”

“That’s... grim,” I note. “I was expecting a funny story.”

He shrugs. “It’s kind of funny. I mean, from a certain perspective.”

“A deranged perspective.”

He nods. “That is probably true.”

“Can I ask you something else?”

“Not if you’re going to make fun of me”

“I make no promises. But I’ll try.”

“All right then. Shoot.”

“Why are you helping me?” I ask. “Why have you put yourself and your club at risk and sacrificed all you have to help me? I’m a stranger to you.”

He takes a bit of the roll on his plate then washes it down with some iced tea. He looks off as if considering his answer. But then he turns back to me and shrugs.

“You asked for my help,” he says.

“That’s it? That’s the big answer? That I asked for it?”

He laughs. “Pretty much,” he offers. “I mean, I saw what you were going through and wanted to help. I wanted to get you out of there because what was happening to you was so wrong. It broke my heart for you, Molly.”

I purse my lips and look down at my plate, doing my best to avoid the avalanche of emotions threatening to topple down over me.

“But I didn’t know if you would even want my help. I didn’t know what your situation was, and I didn’t want to make things worse for you,” he goes

on. “But then I got your note and knew you wanted out of there as bad as I wanted to get you out. After that, the plan came together pretty easily.”

“But now you’re a wanted man because of me. Hammerhead will—”

“To be honest, I think he’s dead. The arsenic you put in his food was enough to be a lethal dose,” he tells me. “I wanted it to be. I wanted him dead just for what he did to you. So, I got enough to kill a man. He’s dead, Molly. Dead and gone.”

His words have a calming effect on me. But there’s still a tiny scrap of skepticism in me. Unless I see the body, I can’t force myself to believe he’s gone. I want to believe, though. I know how much powder was in that baggie. I’m no doctor or anything, but I read somewhere that even a small dose of arsenic can be lethal. What I gave him was probably enough to kill an elephant.

“I hope so,” I say.

“I’m almost positive of it,” he replies.

We stare into each other’s eyes for a moment, and I feel the shadow that had settled down over me begin to lift. It’s probably bad karma, but the thought of that man being dead absolutely lifts my spirits. I give him a wide smile and pick up my glass of soda and tap it against his tea.

“To new beginnings then,” I grin.

“To new beginnings.”

After the most delicious meal I’ve ever had in my life, we walk back to the hotel. I’m stuffed to the gills and happy. I’m giddy and giggling like I’m drunk even though I haven’t had a drop of alcohol. I just feel lighter and freer than I have in so long that my heart is swelling and I’m feeling overwhelmed. In a good way though.

I have hold of Hawk’s hand as we walk across the parking lot toward the hotel. It’s a cool, clear night and we’re still so far out from so-called civilization and all the light pollution it causes. Above us in the heavens, I can see thousands upon thousands of stars. It’s like a breathtaking tapestry of diamonds glittering in the night.

“It’s gorgeous out here,” I say.

Hawk nods. “It really is.”

I turn to him and give him a smile. “You are a good man, Tyson Richards.”

He shrugs. “I don’t know about that.”

“I do,” I insist, my expression sober. “It takes a good man to do what you’ve done. To put your own life on the line for a complete stranger.”

“I don’t know. Maybe I was just trying to balance the cosmic scales for all the bad I’ve done,” he counters.

I laugh softly. “You know, there was a time in my life where I would have seen you as a bad guy simply because of the tats and the fact that you’re a biker. I would have thought you were just as bad as Hammerhead,” I say. “But I’ve come to realize that things are never that simple. I know that bad people can do good things just as easily as good people can do bad things.”

“So, which am I?”

“I told you. You’re a good person who sometimes does bad things,” I reply.

He smiles to himself as he opens the door to our room. “Maybe so. But sometimes I feel like a bad guy.”

“Let me clue you in. A bad guy would have never done what you did for me. Never. Bad people only think of themselves. While they can occasionally do good things, there is usually some sort of selfish motivation for it.”

“Think so?”

“I know so.”

He laughs as we step into our room. He again checks around behind us before closing and locking the door. Feeling like I’m walking on air, I flounce over to the bed and throw myself down on it. Hawk takes off his boots and sits down on the edge of his bed for a moment, looking at me with a tender look on his face. Then he lies down and props himself up on his arm, his eyes still on mine.

Giving him a mischievous smile, I roll off my bed and jump onto his, curling up next to him with my back to his chest. His body is stiff, and he holds his arm out as if he doesn’t know what to do with it. Laughing softly, I take it and wrap it around my waist. He remains rigid for a moment as if he’s trying to figure out what to do, but I melt into him, relishing the feel of his body pressed to mine. Hawk slowly gives in and lets his body relax, letting himself melt against me too.

We lay like that for a long while, just curled up together, enjoying the silence. I can’t even recall the last time I felt so cared for or safe. I close my

eyes and snuggle closer to him, wanting him to enjoy this as much as I am.

If only for a little while, I want both of us to revel in each other and live in this moment. We don't know what tomorrow is going to bring. But as long as we face it together, I think we'll be okay.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



Molly

I roll over and look into Hawk's eyes and a gentle smile touches his lips. I don't know how long we've been lying here together, but it's been so incredibly nice. We haven't spoken a word. Honestly, I haven't felt the need to speak. We've just been content laying in each other's arms. But laying here with him, enjoying these quiet, tender moments, has made my whole body feel like I'm wrapped in a warm shell.

It's strange for me to be feeling the way I am right now. Having gone through what I have, having been used by a series of men, something in the back of my mind is telling me this isn't normal. This isn't natural. I shouldn't be having these kinds of feelings for Hawk.

And yet, I can't deny the warmth flowing through my body that's centered between my legs. Part of my brain is telling me that I'm wrong for wanting this. The other part—the majority share, if I'm being honest—is telling me this is right. And that it's natural.

Hawk has touched me, not in a physical sense but on some deeper level. He's shown me that I can trust again. Maybe even love again. He's shown me that not all men are like the ones who took me. They're not all like Hammerhead.

It's crazy but in such a short span of time, Hawk has shown me there are better things in this world and that I deserve them. He's shown me there are better men in this world.

Reaching up, I gently trace the curve of his lips with the tip of my finger. I feel him stiffen and start to pull away, but I don't let him go. I grab hold of his belt loop and hold him in place. Then I lean forward and press my mouth to his. Though he's hesitant at first, he quickly warms to the kiss. As our

tongues slowly and gently swirl around one another, I can feel him pressed up against me. He's starting to get hard and when he realizes it, he pulls back and tries to scoot away from me.

He looks me in the eyes, a look of surprise on his face. "We really shouldn't," he says softly. "I mean, I want to. I really want to. But I don't think you're ready for anything like this."

I give him a flirtatious smile. "Shouldn't I be the one to make that decision?" I ask. "I mean, you told me I'm free, right?"

He nods. "Well, yeah. Of course, you are."

"Then I should be free to make my own decisions," I tell him. "Especially when it comes to my own body."

"Molly, I didn't do any of this just to get you into bed. That's not why—"

"I know you didn't," I cut him off. "You did this because, despite your objections, you are a good man with a good heart. I can see that. And you can't deny there's a connection between us, can you?"

He looks at me for a long moment but then shakes his head. "No, I can't deny that. But I wasn't sure you felt it too."

"Yes, I do," I tell him. "It's not like anything I've ever felt before."

"Me either."

"And that's why I know, without a doubt, this has never been about sex with you. It's about something more. Something deeper," I tell him. "And I want to explore that with you."

I feel my cheeks flush and I look away for a moment, unable to believe I just admitted to that. But as I let it all settle in my mind, a strange feeling creeps over me. It starts in my toes and goes all the way up to the top of my head, bringing a smile to my face.

I've never felt as strong or as confident as I do right now. I don't know why or where it came from, but I feel more powerful than I ever have before. I know what I want and for the first time in my life, even before I was taken, I have the strength to speak it out loud.

I'm done being taken. I'm done being used.

This time, I'm going to take what I want. Without apology.

Hawk is looking back at me with a gleam in his eye and that smile on his face that melts me inside every single time I see it.

"Molly, I've never wanted anybody the way I want you," he says softly. "Nobody has ever made me feel the way you do. And I'm glad you feel that way because I feel it too. I want to explore everything with you. I think—"

I don't let him finish that sentence because I press my mouth to his again. Pushing him gently onto his back, I climb up on top of him, straddling his lap. I slide my tongue against his, teasing it, reveling in the taste of him. Our kiss deepens and he runs his fingers through my hair, gently pulling on it. The feeling of his hands on me sends a shudder running along my spine that makes that fire inside of me burn even brighter and hotter than before. As I pull back, I give his bottom lip a gentle bite and look him in the eye.

"Less talk," I whisper, almost breathless. "More of this."

"Are you sure?"

I nod. "I'm sure."

"You don't have to tell me twice."

"No, you made me tell you three or four times."

We laugh but then our mouths crash together, our tongues swirling and sliding around one another, the heat of our passion growing in intensity. He slides his hands down my back and cups my ass, giving it a firm squeeze before sliding it back up under my shirt. I grind myself against him, feeling his rigid length growing beneath me and feeling myself growing wetter by the second. If I don't have him inside of me soon, I might just explode.

I raise my arms and let him pull my shirt off. He tosses it aside and my bra soon follows. Hawk cups my breasts, running his thumb over my stiff nipples. And when he sits up and takes one into his mouth, swirling his tongue around it and giving it a gentle bite, I throw my head back and moan as a shudder runs through my entire body.

He continues licking and sucking, kneading and pinching my breasts as I keep grinding myself against him, feeling him growing harder beneath me. I make him raise his arms and I pull his shirt off. It joins mine in our growing pile of discarded clothing. I'm just about to reach for his belt when he slides his hands under my ass and picks me up. He gets off the bed, carrying me as if I weigh nothing at all.

Hawk sets me down on my feet and quickly unbuttons my jeans, pushing them down over my hips, taking my panties along with them. And when he has me fully naked, the self-consciousness sets in, and I move my hands to cover myself. But he catches my wrists and shakes his head. He looks at me like I'm a living work of art. Like I'm the most beautiful woman in the world. I've never had a man look at me like that and I feel myself quivering beneath his gaze. He gives me a warm smile.

"I've never seen a more beautiful woman than you," he says. "Never in

my life.”

My cheeks flush again but I force myself to withstand the discomfort of his compliment. I’m not used to receiving compliments—obviously. They’re not something I’ve ever been good at taking. I’ve always assumed people were just being nice. But the sincerity I hear in his voice and see on his face makes me want to believe him. And it starts to make me feel like maybe it could be true.

I reach out and unbuckle his pants. He starts to take my hands to move them away, but I give him a firm swat which makes him laugh. I undo his zipper and push his pants down the way he did to mine. And when I see him, fully naked, his muscular body thick with corded muscle, and his cock, long and rigid, all I can do is gasp. It’s even bigger than I imagined—and believe me, I’ve been imagining it. I’ve never been with somebody as large as Hawk and there’s a slight quiver of fear in me that he’s too big.

Before I can say or do anything though, he picks me up and carries me back to the bed. Hawk lays down on his back then positions me how he wants me: straddling his face. The moment his tongue hits my clit, I feel my entire body stiffen. I moan as he starts to lap at me, running his tongue along my lips before plunging it deep into my opening. I lean forward, bracing myself against the headboard, gasping as he licks me then sucks on my clit, giving it a gentle nip intermittently.

My veins feel like they’re filled with liquid lightning, and I can’t stop my legs from shaking. I reach down and grab a handful of his hair, accidentally yanking hard on it. He doesn’t seem to mind though, because his tongue doesn’t skip a beat. He licks and laps at me with a fury that has me clenching my thighs, squeezing him, and I don’t seem able to control it. If he notices or even cares, he doesn’t show it.

Still gripping his hair, I feel myself rolling my hips, grinding myself down against his mouth. He responds by driving his tongue into me even deeper, making me throw my head back and cry out. He grabs hold of my hips, pulling me down ever harder onto his mouth, licking me with a ferocity that pushes me to the brink. I’m getting lightheaded. And when he takes my clit into his mouth, swirling his tongue around, I swear to God I start seeing stars.

