



Lock

HELL'S
HANDLERS
FLORIDA
CHAPTER

Jilly Atlas

INTERNATIONAL BEST SELLING AUTHOR

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LOCK
Hell's Handlers MC FL Chapter Book
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By Lilly Atlas

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For everyone who loves a fictional world more than the real one.

PROLOGUE

NO ONE PAID him a lick of attention, yet Lock felt the heat of every eye in the room searing into him, peering through his tattooed exterior to his fucked-up insides.

And he hated it.

Hated them.

Every one of these sad junkies who'd hit rock bottom and landed themselves in this hellhole.

"It happened so fast," the nineteen-year-old who'd ended up on life support two weeks ago thanks to a severe heroin overdose said as she scratched a gouge into the arm of her wooden chair. "My boyfriend was just d-defending me. This drunk guy at the party kept hitting on me. He wouldn't leave me alone. When he grabbed me and tried to force me to dance with him, my boyfriend, Mike, got between us and threatened the guy." The lone hitch in her voice served as the only clue she struggled to tell the story. Otherwise, she droned on in a monotone, almost bored manner.

Back and forth, over and over, she scratched her nail on the chair's arm. The unpolished fingernail would be down to a nub before too long.

She cleared her throat. "The guy sucker punched him. Mike fell and hit his head on the corner of a table. That was it. One punch, and now he's d-dead." Her voice cracked again.

Another peek beyond her mask.

Lock breathed out and shifted his gaze from the pale, sullen-eyed teen to the gorgeous Gulf of Mexico view out the long row of floor-to-ceiling windows.

Deanna loved the beach. At least, once upon a time, she had. Who knew what she'd been into in the months before she'd overdosed? Certainly not her twin brother.

He rubbed a tanned hand across the left side of his chest where an ache

had taken up residence months ago and refused all eviction attempts. The second Deanna suffered a heart attack, an all-consuming heaviness entered his heart. He'd do anything for a moment's relief from the constant reminder of his loss and failures as a brother.

Anything.

Even the very same drugs that had stolen his sister's life. A good high had been the only reprieve from the relentless pain—a few fleeting hours of peace.

Damn, twin sense. They hadn't been identical, hell, not even the same gender, yet their entire lives, they'd always had a connection that transcended time, space, and rational thinking. The link had bonded them as children, uniting them as best friends. Even through their teen years, their shared connection kept them closer than the average siblings. In adulthood, their link became a burden. Nothing more than a chaos-meter alerting Lock to the next crisis in Deanna's life.

This final crisis resulted in her death and left her unborn infant orphaned. By some miracle, the doctors were able to deliver Deanna's son. But Caleb hadn't been a happy, healthy baby. The first few months of his life were fraught with drug withdrawal and one medical complication after another.

He'd survived, thrived, and now lived with his primary guardian.

Me.

The fucking head case who'd never even held a goddamn baby. Who'd never prepared a bottle or changed a diaper and hadn't known babies had a soft and vulnerable spot on the top of their fuzzy heads.

He knew now. Now, he knew everything about living with a baby. He knew about the sleepless nights and the cat-like infant cry every time the baby needed any damn thing. He knew about spit-up and diaper blowouts, even fucking nipple flow rates. But he also knew about gummy smiles and how it felt to have a tiny baby fall asleep on his chest, drunk after downing an entire bottle of formula. And he knew about the enormous weight of responsibility and the fragility of the little life the state had assigned to his care.

What the fuck had they been thinking?

His skin itched, and his insides popped and quivered like live wires. He shifted. Christ, this chair was uncomfortable as fuck.

He needed a hit. Just one bump to take the edge off and silence the demons in his mind. The ones constantly whispering that he'd fuck up and

destroy Caleb's life.

But he hadn't indulged in six days. Six long rounds of twenty-four hours since his club's president showed up on his doorstep and ripped him a new asshole. Curly blasted him for neglecting his MC club duties, being a shitty member of his patched family, and being responsible for his brother's ol' lady getting hurt.

Twice.

But what Curly harped on, what he ripped into Lock over, was his responsibility toward Caleb. His nephew turned son—the baby he'd been tasked to care for and love.

And he'd been right. Lock had done all that shit and more to let down the people he was supposed to love.

Caleb served as a constant reminder of Deanna's death and how he'd avoided his sister in the months before she died because her constant drama and neediness had become oppressive. She always needed something, and usually, those things drained Lock of money, time, and happiness. So he'd stopped checking in.

Maybe if he hadn't been such a selfish prick, she'd be alive, healthy, and raising her son as she should be.

Curly demanded Lock sign himself into a treatment facility within the next week. It was either that or he'd lose his patch and no longer be a Hell's Handler's Motorcycle Club member. Even though Lock had had the intense urge to flip his president off and kick him out of his damn house, he'd known deep down that losing the club would be the final straw. It'd put him into a depression so deep he'd end up in a box in the ground beside his twin.

What would happen to Caleb then?

At least he'd had enough humanity left to consider the child.

So, he'd allowed Curly to find a drug treatment facility and voluntarily signed himself in for a thirty-day recovery program.

Did he have an addiction?

Lock didn't think so. He hadn't smoked, inhaled, or shot up nearly as much as his club seemed to think. Nor was he suffering from the sweaty, tremoring, and vomiting withdrawals he'd nursed Deanna through countless times.

For the first few days, he'd been an admittedly sullen asshole, refusing all attempts to bond with the other junkies or share his story. They were all chronic drug users who'd destroyed their lives and ruined their loved ones'

lives with their drug-seeking antics. He was nothing like them—those people who couldn't make it to their first cup of coffee in the morning without injecting a load of shit into their veins.

But then he'd overheard one of the counselors talking to this nineteen-year-old girl who'd been admitted the week before him. Her grief resonated with him. It sounded similar to his in some ways. The counselor had suggested she'd developed a psychological dependency on the drugs to relieve her of the pain of heartache from the loss she'd suffered.

Curious about what had happened to her, Lock paid attention for the first time during a group therapy session.

The middle-aged counselor gave the girl an encouraging nod and an empathetic smile, even though he still focused on his notepad. "Jenna," he said as he glanced over the top of his reading glasses. The girl stared down at the floor. "I'm so sorry for your loss. And even more sorry for the tragic and unexpected way it happened. That kind of trauma changes you on a chemical level, doesn't it?" He didn't wait for Jenna to respond. "Can you walk us through what emotions you've been feeling since your boyfriend died?"

Her finger froze, the only sign she'd heard the counselor's probing question. Jenna was free to refuse to answer. They were reminded of that on the first day and at the start of every group session. They did not have to participate if they found anything too private or personal to discuss in front of others or weren't ready to voice something. Keeping quiet was the route Lock had chosen thus far. But, as he'd been informed at least a hundred times since walking into the building, he'd come there of his own free will, and active participation would also be his choice, though a smart one.

My own free will. Ha.

Clearly, none of them had met Curly or been on the receiving end of his threats.

After a few minutes of thick silence, Jenna lifted her gaze, and Lock glimpsed the anguish in the girl's deep blue eyes for the first time. "Guilty," she whispered so low he almost didn't hear it.

No one spoke, not even the damn counselor. He merely let Jenna stew in her feelings. The room fell deathly quiet. Lock's heart slowed until he could count the agonizing seconds between each beat. He didn't dare breathe as he waited for the girl's next words.

"I feel guilty." She only spoke a notch louder. "I can't sleep, so I go over the minutes leading up to the fight again and again. Every choice I made,

everything I could have done differently, and all the ways I am possibly to blame for Mike dying.”

The counselor and every person in the room stayed so quiet they could have heard a gnat’s wings vibrating the air.

Lock gripped the arms of his chair until his knuckles ached and turned white as snow. What would she say next?

His gaze shifted to the counselor, who seemed to have endless patience in these heavy situations. Lock wanted to grab the girl, shake her, and scream how it wasn’t her fault. Why couldn’t she see that? Shit happened sometimes. She was too young to lose herself in the same soul-crushing guilt that had dragged him under.

Still, the counselor didn’t say a fucking thing. Why wasn’t he reassuring Jenna that it wasn’t her fault? His muscles tensed until they felt like rocks beneath his skin. Sweat broke out across his forehead. His chest was so damn tight.

He glared at the counselor so hard it was a wonder the man didn’t feel it.

Say something.

But it was Jenna who spoke again in a low whisper he had to strain to hear. “I’m also angry at my boyfriend for doing something so stupid that it got him killed. And then I feel guilty for the anger.” Tears leaked from the corners of her eyes as she looked down at her hands, now clenched in her lap. “All I feel all day long is sadness, anger, and guilt. I can’t eat. I can’t sleep. I can’t do anything. I hate it, but it won’t stop. It never stops unless...”

Unless.

They all knew what came next—unless she smoked, shot up, or maybe swallowed a handful of pills. Whatever her poison, the drugs were the only relief from the brutal suffering.

Christ, he wanted that relief. Instead, he was stuck there *feeling* things. Those damn emotions crawled all over him with razor-sharp claws, digging in and making him want to scream.

He stood so fast his chair clattered to the floor with a loud bang that had everyone jumping. All eyes flew to him. His clothes seemed to shrink on his body, strangling him.

“I-I...”

Fuck it.

He turned and stormed from the room. Only once out in the hall and away from the girl spilling her emotional trauma, which mirrored his own, could he

finally breathe. Lock slammed his palms on the wall, then let his head thud against the cool, textured surface. He sucked in as much air as he could fit in his lungs before blowing it out again. His legs trembled as he fought to keep the unwelcome feelings at bay. The same horrendous barrage of sensations Jenna described.