My grip on his hair tightens even more and my body tenses for just a moment before I go tumbling over the precipice. I feel like I’ve lost control of my body and my thighs clamp shut around his head, squeezing him tight as

I come. My whole body bucks and I spasm, screaming his name as I writhe on his face, gripped by an orgasm so powerful, I feel like I might just pass out. And through it all, Hawk continues to drive his tongue into me, teasing my clit, prolonging an ecstasy that has me feeling like I'm riding a roller coaster.

Slowly, it eases and I'm able to catch my breath again. I ease myself off his face to find him smiling up at me, his mouth and chin slick with my juices glistening in the room's dim light. I lean down and kiss him, forcing my tongue into his mouth, letting him feel an ounce of the passion that's bubbling up in me. As our kiss deepens, I reach down and grab hold of his cock, clenching it in my fist tight, then start to stroke him. Up and down, gripping him even harder, squeezing until he moans.

I start to move down his body, intent on taking him into my mouth, but he stops me. When I turn and look back at him, he shakes his head and gives me a smile.

“But—”

He pulls me back to him and kisses me again. Hawk grabs my hair and pulls my head back, planting soft kisses on my neck, sending a shiver down my spine. He runs the tip of his tongue from my ear down to my collarbone and I shudder, feeling the waves of pleasure rolling through me. Then he gently pushes me down onto my back and I part my thighs, allowing him to climb on top of me. He leans down and takes my breast into his mouth again, swirling his tongue around my nipple as he cups the other and squeezes it firmly.

Hawk braces himself on his arms, looking down on me with a look of pure passion on his face. But even more than that, I see something deeper in the way he looks at me. His face is filled with affection, but it's more than that.

I don't know that I'd say he's looking at me with an expression of love on his face—given my life, I'm not sure I'd even know what that looks like. To be honest. But if I were to imagine what that looks like, I think it would be something exactly like what I'm seeing right now. And the mere idea that he could feel so strong for me sets my heart beating even faster because it mirrors my own feelings.

He kisses me again as I feel the tip of his cock pressed against my opening. I hold my breath, recalling how large he is, bracing myself for the pain. But he parts my lips gently and slides himself in slowly. Gently.

The way I deserve to be touched.

I take him into me inch by inch and though there's a slight pinch of pain from how huge he is, it's overwhelmed by the rush of pleasure that fills my body. I bite my bottom lip and squeeze my eyes shut, taking a minute to revel in the sensations coursing through me.

"Are you all right?" he asks softly.

I nod and feel the smile crossing my face. "I'm great."

He laughs softly and gently starts to roll his hips, the feeling of him moving within me setting off explosions of pleasure that leave me quivering. The sensation of his long shaft sliding against my slick inner walls is unlike anything I've ever felt before. It's so intense, it's almost too much to bear.

His movements are slow but passionate, and he keeps his eyes locked onto mine. Hawk's face is flushed, and a low moan is passing his lips, telling me he's relishing every stroke as much as I am.

I know I shouldn't be since I've seen this side of him before, but I'm surprised by how gentle he is with me. I expected a man his size to be rougher. To go harder. I guess I expected him to be more of the "fucking" type rather than the "making love" sort.

I guess he can always find ways to surprise me.

His every movement is slow and tender. He's so caring, so attentive. He tries to ensure that I'm all right, that I'm being pleased and that I'm enjoying myself. Hawk has made this entire evening about me. About catering to my wants and my needs and fulfilling my desires. I press my head back into the pillows and let out a long, throaty moan as he slips deep within me, filling me up in ways I never have been before.

I reach up and kiss him then pull back and roll over onto my stomach. Hawk leans forward and brushes my hair to the side, kissing my neck and giving my shoulder a bite that makes me shiver. He slides himself into me from behind, moving himself as deep as he can and holding himself there. I bite the pillow under me, the pain blending with the pleasure, the sensations coursing through me almost overwhelming.

"You feel amazing. So amazing," I gasp.

His breath is quick and shallow and as he starts to move. I grit my teeth, the feeling of him so deep inside of me making my eyes roll back into my head. Hawk moves faster, thrusting himself into me with a little more force. I writhe beneath him, my every nerve ending feeling like it's on fire. I can't get enough of him. I want more.

“Harder, baby,” I moan. “Faster.”

He obliges me and starts to thrust himself into me with a renewed vigor. My eyes widen and my mouth falls open and a strangled gasp spills from my mouth.

“Oh, God. Yes, baby. Just like that,” I cry.

Hawk is pumping himself into me in hard, steady strokes. He pierces me and drives himself deep, touching off erotic explosions in the warm center of me.

“Jesus,” he grunts. “You feel so good.”

His words are breathy, his voice hoarse as he continues to power himself into me. I feel him swelling and I tighten myself around him. Hawk stutters and loses his rhythm for a moment but is quick to regain it. The feeling of his shaft sliding along my slippery depths in that hard, pounding tempo has me near the brink again. My entire body is tingling, and my skin feels like it’s on fire. I feel him swelling and know he’s close.

I turn my head and look at him over my shoulder. Hawk’s expression is rapturous and mirrors my own. He gives me one hard, final thrust, holding himself deep inside of me. A loud, throaty scream bursts from my throat as I come again. My entire body is shaking as my orgasm crashes down over me. Hawk is buried so deep within me that I feel him twitch and a moment later, his cries blend with my own as he erupts. I feel him throbbing and pulsing as he fills me with his warm, sticky seed.

We remain as we are, me flat on my stomach, Hawk on top of me, his staff still buried to the hilt inside of me, riding out the waves of ecstasy that are washing over us. He’s trembling as hard as I am and he’s out of breath as well. As I feel him soften, he withdraws and flops onto his back, trying to catch his breath. I roll over and lay my head on his chest and Hawk wraps his arm around me, pulling me close. He runs his fingers through my hair as I trace patterns on his flat, taut belly with the tip of my finger.

We lay together, cuddled together like that, not speaking for several long moments. We just enjoy the feeling and the afterglow. My basis of comparison sucks, but that was the most intense, incredible, and beautiful sex I’ve ever had with somebody. I felt things I’ve never felt before. Things I never imagined I could feel.

I look up at him and smile. “That was amazing.”

He nods. “Yes, you are.”

Hawk pulls me closer to him and envelops me in his arms. I nestle myself

into him, feeling perfectly safe. Perfectly protected. And perfectly loved.

He places a gentle kiss on the crown of my head and wrapped up in him like I am, we both drift off to sleep.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR



My eyes fly open, and I wake up from a disturbing dream with a jolt. I sit up and look around me, disoriented for a moment, not recognizing my surroundings. The cobwebs of that dream cling to me, though the specifics of it elude me. All I recall is seeing Molly's face. She's screaming for me, calling my name as she disappears down a long, dark tunnel. I chase her but can never catch up. And all I see is her being pulled further and further down into the dark.

My heart is racing and my breathing is heavy. It takes me a minute to come back to the present and realize where I am. I swallow hard and wipe the sweat I feel beaded up on my brow. The room around us is still lit—we fell asleep before we turned everything off so I can see that Molly is still asleep beside me. She's got the sheet pulled up over her and it clings to the sultry curves of her body.

I smile to myself as I recall how it felt to be inside of her. How it felt to feel her writhing beneath me, listening to her breathy moans and passionate cries. I would have given anything to feel her mouth on me, but I wanted tonight to be special for her. I wanted tonight to be just for her. I wanted her to feel special, to give her a positive memory to associate with sex.

I know until now, her only memories of sex involve men she loathed, men who used her, and men who treated her horribly. As she embarks on this new life of hers, I want her to start building new and good memories and associations.

She stirs in her sleep and rolls over. As if she can somehow sense in her sleep that she's being watched, her eyes pop open and she looks at me, startled.

“Okay, that’s creepy,” she mutters. “Do you always watch the women you sleep with?”

I shrug. “They normally don’t stay the night.”

She laughs as she sits up and slaps me playfully on the shoulder. “You’re a pig.”

“Not always. But sometimes.”

“Good to know.”

Molly yawns and stretches lazily. The sheet falls away, giving me a clear view of her perfect breasts and shapely body. I reach out and trail the tips of my fingers across her smooth skin, making her recoil and giggle.

“That tickles,” she says.

“Sorry,” I reply with a grin.

“I don’t think you are.”

“You might be right.”

Molly laughs and leans forward, planting a gentle kiss on my lips. I take her hand in mine and give it a gentle squeeze and we sit together, staring into each other’s eyes. The air in the room crackles with tension and the weight of the things we’re not saying to one another.

From my perspective, I just don’t want to say what’s on my heart right now. I’m still trying to understand it myself. Even if I told her what I’m thinking and feeling, I don’t think she would get it. Mostly because I’m pretty sure my explanation would be lacking. Severely.

I’ve never been the most eloquent guy in the world. But something about her makes me feel even more tongue-tied than usual. I don’t think I’m a stupid man but when I’m looking into her eyes, I feel like I’ve got the communication skills of a child. My brain turns to mush and whenever I try to speak, I feel like I can’t get a word out around my foot, which seems to be planted there firmly.

“Are you all right?” she asks.

I nod. “Yeah. Just a stupid dream.”

She gives me a shy smile. “I’m honestly surprised I didn’t have a bad one.”

“Don’t worry,” I tell her. “I’m here. I’ll protect you from the bad dreams.”

She laughs softly. “My hero. I’ll hold you to that. I have a feeling I’m going to need you to chase them away sooner or later.”

“Well, don’t you worry. I’m not going anywhere.”

“That makes me happy.”

I lean forward and dot the tip of her nose with a gentle kiss. “Me too,” I smile. I slip off the bed and stretch, letting out a hefty yawn. “I’m going to take a shower. You go on back to sleep.”

She smiles and lays down on her side, pulling the blanket up to her shoulder. I linger for a moment, looking at her and feeling my heart swell with emotion. I’ve never been in love. I’ve never even come close really, so I’ve got no real experience in dealing with those feelings. I wouldn’t know what love felt like if it walked up and kicked me in the dick. But as inexperienced as I am with love and matters of the heart, the only way I can describe what I’m feeling for her is that.

It’s love. It has to be. I can’t think of anything else it could be.

Just looking at her makes me happy. It fills my heart with a plethora of emotions. Touching her feels electric. Kissing her makes me feel like my heart might actually explode in my chest. And fucking her... I don’t even have the words to describe how that made me feel. I’m pretty sure it’s one of those things that is so beautiful, so amazing, that no words in the history of language could properly describe it.

All I want is for her to be happy, to hear her laugh, and see her smile. All I want is to help keep her safe and never leave her side. It’s bizarre and terrifying given how little time we’ve actually known each other, but I already know that my life would feel incomplete without her. I already know that I want her to be a part of my life permanently. I already can’t bear the thought of a life without her.

If that’s not love, I don’t know what else it could be. And it’s such a potent, powerful, soul-shaking feeling, if this isn’t love, I’m not sure I can handle what real love feels like.

I lean down and plant a soft kiss on her cheek. Her eyes are fluttering and already starting to close, making me smile. I turn and grab some of my things and head into the bathroom. After closing the door behind me, I turn on the water and give it a moment to get warm. I open the sliding glass door and step over the tub wall and into the shower/tub combo then, close the door again behind me.

I lean forward, bracing myself on the wall with my forearm. The hot water washes over me and I relish the way the heat is soaking into my body. I turn my face up into the spray, letting it clean off the remaining fragments of the dream that continue to stick to me. I’m not one who normally has

nightmares so that's probably why it's especially disturbing to me. But I already know why I had it. I'm afraid of losing Molly. Already. That dream played on those fears that are already becoming deep-rooted within me.

I try to push it away, not wanting to think about it anymore. I tell myself that I'm not going to lose her. I'm going to protect her as well as I can for as long as I can. And with Hammerhead likely dead and the Howlers in disarray, I don't see there's much to be afraid of anyway. Even still, I want to keep her safe from the terrible things life can throw at a person. I want to protect her from the horrible random acts of chance. I know that's unreasonable and borders on stupid, but Molly has endured so much in life already that I want to keep her from having to endure anything more. I want her life to be nothing but joyous from here on out and for her to get everything she deserves.

The sound of the shower door opening behind me startles me but before I can turn around, I feel a pair of arms slip around my waist, making me smile. Molly plants gentle kisses all over my back and runs her hands up and down my chest, sending waves of sensation coursing through me.