Sadness, guilt, and anger.

He knew how to do it and make it all disappear. If it wasn't for fucking Curly, he could make it go away. He could feel better, even for a moment.

But you'll lose your son and fail your sister even in her death.

More guilt for the pile.

"Lock?"

He turned his head toward the voice without moving any other part of his body. The counselor stood to his side, shoulder resting on the wall.

He wasn't going to speak, the bastard.

Fine. If he wanted Lock to go first, that's what he'd get. "Why?"

The counselor tilted his head. "Why what?"

Now they were playing games. Anger rose to the surface. "Why the fuck didn't you tell that poor kid in there that her boyfriend's death wasn't her goddamn fault?" By the time he got to the end of the question, he was screaming.

Of course, his outburst didn't faze the counselor. The man barely blinked in the face of his rage.

"Would she have believed me? Do you think she believed everyone she knows who no doubt already told her that? Did you believe everyone who told you that your sister's death wasn't your fault?"

Lock narrowed his eyes. This wasn't about him. It was about that kid in there, suffering misplaced feelings of guilt.

"Did it keep you from the heroin?"

He pushed off the wall. "You motherfu—"

"I'm not here to tell Jenna how to feel, Lock. Just like I'm not here to tell you how to feel. I'm here to teach you how to cope with your feelings so that you stay away from the drugs and process them in a healthy way." He walked straight to Lock, who stood seething with fists clenched at his sides, and clapped him on the shoulder. "That's what will help you feel better. That's what will eventually get you to the place where you realize the truth. That nothing about your sister's death was your fault and that you have nothing to feel guilty about, including feeling angry as fuck at her for dying and leaving

you an infant you had no plans to raise.”

He swallowed. *But if I'd only—*

“Even now, as I say it, you don't believe it, do you?”

No. No, he didn't. He shook his head.

The counselor nodded and then squeezed his shoulder. “Take a minute, then come back and join us. And be proud of yourself, Lock, because you just realized something that takes some people weeks to figure out.” He started back toward the room where he'd left the group.

Lock frowned. “What did I figure out?”

“That I won't force feed you your recovery. I'll make you work damn hard for it, but in the end, it'll stick, and you'll get your life back.” After a quick salute, the counselor returned to the room, leaving Lock alone in the quiet hallway.

He'd never get his life back. Not the way it was before his sister died. He'd always be without a sibling, a twin, and he'd always be a father.

But he still had his brothers and their incredible women. He still had a business, a house, and a bike he loved. And a nephew he had a responsibility to care for and had fallen in love with if he was honest with himself. So, even though it'd be different as hell, he could get *a* life back.

But first, he had to survive the torture of digging through his brain and setting it right.

Without the mind-numbing peace afforded by heroin.

Lock wasn't sure he could do it. He had no confidence in his ability to succeed, but the counselor seemed to, and he was there, so what could it hurt to try?

He walked back into the room, where, thankfully, no one paid him any attention. As his ass hit the seat, he realized that the pain in his chest had dulled to a manageable ache for the first time since Deanna took that fatal dose of meth.

I'm coming back to you, Caleb, bent and twisted as hell but hopefully still whole.

CHAPTER ONE

HALLELUIAH! OLIVER WAS gone.

Brenna noticed it the moment her foot hit the marble floor in her foyer. The air floated around her with a lightness that hadn't been present when she'd left for work that morning. Arrogance and bullshit no longer permeated every inch of the space. The house smelled fresher, cleaner, and more like the way it had ten months ago before she'd invited her new fiancé to move in.

The place was hers and hers alone, as she should have left it all along.

"Oliver?" she called out as she set the mail on the small wooden table near the entrance. Might as well be certain.

When the empty house didn't reply, she smiled. Months of weight, stress, and worry lifted off her shoulders and evaporated into the ether. Her low heels clicked as she walked across the tile, down the hall, and into the kitchen.

Only silence greeted her.

Hell yes.

Her lips twitched into a grin, which spread across her face until it reached a full-blown smile. She snaked an arm behind her back and under her cream-colored blouse until her fingers connected with her bra clasp. A quick flick of her wrist followed by some wriggling had the oppressive garment off. After pulling it from her shirt sleeve, she dropped it on the kitchen counter. Then she toed off her shoes, leaving them on the kitchen floor as she padded barefoot to the refrigerator.

Of course, she'd put it all away later, but it could stay there for a few hours. No one would complain about the less-than-perfect state of the house. *The guys* wouldn't stop by without being invited and crash her restful evening by hanging out with Oliver and spewing their snobbery, judgment, and misogynistic stories all over her home.

God, she hated *the guys*.