"I thought you were going back to sleep," I chuckle.

"I can leave if you want," she replies teasingly. "But if I do that, then I can't do this..."

The shower stall is small and awkward, but she manages to get me turned around with a little effort. Her eyes are sparkling and the smile on her face is stretched from ear to ear and she laughs hysterically.

"That was so much sexier in my head," she says.

I join her laughter. "Yeah, this shower isn't really conducive to romantic scenes."

She shrugs. "It's good enough to shoot porn in though. As I was saying..."

Molly drops to her knees in front of me and before I can say a word, she takes my cock into her mouth. She grips the base of it and squeezes it tight. My body responds immediately, and I start to rise to the occasion. As she moves her head and hand back and forth in unison, a low groan passes my lips. Molly tightens her grip with both her hand and mouth and starts to move faster, to squeeze me even tighter. Fire flows through my veins as I watch her down on her knees, looking up at me as she sucks my cock.

"Christ, that feels good," I moan.

She obviously can't speak, but I can tell she's smiling as she moves her

head up and down on me. This was not what I was expecting when I came in for a shower. She surprised me. I don't normally like surprises, but this one is good enough that it might make me rethink my opposition to surprises entirely. I run my fingers through her hair, our eyes still locked together, reveling in the sensations that are coursing through me.

Molly lets my staff slip from her mouth but keeps her hand wrapped tightly around it, continuing to pump it nice and hard.

"How does that feel?" she asks.

"Amazing," is all I can muster.

She smiles. "I figured it was my turn to return the favor."

"You didn't have to."

"Shut up. I wanted to," she replies. "If there's one thing you're teaching me already it's that I'm my own woman and I will do as I please—and you'll do as I say."

"Yes ma'am," I say with a laugh. "I'm kind of liking this demanding you. It's pretty hot."

"Yeah?"

I nod. "Definitely."

"Good."

She takes me back into her mouth and starts to suck and stroke me even harder. My legs are trembling, and I feel myself rushing toward the precipice. I reach down and grab hold of her hair, pulling it hard. She lets out a soft, muffled moan and keeps working me harder. My body feels like it's been wrapped in electricity and it's crackling all along my skin. I feel myself swelling and it feels so good, but I don't want this to be over just yet.

As if sensing my dilemma, Molly looks up at me with that mischievous glint in her eye and pulls away. She stands up and plants a long, slow kiss on me that keeps my entire body tingling. She slowly pulls back and gives me a smile.

"My turn," she says.

"Gladly."

She scoots around me, the cramped confines of the shower making this all almost comical, and our laughter echoes in the small shower. Molly kisses me again, briefly this time, then turns around so her back is to me. She bends over slightly and plants her hands on the shower wall then looks over her shoulder at me.

"Do you need a written invitation?" she asks.

I look down at her perfectly round ass and grab hold of it with my hands, delighting in the feel of her soft, warm skin.

“No. No, I do not,” I say.

“Good boy.”

Grabbing hold of her hips, I step forward and nestle the head of my cock between her velvety folds. She bites her bottom lip as I slowly push forward, sliding myself into her until I’m fully sheathed. She draws in a sharp breath and closes her eyes for a moment, but the smile never fades from her face. When she opens them again, they’re filled with a sultry, seductive gleam.

“What are you waiting for?” she asks teasingly. “Get to work.”

“Yes ma’am,” I say, returning her smile.

My fingers are pressed hard into the flesh of her hips as I start to drive myself into her. Molly gasps and pushes back against me, taking my staff even deeper into her. She’s so tight and plunging into her warm, wet pussy sends ripples of the most intense pleasure I’ve ever felt washing through me. Her body twitches and she trembles as I thrust myself into her.

“God, Mols,” I groan. “You feel so fucking amazing.”

She gasps and mutters something, seeming to be unable to form a coherent word. But her eyes roll into the back of her head and I feel her quivering around my thick shaft. I feel like I’m losing control as she writhes against me, thrusting her body backward in time with me as I drive forward, our bodies connecting with a wet slapping sound.

What she ignites in me is primal. I reach up and grip her shoulder with one hand and grip her hair with the other, giving it a hard yank backward. She cries out, moaning wildly, and I can tell she likes things a little on the rougher side. It surprises me given what she’s been through, but it turns me on just as much, so I just go with it.

I’m grateful the shower has a textured mat, so my feet find purchase and I’m able to pound myself into her hard and fast. Molly’s groans grow louder, her cries of ecstasy sharper. Her body tightens up around me and she trembles wildly. I yank her head back harder and Molly calls out my name.

“I’m coming,” she cries. “I’m coming so hard for you, baby. Oh, fuck.”

Molly thrashes and writhes but I tighten my grip, holding her in place. Her breath is labored and her moans breathy. I keep driving myself into her, the feeling of her quivering and bucking so wildly pushing me toward the peak of bliss. Molly cries out one last time and thrusts herself backward, impaling herself deep upon my stalk. Feeling her tighten up around me sends

me hurtling over the ledge and I pull her to me even tighter. My cock twitches as I burst, sending my warm juices flowing into her.

I lean forward, planting my hand on the wall over her head as I continue to pulse, every last drop of my seed spilling into her. Our breathing is ragged, but when Molly turns her head, I see a glazed look in her eye and a smile on her face. Slowly, I feel my staff deflating until it slips out of her. She turns around and wraps her arms around me. I pull her close and lay my cheek on top of her head.

We stand together beneath the warm spray of the water raining down over us. I've never been so content and satisfied in all my life. Molly is definitely what my soul has been yearning for all this time. I just can't believe I actually found her. Not everybody is that lucky.

Now, all I need to figure out is how we fit into each other's lives, and how the Kings are going to fit into my new reality. There's some small part of me that fears they don't.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE



Molly

I can see the sun glowing around the edges of the room's blackout curtains and know it's later than I usually wake up. I turn my head and glance at the clock on the nightstand and see it's half-past eight. I turn my head the other way and smile when I see Hawk with his head on the pillow, still asleep. His breathing is shallow and even. He looks peaceful. Memories of last night flood my mind and fill my body with a heat that I'm growing to enjoy.

I honestly never thought I would enjoy sex again. Not after what I've been through. Not after I've been used like I have been. I never believed I'd be able to be intimate with anybody. That I'd never be able to let my walls down and let anybody in. Though I hoped for those things and clung to that hope like a drowning man clings to a piece of driftwood, I didn't know that I would ever actually be able to feel the way I feel for Hawk about anybody again.

But Hawk has come into my life and turned everything upside down. He's made me see things in ways I never believed possible. He's made me see myself in ways I didn't think I could. He's helped me tap into a strength and courage I never knew I had.

I'm grateful for all those things, but the one thing I'm most grateful for is that he's helped me believe in myself. He's helped me believe that I'm worthy of love. That I'm worthy of the life I want to live. And that I can be the person I want to be. He's helped me believe that I can do and be anything I want and that nothing can stand in my way.

Hawk's eyes flutter, then open, and he covers his mouth as he yawns. Still lying with his head on his pillow, he looks at me and smiles.

“Now who’s being creepy?” he asks. “Do you always watch people sleep?”

“Only those people I like.”

“That sounds even creepier.”

I laugh and give him a shrug. “Yeah, maybe.”

“No, definitely.”

“Shut up,” I say and slap him on the arm.

“Don’t get me worked up now, Miss Sanders,” he teases. “The spirit is willing, but the flesh needs a rest after all those rounds last night.”

I toss my head back and chortle, then reach out and trace his jawline with the tip of my finger and smile. He takes my hand and kisses my finger.

“Do you know, I have never smiled as much as I do because of you,” I tell him. “Never in my entire life.”

“Yeah well, I have that effect on women.”

“Oh, do you now?”

“I most certainly do. Ask around.”

The laughter bursts from my mouth. “You are a pig!”

“Oink oink.”

He pulls me to him, and we cling to each other, laughing like idiots together. The whole scene just feels so domestic. Like we’ve been together for years and this is just another Saturday morning spent in bed together. It somehow just feels so right and natural. Given how little time we’ve actually known each other, it’s more than remarkable. It’s actually kind of frightening. And it makes me wonder what Hawk thinks about it all. I guess if I want to know, I just need to ask him. He’s been nothing but honest with me.

Even as confident as I’m feeling right now, I don’t know that I have it in me. I couldn’t bear it if Hawk didn’t feel the same way that I do. I mean, I knew going into this that there were no guarantees. Everything he’s said and done to this point makes me want to believe he feels like I do but we haven’t talked about it. We haven’t shared our feelings with each other. He doesn’t know what I feel or what I want. And I don’t know that about him either. All I have are assumptions based on things he’s said or the way he looks at me.

I silently kick myself. I realize I sound like a teenage girl and the thought of letting him hear that in me makes me cringe. I’d never want him to think of me as some insecure, immature girl. I want him to see me the way he seems to—as a strong, confident woman who can handle anything life throws

at her. And to be fair, there are times I feel like that.

But there are other times when I feel like I'm teetering on the verge of a massive breakdown. Times when I need to fall to pieces. Like yesterday in the shower. Times when I feel weak, when I feel powerless, and when I feel like all I want is for somebody to hold me and tell me everything is going to be okay. If I'm being honest with myself, that piece of me has been in the driver's seat for much of the last few years. I'm used to feeling that way, as much as I hate to admit it.

But I don't want to anymore.

"Penny for your thoughts," he says.

"It's going to cost you a lot more than that, mister."

"Wow," he says. "Inflation is a bitch."

"Smartass."

He's looking into my eyes, and I feel my heart flutter, which makes me giggle. There's so much I want to know about him and so many questions I have. I don't even know where to begin. He's intriguing and mysterious, and every question I have leads to another. And another. And another. I'm pretty sure I could spend my entire life learning about him and still have yet more questions to ask.

"Come on. What's going on in that pretty little head of yours?" he presses.

"A lot of things," I reply. "I wouldn't even know where to start."

"Pick a place."

I smile softly. "All right. Well, I was thinking about the fact that there was a time in my life where I would have just fainted on the spot if I saw a headless corpse," I say. "And yet now, I can watch you dress one in your clothes, and it barely fazes me. I'm not sure what that says about me."

"I don't think it really says anything about you," he offers. "If it says anything, I tend to think it says that you've had your eyes opened to the world around you and that you've learned how to adapt to it."

I laugh softly. "That's certainly one interpretation. It certainly puts me in a better light than I think I deserve."

"That's not true. You deserve to be in a good light. You're a good person, Molly," he replies. "You're the best person I've ever known. And just because you've learned how to roll with the punches, even in a horrible situation, doesn't mean you're not. It means you've seen some things. And you've not only survived, but you've learned how to cope with those things."

I listen to his words and let them sink in for a minute. “You know, you really have a way of putting things. You have a way of making me think and see things differently.”

“Well, I’m thinking about a career change.”

“Yeah? What are you thinking about doing?”

“Oh, a motivational speaker.”

My laughter is sharp and hysterical. “You are hilarious.”

“It’s from my time as a stand-up comic.”

“You used to be a comic?”

“No,” he replies, totally deadpan, which makes me laugh harder.

I love the way he makes me laugh. And he’s able to do it without even trying. It’s one of the many, many things I appreciate about him.

“Hawk, when you said you wanted to explore things between us... did you mean it?” I ask, cringing at the question that slipped out of my mouth. “That wasn’t like a heat of the moment, fueled by passion thing?”

He nods. “Of course I meant it. The heat of the moment and the passion thing had nothing to do with it,” he says. “Molly, I know it’s insane, but I care about you. A lot. You’re the only woman I’ve ever been with that I didn’t want to run away from. Instead, I find myself wanting to run toward you. You’re the most incredible woman I’ve ever known, and this is going to sound nuts, so I’m sorry in advance, but I want to build a life with you.”

I let out a small breath of relief and a trembling smile crosses my lips. “Really? Do you really mean that?”

“Every word of it.”

I lay my hand gently on his cheek and feel my heart racing. Hawk leans forward and gives me a gentle kiss.

“I’m sorry if I sound like a stupid, insecure teenage girl,” I tell him. “I just... I guess I’m a stupid, insecure, no longer a twenty-something girl. I guess I sometimes just need to hear that.”

Hawk’s smile is soft but sincere. “I will tell you that as often as you need to hear it.”

“You are an amazing man.”

He gives me a smile and nods. “Yeah. I kind of am, huh?”

We both laugh like lunatics, and he pulls me to him, placing a fiery kiss on my lips. I feel him stirring and know exactly where I want this kiss to lead.

“And I’ll have the chicken and waffles,” Hawk says, handing the menu back to the waitress with a smile.

“Comin’ right up,” she says and walks off to place our order.

I frown at him. “Chicken and waffles?”

I nod. “It’s one of the best things ever.”

“If you say so.”

“I do. I most definitely do,” he replies. “Don’t knock it ‘til you try it.”

“You know, I’ve never tried barbecued road kill, but I don’t think I need to eat it to know I’ll hate it.”

He laughs. “You just don’t know what you’re missing,” he says. “You are missing out on one of the finest things in life.”

“You said I was one of the finest things in life not half an hour ago.”

“Well, I wasn’t lying then,” he points out. “And I’m not lying now either.”

I grin. “Fair enough, I suppose. Though I’m not real thrilled with being compared to a plate of chicken and waffles.”

“You will notice, though, that I eat both with the same vigor.”

My guffaw is so loud, it draws the attention of everybody in the diner. My cheeks flare with heat and I look down, trying to avoid the curious stares.

“You are awful,” I say.

“That’s not what you said just about half an hour ago.”

“Really, really awful.”

Trying to avoid making a spectacle of myself, I tone down the laughter and take a drink of my coffee and look around the small diner. It looks a lot like the diner we stopped at on our way toward Vegas the day Hawk and Reaper helped me escape. It has the same black and white tiles and chrome fixtures. This time the vinyl booths are a bright blue. Otherwise, it’s virtually identical which kind of amuses me. There isn’t a lot of originality in small-town diners.

“So, what are we going to do?” I ask.

“Well, I figure we’re going to need to lay low a bit. Just to be safe.”

“But you said Hammerhead is dead.”

He nods. “Yeah, but there are others—Hogwild, Jammer, Deadbolt—not to mention any number of guys who still fly the Deviant colors. They may have figured out that we scammed ‘em and might be lookin’ for a little

payback.”

I groan. “Great.”

“Don’t worry. I’m going to keep you safe,” he tells me. “That’s one reason we got out of town. We’re going to keep our heads down for a little bit. Just until all the dust out there settles. That’s all. It’s all good. Trust me.”

“I do trust you,” I say and really mean it. “But why do you look so troubled when you’re talking about it?”

He laughs softly. “You don’t miss anything, do you?”

“Not a lot,” I admit.

“I’m not all that worried, if that’s what you’re thinking. I don’t think they’ll be comin’ out here to find us,” he says.

“But?”

“But, Reaper and I basically started a war out there. The Howlers and the Deviants are going to blame each other. Shit will get real bad, real quick,” he says. “Unless they both figure out they’ve been set up. If they do, they’ll come lookin’ for that bike we’re on. The Howlers are going to want to know who shot up their club and the Deviants are going to want to know who offed their guy then stole his bike.”

“But you’re not worried about it, huh?”

He shakes his head. “Nah. Just means we need to get rid of the bike.”

“So? How do we do that?”

“I know a guy who can take care of it when we get to where we’re going.”

“And where are we going?”

He gives me a grin. “It’s a surprise.”

The waitress comes by and drops off our plates and I look at his mound of fried chicken and waffles. I hate to admit it, but it actually doesn’t look half bad. Not that I’ll tell him that.

“Eat up,” he says. “We have a long road ahead of us today.”

I know he says not to worry, but if the Deviants and the Howlers are looking for that bike, and by extension, looking for us, I can’t help but worry. I’m scared all over again as visions of Hammerhead, back from the dead and looking for revenge against the one who poisoned him, dance through my head.

There’s a piece of me still terrified that the day this is all behind me will never come. That the fear that’s gripping me will never subside.

I let out a breath and silently pray for a day when I won’t be looking over

my shoulder all the time. I pray that it comes soon.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX



“Chico,” I greet him. “What’s up, man?”

I step forward and pull the man into a tight embrace and clap each other on the back.

“It’s been a while, man,” I say.

“Sí, *amigo*. How you been, man?”

“Been good, brother. How about you?”

“Lovin’ it out here,” he says.

Chico is tall and heavysset with tawny skin and dark eyes. He’s completely bald and has the tattoo of a Mayan mask on his scalp. He’s got a bushy goatee and has worn the same pair of dark shades since I’ve known him, day or night. He’s a good guy who likes to laugh as much as he likes his tequila and used to run a chop shop out in Vegas. The Kings did a lot of business with him. But he got popped, did a five-year bid, then moved out here for a fresh start. Or at least, fresh ground to start up a new chop shop.

Chico lowers his shades and gives Molly the elevator eyes, a smile crossing his face. Putting his shades back up, he turns to me.

“Dating up and out of your league, I see,” Chico comments.

“You don’t know the half of it,” I reply. “Molly, this is Chico. Chico, Molly.”

He turns to her. “Nice to meet you,” he says. “You know what you’re gettin’ into hangin’ around this *pendejo*?”

“I’m starting to get an inkling,” she replies teasingly.

He nods. “If you were smart, you’d run for the hills now.”

I laugh and turn to Molly. “Don’t mind Chico. He’s just a bitter, jaded old man.”

He clicks his tongue. “Don’t make me wrong though.”

Molly shrugs. “I figure I’ll hang around a little while longer. Just see what kind of trouble he attracts.”

“The worst kind. He’s like a trouble magnet, this guy.”

“Well, the same can be said about me,” Molly offers. “Maybe we’ll get lucky and cancel each other’s troubles out.”

Chico laughs. “She’s sharp. Smart. And drop-dead gorgeous,” he says. “You are most definitely way out of your league, man.”

“Don’t I know it,” I reply.

“So, what can I do for you?” he asks.

“Need to make a bike disappear,” I tell him.

He finally looks at the bike behind us and I see his eyebrows go up and he whistles low.

“Yeah, I’d say you do,” he notes. “What happened to your Fat Boy?”

“Collateral damage,” I tell him. “Couldn’t be helped.”

“That’s a damn shame. That bike was cherry, brother.”

“Yeah, I know,” I say then look at Molly. “But some things are worth a little sacrifice.”

“The Deviants know you got their bike?” he asks.

“That’s... complicated.”

“Ain’t it always?”

“Can you wave a wand and make it disappear?”

He levels me with a stare. “Gonna cost ya.”

“We’ve been friends for how long now, Chico?”

“Not long enough for that big a favor,” he counters, but a hint of mirth in his voice betrays him.

“All right, all right,” I relent. “You know I’m good for it. And I’ll need a new one out of here too.”

He purses his lips and nods. “Yeah, I think I can do that,” he says. “Won’t be as cherry as your last bike, but it’ll get you where you need to go.”

“That’s all I need,” I tell him.

“All right, follow me.”

Chico leads us to the back of his shop and through the door. It leads into a parking lot that’s full of bikes. A lot of them are Frankenstein jobs—no doubt parts from bikes that have disappeared. But there are also some nice ones that aren’t made from various and sundry parts mixed in as well.

He walks us directly over to a vintage Harley. It’s nice. Real nice. Could

use some maintenance and shine, but it's in shockingly good condition considering it's at least a couple decades old. I give it a once over and whistle in appreciation. If I could put in some work on this bad boy—and make no mistake, it could use some work—I could be riding this for decades to come. Hell, my son could probably ride this when he's old enough.

That thought makes me pause. Where the hell did that come from? Me having a kid? I know things are moving real fast with Molly, but that's a bit far in the future even for me.

“Haven't had much time to work with this one,” Chico tells me. “But no one will know it's you.”

“I'll take it.”

Chico opens the saddlebag and pulls out a set of keys.

“Here you go, brother,” he says.

I give him the keys to the Deviant's bike. “I appreciate you, man.”

“Any time. You know I got your back.”

“And I got yours. You need anything, just give me a shout and I'll come running.”

“Count on it,” he says.

An hour later, I'm pulling into the lot of a hotel called The Sands. It's a series of bungalows that sit on the beach and is within walking distance of the Santa Monica pier. I climb off my new ride then turn and help Molly off the back. Her eyes are wide, and her mouth is a perfect O as she takes it all in. She looks at me and a wide smile crosses her face.

“Are you serious?” she gasps.

“You did say the first thing you'd want to do is go see the ocean,” I remind her.

“I did say that. I just—I didn't think it would happen.”

“One of these days you will learn to not doubt me.”

“Clearly.”

A bell tinkles over the door as I lead her into the manager's office, which is just one of the bungalows just converted to the front room. It has a tiny little counter. The manager obviously lives on the premises and comes out just as we're stepping to the counter. He's a young guy, early thirties maybe,

with long brown hair, green eyes, and golden tan skin. My guess is that he's a surfer and lives here to take advantage of the proximity to the beach.

"What's up?" he asks.

"Hey," I reply. "Got a reservation under the name Richards."

He taps a few keys on the computer and nods. "Yep. Stayin' four weeks?"

"Give or take," I shrug. "If we need to stay longer, can we re-up?"

"As long as we got room, sure," he says, his voice tinged with that SoCal surfer accent.

"You own this place?" I ask.

He nods. "Inherited it when my dad passed," he explains. "Can't beat the commute from work to the waves and back again."

"I suppose you can't," I chuckle.

He fishes a set of keys out of a drawer and hands them to me. "Bungalow Three-C," he says and hands me a sheet of paper. "These are the rules. It's all common-sense stuff. Just make sure you follow them, and we won't have any problems."

"Appreciate you," I nod.

"You got it. Enjoy your stay."

"Thanks."

I turn and lead Molly out of the office. We go to the bike and grab our things, then head for the bungalow assigned to us. Her eyes are still riveted on the ocean and she has a look of wonder on her face.

"Come on. Let's throw our shit in the bungalow then go down to the water," I tell her.

She's practically jumping up and down with excitement, her smile so wide, I fear her face might crack. We get to Three-C and I unlock the door and push it inward. The place is immaculate. There's not a speck of dust to be found anywhere, although there is still a faint lingering odor of pot, which tells me the guy does his own cleaning and doesn't have a maid staff. I suppose it can't be too difficult when there are only eight bungalows, excluding the manager's office. But they all sit on the sand with a view of the Pacific.

The interior is tastefully decorated with a beach theme to it. It's all done in pastels and sandy tones. There's a front room with a large TV on a credenza, a plush and comfy couch, a wingback chair, and a coffee table that's coral pink. There's a kitchen to the right with a pass-through. Three chairs line the pass-through, enabling it to be used as a bar. And there are two

large French doors that open onto a private patio encircled by a low brick wall.

Molly turns to me, her face etched with awe. “Hawk, this is... this is amazing.”

“I hoped you’d like it.”

“Like it? I love it.”

“Good. Then take off your shoes and roll up your pant legs and let’s get out there, huh?”

“How can you afford this?” she asks.

“Don’t you worry about it,” I tell her.

“Hawk, this has got to be so expensive.”

He shrugs. “I came into some money. All you need to know is that we’re going to be all right for a little while.”

“Came into some money, huh?”

I grin and laugh, tossing the duffel bag of money on the bed and unzipping it. Molly peers over into it for the first time and her eyes round in surprise.

“Holy shit, that’s so much money!”

I shrug. “And that’s without even dipping into my account,” I tell her.

“Won’t the Kings be pissed? That’s club money.”

“I’ve got plausible deniability,” I explain, zipping the bag back up and stashing it away in the safe in the closet. “Plus, nobody’s going to come lookin’ for it since not even Reaper knows where we are. Also, everybody already thinks I gave the cash to Hammerhead, so as far as they’re concerned that’s it. They believe I gave him the bag and if it’s lost, it’s his fault. Let them try to get it out of him.”

She laughs. “You seem to have everything figured out already.”

“I like to think so,” he says. “Now, let’s go see about that beach.”

“I can’t wait.”

We take off our boots and roll our pant legs up then open the French doors. We walk through the opening in the retaining wall and walk all the way down to the water’s edge. A wave crashes and sends a rush of white, foamy water up the sand and over our feet. Molly laughs hysterically and claps her hands.

“What do you think?” I ask.

“I think this is amazing.”

The sun is slipping toward the horizon, casting the sky in vivid, fiery

hues. It sparkles off the water dazzlingly, making the surface glow the same shade of red as the sky. Overhead, a couple of seagulls circle, their plaintive cries rolling over the beach. In the distance is the Santa Monica pier and we stop to watch it for a moment. The delighted shrieks of the people on the roller coaster fill the air.

“I’ve never seen the ocean before,” she says softly. “This is more than I ever imagined it would be. It’s beautiful. It’s magical.”

I nod as I survey the endless ocean stretched out before us. I’ve always preferred the endless desert vistas, but there is definitely something about the ocean that’s soothing. Calming. The heavy scent of salt in the air is pleasant and the crashing of the waves is a melodic sound I think I could listen to just about forever. Molly is right. It’s beautiful.

“What made you think to come out here?” she asks.

“Because this is probably the last place anybody would ever think to look for us,” I explain. “Plus, we’re in LA. There’s like twelve million people in here spread out over a few dozen cities. Good luck trying to find us.”

Molly smiles and turns to me, taking my hands in hers as the waves crash and the water rushes over our feet.

“You really have thought of everything, haven’t you?” she asks.

“I like to think so,” I reply. “At least about what’s important.”

“And have you thought about what comes after this? When the fairy tale ends and we have to go back to reality?”

I give her a gentle smile. “I haven’t,” I admit. “I just want to enjoy the fairy tale for as long as it lasts.”

“That is a very good answer.”

She leans in and gives me a fiery, passionate kiss. The sound of the waves crashing fills my ears and the water rushes over our bare feet. I can’t think of a more perfect evening. Yeah, I want this fairy tale to last as long as it can.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN



Molly

“So? What do you think?” Hawk asks.

“I think it’s incredible.”

We stand before the Caravaggio exhibit looking at the paintings. I’m almost speechless. It’s more beautiful than I could have ever imagined. Every painting is gorgeous. Stunning. When Hawk told me he was taking me to the Getty today, I felt like he told me he was taking me to Disneyland. Art has always been my thing. I’ve loved it since I was a kid and I remember making my parents take me to local museums and galleries. I couldn’t get enough.

Trapped in the Howlers’ clubhouse, I would often think back on those days. I would recall the beauty I’d seen in the paintings and sculptures. Those memories would fill me with joy and would often give me the strength to make it through another day. I vowed that once I got out of there, I would visit a museum just as soon as I could. And Hawk, being the thoughtful and kind man he is, made that vow a reality. He made that wish come true.

“What do you think?” I ask.

He screws up his face and looks at one of the paintings, *the Martyrdom of Saint Matthew*. But the only thing on his face is confusion. It’s kind of cute. I can tell he’s not an art person, which makes me determined to teach him.

“Look at the interplay of light and shadow,” I explain. “Look at the expressions on their faces. Look at the fear in his eyes. And the exultation in his.”

“Yeah, I was going to say that,” he replies.

I laugh softly and take his hand, giving it a firm squeeze. “I’m going to make an art lover out of you yet.”

“I like it. I think it’s cool,” he shrugs. He doesn’t totally sound convinced, but I appreciate that he’s trying his best.

“Art has always filled my heart and soul. It’s always made me think. I see things in these works that always make me reflect on myself and the world around me,” I tell him. “There are always elements in these works that make me think about life and society as a whole.”

Hawk looks at me and smiles but has nothing to say. I can tell he wants to engage with me on this level. Wants to be part of this world with me. But I can see that he’s never been exposed to works like these. He’s never spent time in a gallery or reading about the artists and their inspirations for their pieces. He wants to understand but he doesn’t have the skill set. Not yet anyway. I’m going to work on that.

“I’m sorry. I’m rambling,” I say.

“No, not at all. It’s fascinating,” he tells me with a genuine smile. “I love seeing how passionate you are about it. I love seeing how it lights you up.”

I nod. “It does. It always has.”

“I like that,” he replies. “Maybe I can learn about it too.”

“I’d like that.”

“You’re just going to have to be patient with me,” he says. “But I can see how important it is to you. That makes it important to me too.”

“I’m a very patient teacher. If you really want to learn more, I’d love to show you.”

“I would.”

“Then it’s a date,” I grin, giving him a peck on the cheek. He takes my face in his before I can pull away and plants a deep kiss on me.

God, even in little moments like this, he leaves me breathless.

I take his hand and we stroll through the rest of the museum, looking at the different pieces being housed there. I point certain things out and start to teach him about art. He’s a quick study and is very smart but I can see it doesn’t fire him up the same way it does with me. He’s trying though. And I appreciate him wanting to connect with me about something that means so much to me.

Honestly, I can’t believe life can be like this. The past few weeks have gone by in a blur of fancy dinners and fun days out to amusement parks and other points of interest. He even took me down to the San Diego Zoo. It’s been a whirlwind, but one filled with a joy I’ve never known. A joy I didn’t think I could ever know. And it’s because of this man. He not only saved me

physically, he saved me emotionally as well. He quite literally saved my soul.

We finish our tour and part of me wants to go back through and look at everything all over again. But I don't want to overload Hawk's senses. Not in the first go. I want him to come to love them the way I do. But I know that will be a slow process. I can't expect him to love them based on the first outing. We'll get there though. I'm confident of it.

"How do you feel about sushi tonight?" he asks.

"I'd love it."

"Great. That's a date too," he replies.

I give him a gentle kiss on the cheek as we head out of the museum and climb on his bike—which draws some curious stares, as well as some glares of distaste—and head for downtown LA.

We get back to the bungalow on the beach and Hawk opens the French doors, letting in the heavy salt scent of the sea along with the musical rhythm of the waves crashing against the shoreline. Hawk is standing on the back patio, looking out at the ocean as I slip behind him and wrap my arms around his waist. He takes my hand and pulls me around in front of him. I lean back as he wraps his arms around me and together, we watch the way the moon sparkles dazzlingly on the water. It's the perfect end to a perfect day.

I turn to him and take his hands in mine. Hawk lowers his gaze to mine and his eyes glitter in the moonlight. The smile upon his lips takes my breath away and makes my heart race. We have grown closer over these last few weeks and one thing I've come to realize is that there seems to be no depth to my feelings for him. Every time I feel myself start to even out, he'll say or do something that will reveal an entirely new layer of emotion. It's dizzying and exciting at the same time. And as I look into his eyes, the words form on my lips and pop out before I can stop them.

"I love you," I say. "I love you more than I can say."

His smile widens and his grip on my hands tightens. "It's about time you say it."

"Oh? And you couldn't have said it first?"

"I'm a gentleman, and the lady always goes first."

I laugh and shake my head. “You are terrible. Why do I put up with you?”
“Beats me,” he replies. “But I love you too. I love you so much it makes my heart hurt.”

“It makes me happy to hear that.”

“Well, it’s only fair since you make me insanely happy.”

I reach up and slip my hand behind his neck, pulling him down into a fiery kiss. Our tongues dance in his mouth as he caresses my body. Hawk slides his hands up and rakes his fingers through my hair, drawing a soft shudder from me before he gently pulls my hair, dotting my exposed neck with kisses, stopping to bite my ear lobe before pressing his mouth to mine again.

He pushes me back into the bungalow and I raise my arms as we go, allowing him to strip off my shirt. He tosses it carelessly to the side then single-handedly unclasps my bra, letting it fall to the floor at our feet. I bump into the dining room table behind me, out of room. Hawk leans down and takes my pert nipple into his mouth, giving it a firm bite that draws a sharp squeal of delight from me.

I run my own hands through his hair as he licks and sucks on my breasts, shuddering as he cups and squeezes them. My skin is crawling with fire and the heat is growing in my belly and I feel myself growing warm and slick. I reach down and grip him through his jeans, squeezing his hardening cock, drawing a low moan from him. I pull back and look him in the eye, a flirtatious smile on my face.

“I want you inside me,” I tell him.

“What a coincidence,” he purrs. “Because I want nothing more than to be inside of you right now. I don’t think I can wait.”

“Please don’t.”

As he slides his hands up my thighs and under my skirt, I fumble with his belt buckle. I finally manage to get it undone and his pants unbuttoned. As he’s sliding my panties down my thighs, I reach into his jeans and take hold of his cock. I squeeze it and stroke it, teasing it until he’s as hard as steel. Hawk shimmies out of his pants and quickly takes off his shirt, giving me a view of the taut angles and planes of his torso. I lean forward and kiss his chest, biting his nipples this time.

Hawk picks me up and sets me down on the table that’s behind me then quickly falls to his knees and buries his face between my legs. I gasp and grab his hair, pushing his head down further and grinding myself against his

face.

“I thought you couldn’t wait to fuck me,” I say, my voice breathy.

He pulls back and looks up at me. “I can’t. But with you sitting there all pretty like that, I just couldn’t not take a taste of you. You’re just too sweet.”

I force his head down again. “Then get to work.”

And he does. Hawk drives his tongue deep into me, skipping all the preamble, skipping all the teasing, and going straight to it. He laps at my opening, tasting my dripping juices and getting them all over his face. When he takes my clit into his mouth and sucks hard on it, I cry out. I yank on his hair even harder, my thighs clamped around his head, then push his head down into me. I can’t get enough of feeling his tongue inside of me. Can’t get enough of feeling him sucking on my clit.

He’s talented with that tongue of his and adds a pair of fingers to the mix, making me call out his name. He’s driving his fingers into me at a rapid pace along with his tongue now, driving me wild. I’m shaking uncontrollably. My heart is beating so hard I feel like it might burst in my chest. My entire body is rocked by sensation, and I feel a fluttering between my legs. Hawk is quickly pushing me toward the brink. My body is aflame, and my veins are coursing with electricity. And when he plunges his fingers into me as he sucks my clit, I lose control of myself.

“Oh God yes. Yes, baby, yes!” I cry.

A feeling like a bolt of lightning strikes me and I writhe on the tabletop, my hand on the back of Hawk’s head, forcing it down, forcing him to keep licking me as I come, unable to get enough of that talented tongue. Gradually, the sensations fade and I’m left panting, my body dewy, feeling lightheaded. But happy.

Hawk gets to his feet and steps forward. As he kisses me, I reach down and take his cock into my hand. I stroke him hard and fast, relishing the feel of his rigid length in my hand. I pull back and look up at him, a salacious smile on my lips.

“There’s no need to be gentle with me tonight,” I purr.

“Didn’t plan on it.”

“Good boy.”

With one hard thrust, Hawk buries his thick cock deep inside of me and I gasp as I dig my fingernails into his shoulders. He draws in a sharp breath as I drag them along his skin and then he starts to pound me. Hard. I wrap my legs around his waist, luxuriating in the feeling of his rigid staff driving into

me again and again.

Our bodies crash together as Hawk moves, rolling his hips, slamming himself into my tight, slick opening. I throw my head back and moan, my voice blending with the crashing of the waves outside, creating an erotic soundtrack for us. Hawk grunts as he plunges his staff into me, burying himself to the hilt. I feel his body growing taut and feel his dick swelling inside of me. I know he's not going to be able to hold out very much longer.

He steps back, then pulls me off the table. Hawk leans down and gives me a kiss, then spins me around and roughly bends me over the table. I grip the edges of it as he steps up behind me and grabs a fist full of hair. He yanks my head backward as he drives himself into me, making my mouth fall open. A stuttering gasp bursts from my throat as he starts to fuck me, his thick, rigid length plumbing my fiery depths.

Hawk starts slamming himself into me harder and faster, making me quiver and shake. The tremors that pass through my body shake every inch of me and leave me yearning for more. I call out his name as he parts my folds and slides into my slippery center. Hawk grabs my shoulders and starts to power into me even harder, our bodies crashing together with an audible slapping sound that fuels my passion to even greater heights.

My body tightens up, vibrating with an erotic energy that's making me dizzy, and I know I'm right on the verge. I turn my head and look at him over my shoulder, my insides melting when he smiles at me.

"I'm going to come," I gasp.

"Come for me," he moans.

"Come with me," I reply.

He nods and grits his teeth, pumping his cock into me with wild abandon. I feel him swelling inside of me, feeling myself tightening around him. And when Hawk moans my name and I feel him burst, I'm cut loose from my own moorings and feel myself floating away on a river of ecstasy. He fills me up completely with his thick, warm juices as we come together. I've never come harder and the passion in our voices rises higher and louder.

The sound of our shared ecstasy is carried away by the ocean breeze. I turn around and Hawk sits me down on the table again and stares into my eyes. He presses his forehead to mine as we both take a minute to catch our breath, goofy smiles on both our faces, our eyes locked together. The emotions within me swell to the point I feel like my heart might burst with them and all I can do is smile like an idiot.

“I love you so much, Tyson,” I say.

“And I love you, Molly.”

Now that is the perfect end to a perfect night.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT



Eighteen months later...

I pull the RV into the parking lot in front of the clubhouse and cut the engine. I look over at Molly and give her a grin.

“You sure you’re okay with this?”

“Of course,” she replies. “We’re just stopping by for a visit. Right?”

I nod. “Just a visit.”

The fairy tale out in LA lasted longer than I expected it to. In fact, it’s still going on. We haven’t returned to reality. It’s been eighteen months since we set out that day after helping Molly escape and our entire life has changed.

The biggest change, of course, is currently cradled in Molly’s arms.

Jenkins. Our little boy.

When she told me she was pregnant, I rode out to Vegas to talk to Reaper personally. I thought I owed him at least that much respect. I gave up my VP patch and though I’m still a King at heart, I’m not riding anymore. I couldn’t find a way to balance being a father with being a biker and doing the things we do. I’ll never not be a King, and Reaper promised that the door is always open for me to come back when I want. Which I appreciate. For now, though, I want to focus on my new life. On my family.

We step out of the RV to find him standing on the porch of the clubhouse with a beer in his hand, staring at us and smiling.

“Well, look who it is,” Reaper calls. “The prodigal son returns.”

Molly steps out of the RV behind me, carrying the small bundle in her arms. Reaper bounds down the steps and pulls me into a tight hug, slapping me on the back. He steps back, then turns and takes a look at Jenkins. Molly holds him up and pulls the swaddling back so he can see and Reaper's jaw drops. I don't think I've ever seen him that surprised.

"Son of a bitch," he mutters. "You really had a kid."

"Language," I warn him.

He looks at me and grins. "You think he understands bad words already?"

I shrug. "I don't know. I was cursing at a pretty young age."

Molly laughs. "He doesn't understand," she tells me. "That being said, we probably don't want to get used to cursing in front of him. When he does get to an age where he can understand, he'll be parroting those words back to us."

"See?" I ask.

Reaper gives me the finger and laughs. "Unless you think he can read sign language too."

"You're such an asshole," I say.

"Language," Molly says mockingly.

"So, what are y'all up to?" Reaper asks. "Gonna stay for a bit? We got more than enough room. Dad had some extra rooms built onto the back."

"Yeah, it looks bigger than the last time I was here."

"That's because it is, idiot."

I laugh and start to call him an asshole but glance Molly and let the words die on my lips. She smiles and gives me a nod as if she knew what I was going to say and appreciates my restraint.

"So? You two want to stay for a bit?" Reaper repeats.

"No, we're actually just passing through," I tell him. "We're actually heading out to Zion National Park. Thought we'd spend a little time out that way."

"Exposing the kid to nature. That's a good thing," Reaper notes.

"A hell of a lot better than exposing him to what goes on in that clubhouse," I reply.

He laughs. "You ain't lyin'," he says. "Anyway, listen, Old Grim wants to see you."

"Yeah? All right," I say. "You mind staying out here and keeping an eye on Molly and little Jenkins for me?"

"You got it."

“Thanks, man,” I say then turn to Molly and give her a gentle kiss on the cheek. “I’ll be back in a little bit.”

“We’ll be here.”

I clap Reaper on the back and turn and head to the clubhouse. I walk up the steps I used to walk up every single day and feel a powerful wave of nostalgia wash over me. I’m not going to lie. Not being here with my boys every day has been hard. They’re my brothers and I can’t help but feel like I’ve abandoned them. I know none of them bear me any ill will. I know that most of them are excited for me and this new chapter of my life. But I can’t shake the feeling that I’ve let them down.

I walk through the clubhouse and greet some of the guys. There are a lot of back slaps and high fives as I walk through. It makes that wave of nostalgia even deeper. I walk back to the meeting room and slide the door open. Old Grim is at the head of the table, a cigarette in one hand, his phone pressed to his ear. When he sees me, he waves me in. I slide the door closed then walk over and sit in my old VP’s chair to the left of him.

I notice that his cut no longer has a President patch on it. For a while there, both he and Reaper were wearing one, but now the space is just blank. Clearly he’s still got some responsibilities to the club, but I didn’t know he’d basically retired.

Old Grim is a rugged-looking guy. He looks kind of like what Reaper will look like in thirty years or so. He’s got a thick mustache but no beard, a head of thick hair that’s shot through with gray, pocked cheeks, and dark eyes. He’s a tall, brawny guy that has a hard edge about him. He is not somebody you want to be on the wrong side of.

“Yeah, let me call you back,” Old Grim says.

He disconnects the call and sets his phone down on the table. He takes a long drag off his cigarette and blows a thick plume of smoke toward the ceiling.

“It’s good to see you, kid,” he says.

“It’s great to see you too, Prez.”

“You know I ain’t Prez no more.”

I acknowledge it with a nod. He may not hold the title, but as long as he walks these halls, he’ll always be a leader. Something above a Prez. I don’t even know what.

“How’s life on the road?”

I nod. “It’s been great. It really has,” I tell him. “I miss the guys a lot. I

miss being here every day. I even miss some of the crazy shit we used to pull.”

He laughs and nods. “Yeah, to be honest, it ain’t been the same without you around here,” he tells me. “There’s a big Hawk-sized hole in the club.”

“I feel like shit about leaving. But I’m a King for life, Prez. I want you to know that,” I tell him, still referring to him with the title on purpose. “This club is always in my heart.”

“And you’re always in ours. I really am happy for you, kid,” he says. “I’m glad you got the girl and I’m glad you’re raising a family.”

“Thanks, man. I really appreciate that.”

He takes another drag on his cigarette and I can see something in his eyes that isn’t quite right. He’s worried about something. Maybe worried isn’t the right word, but I know him well enough to know that something is definitely on his mind.

“What is it?” I ask. “Something’s bothering you.”

He nods. “It’s the reason I wanted you to swing by actually.”

“You having problems with the club I set you up with?”

Old Grim shakes his head. “Nah. Nothin’ like that.”

“Good. That’s good.”

When I made the decision to leave an everyday status with the club, I felt bad for leaving them in a lurch in Phoenix. So, I came up with an idea. I had a smaller club that was originally based in Yuma, the Road Screammers, who were looking to expand and get into the game move into the area. We set up shop with them and they grew quickly. They took control of the corridor and the distro network and have even kept Ratchet and the Deviants in check. So far as I know, everything’s been working out well on that end.

“So, if it’s not the Screammers, what’s going on?” I ask.

“It’s the Howlers,” he says.

“What about them? Last I heard, they were pretty well decimated.”

“They are,” he notes. “After you put them and the Deviants at each other’s throats—which was damn brilliant, I have to say—they were pretty well wiped out. But not completely. There are still a few of their old guard hangin’ around out there—Deadbolt and Hogwild—last I heard.”

I chuckle softly. “Deadbolt isn’t anybody you have to worry about. He’s a chump,” I say. “He’s an absolute coward. Hogwild, though—he’s one you have to watch out for.”

“There’s been a development,” he says.

“Yeah? They mounting a comeback out there?”

He shakes his head. “No, but we learned that Hammerhead is still alive.”

My mouth falls open and I’m gaping at him like a fool. I take a minute to compose myself and wipe the surprise off my face.

“You’re kidding me,” I say.

“I wish I were,” he replies grimly.

“How do you know?”

“One of our guys down there saw him,” Old Grim replies. “He’s living in that decrepit old clubhouse.”

“Son of a bitch,” I mutter. “Can’t we have the Screamers root him out?”

“I talked to their Prez and they want no part in that,” he tells me. “Say it’s our business and we should handle it. And I can’t blame them for feeling that way.”

“Yeah, I get it. I get it,” I say.

Shit. This complicates things in ways I didn’t expect. What the hell do I tell Molly?

“Anyway, I wanted to let you know, face to face, so you can see how serious this is,” he tells me. “Be a hawk. Keep your eyes open.

“Always do.”

He nods. “If Hammerhead is still out there, he might still be gunnin’ for you. So, you know, just keep an eye on your old lady and that baby of yours. That son of a bitch has no boundaries.”

“Yeah, I know,” I grouse. “And I appreciate the heads up. I really do.”

“You got it. We always have your back, kid,” he says. “Now, let’s go see that little bundle of joy, huh?”

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE



Molly

Months Later...

“Yeah, can you pick up some Pringles? Oh, some Cheesy Puffs too,” I call after him.

Hawk laughs. “You got it. Anything else?”

I screw up my face and think about it for a minute then shake my head.

“No, that’s about all I can think of right now.”

“All right well, I’ll text you before I leave the store just in case you have any last-minute requests,” he says.

“That is very kind of you, my love.”

“That’s because I’m a very kind man.”

I laugh and he blows me a kiss as he carries Jenkins out of the RV and heads for the car we tow behind it. We’ve set up camp just outside of a small town in southern Wyoming. It’s beautiful out here this time of year and we wanted to show Jenkins what it was like. We wanted to show him the beauty of Yellowstone before it got too cold to enjoy it.

I watch as Hawk and Jenkins drive off, leaving me alone in the RV. When I’m positive that I’m alone and they aren’t coming back because he forgot his wallet or something, I reach into the drawer and pull out the bag I’d secreted away in it. My hand is trembling and my stomach is churning as I pull the box out of the bag.

“Here goes nothing,” I mutter to myself.

I open the home pregnancy test box and pull the stick out. I look down at it and frown. I'm suddenly terrified and don't know if I can go through with it. I don't know why I'm afraid. I have nothing to be afraid of. Even if I am pregnant, that's not a bad thing. Hawk and I have been talking about having another baby for a while now. We wanted to have a baby before Jenkins got much older since we wanted them around the same age.

I set the box down on the counter then go outside and take a deep breath of the crisp autumn air that's thick with the aroma of pine and an earthy musk. It's the scent of nature and I love it. Walking away from the RV, I follow a trail through the woods and try to clear my mind. I have no idea why I'm freaking out about this. I don't know why being pregnant would trip me out like this.

It's just, life has been so good for so long and I'm still just waiting for the other shoe to drop. It's been a little more than two years since I got out from under Hammerhead's thumb and ever since then, life has really been sweet. I feel like I won the lottery by meeting Hawk because he's been such a blessing. Such a wonderful blessing in my life. He's shown me what it is to love, to feel content, and to be happy. He's been amazing. Is still amazing.

I stop and pluck a flower off a bush beside the trail and hold it to my nose, breathing deeply and reveling in the aroma of it. As I walk down the path, I look around and smile at the birds I see flitting from branch to branch overhead, at the butterflies who float among the bushes, and at the small squirrels that run around on the ground, darting under logs.

As I walk, I think again about the test kit back in the RV. I don't know why I'm freaking out so bad about it. I'm pretty sure Hawk would be more than thrilled if I were pregnant. And I know I would be too. So, why am I tripping out so much about taking this test? I put my hand on my belly and smile. I think I already know anyway. I don't think that test is going to tell me anything I'm not already aware of. I feel the same way I felt when I was pregnant with Jenkins. The insomnia, the strange cravings, and yeah, the irritability. I had all the same things when Jenkins was growing inside of me.

I just need confirmation. I'm ninety-nine-point-nine percent positive that I am. I would just feel better about it if I had confirmation that I'm carrying another baby. A girl this time. I don't know why I'm sure it's a girl, I just am. Call it intuition or whatever, but I'm sure.

"Stop being an idiot," I tell myself.

I turn around and head back to the RV. I'm going to take the test and get

confirmation so that Hawk and I can start planning for our life with little Jenkins and his soon-to-be little sister. Though there's a thread of fear wrapped around my heart for some reason, I can't deny that I'm excited as well. The thought of having a little girl, of being able to dress her up and play games with her I can't with Jenkins, is thrilling.

I push away all the fear and focus on the excitement I'm feeling. I let it fill me, fill my heart, and fill my soul. By the time I get back to the RV, I'm smiling again, the exhilaration pushing out all the fear that had been gripping me before. I'm practically skipping back down the path and am singing a little tune to myself.

I pull the door open and step inside and instantly freeze. My heart falls into my stomach and my throat goes dry, and I start to tremble.

"Hey, baby," comes a voice from my nightmares. "I've missed you."

Hammerhead is sitting at the table in the RV, a malicious smile on his face. He's lost weight since the last time I saw him but still has a look of ill health about him. I can tell he's high as he sits there looking at me. He's got that crazed gleam in his eyes that always used to terrify me.

"Wh—what are you doing here?" I ask.

"Oh, you mean after you tried to kill me?" he sneers. "Did you mean, how did I survive the arsenic poisoning? Is that what you meant?"

"Please," I beg. "Don't."

"Where's your man?" he asks, his face a mask of pure rage. "And where's that adorable little boy of yours?"

"Please, leave them out of this. Your problem is with me."

He slams his fist down on his table so hard, the entire RV rocks. I flinch and feel the tears welling in my eyes. This is the other shoe and it's dropping. This is where all the fear that's been plaguing me the last few days is coming from.

On some level, deep down inside, I knew there was something bad coming. Something horrible. And here it is. I hate it. I hate that I was right about it all along.

"How did you know?" I ask softly, tears already brimming in my eyes. "How did you know I'd escaped and wasn't taken?"

He laughs, a low, gruff sound. "You took your diary. If you'd been taken, I doubt they would have been thoughtful enough to let you take your diary."

"How did you know about that?"

"Baby, nothing happened in my clubhouse without me knowing," he

replies with a grin. “Of course I knew about your stupid little diary. Read it too.”

“What do you want, Hammerhead?”

“Want? Well, I want you, of course,” he says. “I came all this way to get you back, baby. I’ve missed you. Took me forever to find you, but I finally did and now, you’re coming home with me.”

I slowly edge toward the door, but Hammerhead pulls out a large, fearsome-looking gun that freezes me in my tracks. I swallow hard and lick my lips nervously.

“Yeah, you don’t want to be doing that,” he says. “You really don’t.”

“Please, just let me be. I’ve got a life now and—”

“Like I give a goddamn fuck about your life!” he roars. “Your place was in my clubhouse by my side. That’s what your life was supposed to be.”

The tears spill down my cheeks, and I instantly try to wipe them away and hide them, recalling how he used to slap me for it. I hate how easily I’m falling back into old, subservient patterns around him. I hate him for making me this way.

“So, what do you think, baby? Should we wait for your man and your little boy to come home?” he asks. “Should I make you watch me kill them both?”

A choked sob bursts from my throat. “Please, leave them out of this. I’ll go with you, peacefully if you just leave them alone,” I say. “Don’t hurt them.”

“Hawk fucked me over,” he sneers. “He deserves a bullet in the head.”

“He wouldn’t have if not for me. It’s all my fault. I swear it. I made him help me.”

“Awww, ain’t that sweet?” he mocks. “It’s sweet that you’re coverin’ for him that way. Really, it’s touching.”

I sniff loudly and am doing my best to control my emotions but it’s next to impossible. He leans forward on the table and stares at me.

“You know what’s gonna hurt him more than a couple of bullets in the head?”

I sniff loudly again and wipe away the tears on my cheeks. He glares at me.

“I asked you a question, bitch.”

I shake my head. “No, I don’t know what’s going to hurt him more than a bullet in the head,” I say. “Please, stop this. Don’t do this.”

“Not knowing what happened to you is what’s gonna eat him alive,” he says with a laugh. “Always wondering if you’re dead or alive. That’s what’s gonna kill him a hell of a lot better than just shootin’ him.”

His words send a river of ice flowing through my veins and nearly stops my heart entirely. He’s going to take me. Again. He’s going to force me to live in that cage once more. The thought occurs to me that it would almost be better to let him kill me than to live that way again. I don’t know that I’d survive it a second time.

“That’s right, baby. You’re comin’ home,” he sneers.

Without thinking about it, I turn and push my way through the door. But Hammerhead is quicker than I imagined, and he grabs me by the hair and yanks backward, almost pulling me off my feet. I scream, my voice echoing through the trees around me, but they ultimately fade away. Unheard. I’m alone here and nobody is coming to save me.

Hammerhead spins me around and drives his fist square into my face. I feel a blinding flash of pain a moment before my entire world goes black.

CHAPTER THIRTY



“All right, buddy,” I say. “What do you think about a little ice cream?”

Jenkins burbles and coos in my arm, making me smile. I push the basket with his baby carrier sitting inside through the store, picking up everything on Molly’s list and some other things I’m sure she’s going to have a craving for later on. I know her well enough to know what she likes and what she’s going to want, even if she forgot to tell me to get it at the time.

I grab a bag of chili cheese chips from the shelf and hold it up for Jenkins to see. “See these? Your mom loves these,” I tell him. “I’ve seen her go through an entire bag on her own. It’s impressive. And kind of nauseating.”

Jenkins smiles at me, a big bubble forming on his lips. I scan the shelves around me, looking for things Molly might want. I’m trying to anticipate her every craving, even if she hasn’t had it yet.

“What an adorable baby.”

I look up to see a tall, leggy blonde looking into my basket at my baby boy and I feel a flush of pride. That’s my boy—adorable. But he’s going to grow up to be rugged and manly. I already know it. My boy is going to be a lady killer.

“Thank you,” I smile. “His name is Jenkins.”

She leans down and taps him on the nose, smiling and laughing as he squirms in his set and burbles at her. The woman stands up and gives me a smile.

“He really is adorable,” she says.

“He takes after his mom,” I reply.

“Have a nice night,” she says and walks off.

I push the basket and continue my quest for snack food. There's something about having a baby that makes me seem normal and not as threatening to people anymore. I'm still the same guy. I'm still as large, rough, and rugged as I've always been. But I'm not wearing a cut anymore, so I guess that's the difference. People see me now and they don't see me as an outlaw or somebody prone to violence. They don't see me as somebody to be feared. With my baby in tow, they see me as a normal member of society. A family man, maybe.

The weird thing is, I've spent my entire life trying to avoid being considered a normal member of society. I've done everything in my power to fall outside those lines. I don't like the thought of somebody pegging me as this or as that. I don't like being put into a box or labeled according to somebody else's definitions. It was one reason I joined the Kings to begin with—I wanted to be outside the lines of what was considered normal. I didn't want to be known as somebody who conformed to what was considered acceptable.

But now, I'm happily embracing everything I rejected before. And it's kind of tripping me out. Granted, we are a very non-traditional family. We don't have a permanent residence right now and spend our time traveling the country in our RV. Molly and I are content to stay on the open road and see whatever we want to see. There's something liberating about waking up in the morning and not knowing where you're going to go that day. Never knowing what you're going to see. I like not having a destination in mind and simply making it up as I go along.

That's all going to change, though, when Jenkins is old enough to start school. We figure when that day comes, we'll have to give up our nomadic lifestyle and settle down somewhere. That's a day I'm not looking forward to. Being tied down to one place isn't my thing. But I know I need to do what's best for my little boy. And that means stability. That means a permanent home and a roof over his head rather than wheels beneath his feet. It'll be a sad day for me but a good day for him. We both want Jenkins to have opportunities we never had.

I also want our newest child to have those same opportunities. Molly thinks she's been slick in hiding her pregnancy from me. I don't understand why she's doing it, but I trust that she has her reasons. I don't want to pressure or stress her out. I want her to tell me in her own time. I just think it's funny she thinks she can hide it from me. As if I'm not going to notice

that she's doing all the same things she did when she was pregnant with Jenkins. That I won't notice her wildly fluctuating mood swings or how quickly irritable she can get. She thinks she's hiding it but she's only making it more obvious to me.

It's funny and I want to laugh but that will only irritate her and would likely end up with me catching a frying pan to the face. When she's cranky and pregnant, she's as dangerous and potentially violent as any biker I've ever known. Not that I'd ever say that to her face, simply because of the aforementioned frying pan.

I pull a carton of mint chocolate chip ice cream out of the freezer section and put it into the basket. Then I pick up a few more things Molly requested and head for the checkout counter. I pull out my phone and type out a quick text to see if she wants anything.

Jenkins and I wait, and I try to make small talk with him, desperately trying to get him to say "papa" earlier than "mama." I've got a hundred bucks riding on it with Molly.

I check my phone and still don't see any response. No big deal. She might just not have seen it yet. I made sure to get everything anyway.

We pay for our things, and I take it out to the car, and I load it all into the trunk. After getting Jenkins squared away in his car seat, I close the door, then lean against the car. I miss my bike. A lot. It seems like it's been forever since I've been on a ride. Since I've felt the sun on my face and the wind in my hair. I would give anything to hop on my Harley and just ride for a while. But my bike is back at the clubhouse under a sheet and is gathering dust. I haven't even had time to fix it up. It's a depressing thought. A bike like that deserves to be ridden.

At the same time though, I wouldn't give up my life as it is right now for anything. Not even for a shot to ride my old Fat Boy again... though it might be tempting. Not that I'd ever say that to Molly for fear of the frying pan. She likes to pretend she would never do something like that. That she's above petty violence to resolve any differences. But I've got a scar on my forehead and a concussion that says otherwise.

I climb behind the wheel of the car and point it back to the campground where our RV is parked. On the way back, I stop at a roadside diner and pick up a couple of shakes—strawberry for my queen, of course. That done, I run through my mental checklist to make sure I haven't forgotten anything. I don't think I have, so I drive on home.

I pull into the campgrounds and park the car. The first thing I do is get Jenkins out and take his carrier into the RV. The moment I step inside though, I can tell something is wrong. Something isn't right. It's not that I see anything out of place or broken, there are no obvious signs of a struggle or violence. But I can feel that something's off. It's like somebody who doesn't belong here disturbed the air in the RV and left behind their stink. I can smell them.

"Molly?" I call out. "Mols?"

There's no answer and I feel a stitch in my heart. My mouth is dry and my heart is pounding. Something is very, very wrong here. I set the baby carrier down on the table, then turn around and go outside.

"Molly!" I call out.

My voice echoes through the woods around us. I cup my hands around my mouth and call out for her again. Still nothing. With my heart in my throat, I run back into the RV and look around for a note thinking that maybe she's out on a walk. Maybe she'll be back soon and I'm freaking out over nothing. I can't help it though. I can feel just how not right something is around here and I have no idea what it is.

When I walk into the bedroom compartment at the back of the RV, my heart drops into my stomach and I taste bile in the back of my throat. My hands clench into fists and I grit my teeth, trying to control the trembling in my body.

On the bed in front of me is my old cut. Specifically, the cut we put on the headless corpse we were using to masquerade as me. That tells me one thing and one thing alone: where Molly is.

"Hammerhead," I mutter. "You fucking son of a bitch."

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE



“Are you sure?” Reaper asks.

I toss my old cut down on the table between us. “Look familiar?”

He picks it up and looks it over, his face paling as he does. “Son of a bitch. I can’t believe this is for real.”

He looks up at me, a thousand questions flashing through his eyes. But all he can do is shake his head. A moment of strained and awkward silence descends between us as neither of us knows quite what to say just yet. But then my anger takes over and I grit my teeth. I’m seething and am having a hard time controlling my anger.

I want to lash out. I want to break something. Smash it to pieces. More than that though, I want to hurt somebody.

No, not somebody. One person. I want to hurt Hammerhead. And I want to hurt him bad.

I want to take my Louisville slugger and beat him to a bloody fucking pulp.

We’re sitting in the clubhouse, the only two in the place, sharing a beer. Jenkins is sitting in his carrier on the chair next to me. I know Molly would kill me if she knew I brought our little boy in here. She was the one who insisted on keeping Jenkins out of the clubhouse, not wanting the rough and tumble crowd to rub off on him. I can’t say I blame her. We’re all pretty coarse in here and I don’t want him to be exposed to that either. But right now, I don’t really have much of a choice. I need help with this.

“I’m going to kill that motherfucker,” I growl. “If she so much as has a hair out of place, I’m going to cut out his fucking heart and feed it to him.”

“Let me talk to my dad—”

I shake my head. “Nah. Not for this one. This is personal,” I tell him. “I’m going to ride down to Phoenix on my own. I want to look him in the eye personally as I cut his nuts off.”

“Are you sure he’s keeping her in Phoenix?” he asks.

I shake my head. “I don’t. I’m assuming,” I tell him. “Your dad told me Hammerhead’s been seen at his old clubhouse. Worst case scenario is I roll in there, he’s not there, and the only thing lost is time.”

“Well, time and having to figure out where she actually is,” he points out.

“I’m trying to avoid thinking about that,” I tell him. “Right now, I’m going with the idea that she’s at the Howlers clubhouse. If she’s not, I don’t know what the fuck I’m going to do. So, I’m just going to think positive right now.”

He nods. “It’s a good idea.”

“So, can you do this for me?” I ask.

“Are you sure you want me to?”

“You’re one of the only people I really trust in all the world. Of course I trust you with my son,” I tell him. “And I know if anything happens to me that you’ll do the right thing by him.”

“Don’t you even go there. Get that fuckin’ thought out of your head right now,” he snaps, his voice hard. “Nothing is goin’ to happen to you.”

“You know there are no guarantees.”

“Nothing is going to happen to you,” he insists. “You are going to come back to your son and to the club.”

“That’s my plan.”

“Speaking of plans, do you happen to have one for dealing with this prick?” he asks.

“What, rolling in with guns blazing and putting two in his head isn’t a plan?”

“Not the most well thought out plan, no.”

“I’m not in the mood to get creative,” I tell him. “I think the direct approach is the best approach. He didn’t leave my old cut to be subtle.”

“No. No, he did not.”

“So, you’ll do it?”

“Of course I will,” he replies. “And you had best come back here. I’m not going to put up with you gettin’ yourself smoked.”

“Going to do my best.”

“Do better than that.”

I snap him a salute. “Yes, sir. Will do.”

“Be careful, bro.”

“I will.”

As if reading my mind, Reaper had one of the club’s prospects get my bike tuned up and in good working order before I got to the clubhouse. I leave the RV and our follow car on the trailer at the clubhouse and take my bike instead. In a way, it’s like getting back to my roots. It’s channeling the man I used to be. The man who isn’t afraid to roll up his sleeves and get his hands dirty.

The man who doesn’t fear a piece of shit like Hammerhead.

Because make no fucking mistake. This time I won’t bother with subtle shit like poison or sabotage.

This time I’m going to rip out his fucking throat and feed it back to him.

It’s dark by the time I hit the Phoenix city limits. My stomach has been clenched tight the entire way down. At the same time, the rage inside of me has continued to build. By the time I get to Phoenix, I’m seeing red. I stop off at a diner. I need to give myself a minute to calm down and breathe. Blowing into the Howlers clubhouse when I’m so pissed I can’t think straight isn’t going to help anything. And it’s likely only going to get me killed.

“What can I get for you, hon?”

“Coffee,” I say, not even bothering to look up at the waitress. “And... give me one of your cinnamon rolls, please.”

“Comin’ right up.”

She turns away to get my order, leaving me alone. Sugar probably isn’t the best thing to have in my current state. Nothing like getting myself all jacked up before going into a dangerous situation where I need to be clearheaded and focused. But I need something to put in my face right now. I need a distraction.

A moment later she comes back and sets a plate down in front of me that holds a cinnamon roll about the size of my face on it. It’s dripping with frosting and looks delicious. As I dig into it though, I grimace. It tastes like ash in my mouth. With a sigh, I push the plate away and pick up my mug of

coffee and take a drink. It's not much better than the cinnamon roll but I force myself to drink it anyway.

"Everything okay over here?" the waitress asks.

I nod. "Yeah. All good. Thank you."

She walks away again, and I pick at the cinnamon roll anyway. I check my watch and see that it's just after ten. I still need a few minutes to cool down, so I sip my coffee, pick at my roll, and think about all the different ways I'm going to kill Hammerhead. I'm not going to make the mistake of leaving anything to chance this time.

My failing last time was in not accounting for the man's size. The dose of arsenic I gave him probably wasn't enough for a man his size. I didn't factor his weight in. My mistake. And it's a mistake I'm not going to make again. This time, I'm not leaving until the job is done. This time, I'm going to use my Sig Sauer to make sure the job is done right.

I picture putting a round between his eyes and one in his heart. I picture it over and over and over again, and each time it calms me down slightly. Imagining that prick's death is soothing. Once I feel calm enough to drive, I get up from my table and leave some cash on the table, making sure my waitress is tipped well.

After that, I walk out to the parking lot and get my brain bucket on, my yellow-tinted night glasses, and gloves. Then I fire up the Harley and ride out, heading south and moving toward the clubhouse. I give thought to cutting the engine and coasting in but I'm sure he's going to be on alert, waiting for me to arrive. And being the paranoid shithead he is, I'm sure he'll be watching closely. There's probably no realistic way I'm getting in there unnoticed. So I decide to just roll up boldly and directly.

I rumble into the parking lot and see the clubhouse hasn't gotten any better over time. It's gotten worse with age and what seems like disuse. Frankly, I'm surprised it's still standing after we torched half the place.

There's only one bike in the lot and I'm assuming that belongs to Hammerhead. I shut off my engine, then take my helmet, gloves, and glasses off and set them all down on my seat. The weight of my Sig at the small of my back, and the Louisville Slugger in a holster on my hip, is comforting. It also helps keep me sharp, reminding me of what the stakes here are.

I pull the gun and hold it down at my side as I mount the steps and walk across the porch. I yank the door open and step inside, leveling my weapon at Hammerhead's face. He's sitting at the only table in the place, which is dimly

lit and filled with trash. It looks like the literal definition of a rat's nest to me. Which is fitting.

Hammerhead himself has changed a bit. He's lost a good fifty or sixty pounds. Maybe his brush with death convinced him to make some real positive life changes. But half a second of thought later makes me discard that. It's the meth, of course. His jowls aren't so jowly, but even though he's lost a good amount of weight, he's still a pretty heavy man.

"Love what you've done with the place," I comment.

"I guess it needed a woman's touch."

I tighten my grip on my weapon and am doing my best to keep from squeezing the trigger as the hatred flows through me.

"Where is she?" I ask, my voice cold and low.

"Where is who?"

"Don't fuck with me, Hammerhead. Where is she?"

"I honestly don't know who you're talking about."

"Do you want to die right here and right now?"

A slow smile spreads across his lips and his eyes glitter with a light of amusement. He's enjoying this game far too much.

"Where is she?" I ask again.

"She's not here."

"You took her. I got your message," I snap, doing my best not to squeeze the trigger right now. I have to find out where she is first. "So, what's the point of dragging me all the way down here if you're going to play these stupid fucking games?"

He leans forward, his eyes glued to mine. "Maybe I enjoy stupid fucking games."

I take a step forward, still holding the gun leveled at his face. "I'm going to ask you one more time and then I'm going to pull this trigger," I growl. "Where. Is. Molly?"

"I'm telling you that she's not here," he replies. "You can search the entire clubhouse if you want. But she ain't here."

"Then where is she?"

He shakes his head. "I got no idea. And that's God's honest truth."

"Hammerhead, you wouldn't know the truth if it walked up and punched you in the balls."

He guffaws and nods. "Maybe not. But I still don't know where she is."

"What did you do with her?" I ask, fighting to keep the emotion out of

my voice—and failing. “Did you hurt her?”

Hammerhead looks at me coldly. “Did you really think there weren’t going to be any consequences for doing everything you did?” he sneers. “You destroyed my club. You tried to fucking kill me! Did you really think you were going to walk away from that unscathed?”

“She had nothin’ to do with any of that.”

“No. But I know that by hurting her, I’m hurting you,” he says with a wolfish grin. “You’re going to spend the rest of your life wondering what happened to her and your perfectly happy little bubble of domestic bliss is forever shattered. Kind of sad, isn’t it?”

“Tell me where she is.”

He shrugs. “Like I said, I can’t tell you what I don’t know.”

“I’m not fucking with you, Hammerhead.”

“And I’m not fucking with you,” he shrugs. “I don’t know where she is.”

A tense moment of silence passes between us and I’m doing all I can to keep myself from shooting him in the face. But he’s making it almost impossible, and I have a feeling, sooner or later, I’m just going to give in to my rage and pull the trigger.

Hammerhead chuckles. “Here, let me help you out. You’re asking the wrong question.”

“What the fuck are you talking about?”

“Ask me why I don’t know where she is.”

I cock my head and look at him, threads of confusion wrapping themselves around my heart. I shake my head and he lets out an exasperated sigh.

“Not sure I can dumb this down any more for you, man. You’ve got to meet me halfway on this,” he says.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“I said, ask me why I don’t know where she is.”

I sigh. “I don’t want to play these stupid fucking games. Tell me.”

“You’re in my house. I’m holding all the cards,” he snaps. “You’re going to play these stupid fucking games if you want answers.”

“Fine. Why don’t you know where she is?”

“Because I sold her. To a trafficker I know,” he says simply. “And who knows? He may have already used her and sold her.”

The rage in me boils over and I stare at him with murder in my eyes. I don’t want to believe this. I don’t want to believe him. He’s doing this to

torture and torment me. That's what Hammerhead does. This has to be that.

"You're lying," I say.

"'Fraid not," he counters, shaking his head. "I knew the best way to hurt you, to really, really hurt you, wasn't to kill you. It was to make sure I could fuck with your head forever. And to that end, I realized how much that bitch meant to you. So, what better way to torment your soul until the day you die by knowing that the love of your life, the mother of your children, is somewhere out there having horrible things done to her—worse things than even I did to her—and that there's nothing you can do about it. Absolutely nothing."

I listen to him, wanting to deny his words. But I hear the ring of sincerity. Of truth. And the cold dread of certainty that he did exactly what he's saying he did settles down over me. It presses down on me so hard, I can barely breathe.

"Please tell me you're lying," I whisper, even though I know he's not.

"You wish I was."

I glare at him and all I can see is red. The hatred and rage flow through me, sending currents of electricity to my every nerve ending and I feel myself trembling with my anger.

"You know I'm going to kill you, don't you?" I hiss.

"I'm all right with it 'cause I'm terminal anyway. Cancer. Ain't that a bitch?" he says. "But I'm at least going to go to my grave knowing that you'll be tearing yourself apart from now until the day you die, wondering how many guys are running a train on her in that moment. Wondering how many blowjobs she's being forced to give. You're going to drive yourself crazy wondering what sort of degradations she's being forced to endure. Again. I can promise you that the things she's going through right now are so much worse than what she went through here. By far. I mean, for one thing, I didn't pass her around to my friends."

I walk over to him, my blood boiling, the rage in me bubbling over. He closes his eyes as I approach and squeeze the trigger. The shot sounds like a cannon going off. It's deafening. Hammerhead's head snaps back and the back of his skull explodes outward, sending a grisly spray of blood and brain matter all over the floor behind it. Hammerhead is leaned back in his chair, his eyes open wide, his mouth hanging open. His face is drained of color, but I don't know if that's the pall of death or his cancer. Doesn't matter now. He's dead.

I stagger back a few steps and my entire body goes so numb, my gun hits the ground with a loud clatter. I can't believe she's gone. And I don't have the first clue where she is. Or how to find her. I replay the conversation with Hammerhead over and over in my mind, but he gave me no clues. He said nothing telling.

He is right, though. I am going to spend the rest of my life in torment. I'm going to spend the rest of my life trying to find her. Trying to find the love of my life and the mother of my children. I fall to my knees and bury my face in my hands as I begin to sob. The grief that grips me is so thick and so deep that I can barely think. Can barely function.

Molly needs me. She needs me to find and save her. But at the same time, my boy needs me. I need to be here for Jenkins. I have to raise him. But how can I raise him without her? How can I teach him the right ways without her? I feel like she was my center. My moral compass. She was the one I could count on to always do the right thing and inspire me to do the same. What am I supposed to do without her?

I raise my face to the sky and let out a scream that's filled with rage. With raw emotion. With hatred. With fear.

It's in that moment though, that I make a silent vow to find Molly. I don't care what I have to do or how long it takes. I'm going to find her or what happened to her.

I will search to the ends of the earth and to the end of time. I'm either going to find Molly, find out what happened to her, or I'm going to die in the process of trying. That's my vow. My promise to her.

And I don't break promises to Molly.

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