They were a bunch of pretentious pricks who never had a nice thing to say about another human being outside their exclusive circle. Their wives and girlfriends were even worse—unhappy women who only smiled because they paid to have their facial muscles frozen that way. They wouldn't be caught dead without designer labels and flashy cars—the kind to attract attention, gossip, and jealousy.

None of them were evil people per se, but they just weren't her people. By the time she realized it, she was engaged to one of them and waking up unhappy every day.

Oliver came into her life when she'd hit a low point. As an estate lawyer, he'd been integral in sorting out the messy details following her parents' untimely death in an automobile accident. Over time, their relationship drifted from professional to personal to sexual. For a time, she thought she'd found the love of her life. He'd been sweet, attentive, available, and a little dazzling with his fancy tastes and luxurious way of living. It wasn't until they'd lived together for a month or so that she realized his enjoyment of the finer things in life was a mere facet of his intolerance, arrogance, and constant criticism.

Brenna was a simple girl—a beer and bonfire while wearing cutoffs and flip-flops kind of girl—whereas Oliver wore alligator shoes and Rolex watches with a side of beluga caviar. They could have made it work if both had respected their differences and supported each other's interests, but Oliver didn't take that route. He looked down on her choices and budget-friendly life with scorn and contempt. Before long, his disapproval turned vocal and frequent. At times, it felt like she couldn't do anything right in his eyes, so she started to doubt herself and take on some of his interests.

It took him suggesting—more like demanding and her actually considering—that she sell the home she'd inherited from her parents and use the money to buy them a swanky one-bedroom condo on the beach before she realized they'd never work long-term.

Not only had she grown up in this house and only lost her parents two years ago, but she had put her blood, sweat, and tears into making the house her own. This home was her pride and joy as an interior designer, and she would never sell it.

Something Oliver knew, and she thought he'd understood.

He wasn't a bad man, but they were terrible for each other. He needed someone who loved luxury and excess, while she needed someone more chill.

Sadly, they'd let the relationship drag on so long that she only felt relief now that their engagement had ended. Oliver hadn't been happy about the split, which surprised her considering his constant censure, and he'd let her know it with more shouting than she'd ever experienced. Little did he know, he only fortified her decision to break the engagement.

He'd understand in time. Once he found someone better suited to him and his lifestyle, he'd realize she was right to break it off.

"He's gone. Time to stop thinking about him," she said aloud as she grabbed one of her favorite IPAs from the refrigerator. After popping the top with a bottle opener magnet on her refrigerator, she snagged the salsa, then her favorite lime-flavored tortilla chips.

She set her unhealthy yet perfect dinner on the coffee table in front of the couch as she sat. "Ahh." She closed her eyes and let her head rest against the back of the sofa. "Peace and quiet." And there was a new episode of her favorite reality dating show coming on. Typically, she had to squeeze in time to watch it whenever Oliver wasn't home.

Not anymore.

"I can do what I want," she sang to a made-up melody as she opened the small drawer where she kept the remote. Instead of finding the little black remote that controlled her television, she saw a thick manila envelope with today's date in Oliver's handwriting.

Her stomach sank.

Damn, she did not want to have to call him already. He'd finally finished clearing out his belongings that morning, and all she wanted to do was revel in her solitude. But his job was important, and she knew firsthand how time-sensitive his cases could be. She couldn't live with herself if someone suffered because she refused to tell him about the envelope.

With a frustrated groan, she lifted the envelope from the drawer. It was much heavier and thicker than she'd have expected. Frowning, she noticed he'd sealed it. Brenna wasn't enough of a vindictive bitch to open it and snoop. His clients were his business. Hell, his whole life was his business now. All she had to do was let him know about it, and her involvement ended there.

She pulled out her phone. A text would suffice.

Brenna: *Found an envelope in the coffee table drawer. Looks important. I'll put it in the mailbox tomorrow a.m. for you to grab.*

There. That was perfect. She didn't have to talk to or see him when he

came to retrieve the packet. And just in case he tried to stop by around the time she usually left for work, she'd take off a few minutes early.

The phone immediately rang, drawing a long groan from her.

She couldn't ignore it. She'd only sent the text ten seconds ago, so he clearly knew she had her phone on her.

"Crap," she muttered as she hit accept. "Hello, Oliver."

"Oh, my God, Bren, you are a lifesaver. I can't believe I left that. I am such an idiot."

She rolled her eyes. "It's fine. Like I said, I'll leave it in the mailbox so you can get it on your way into the office tomorrow. Or I can put it there right now if you need it tonight."

He moaned. "Shit. I'm so fucked." He sounded sincerely distraught.

Don't ask. Don't ask. "What's wrong?"

You're a damn pushover.

"I do need it tonight. It needs to be dropped off to a VIP client, but I'm in Tallahassee for work until tomorrow. I was supposed to drop it off before I left town. I am so screwed."

Brenna bit off another grumble. She was way too nice. "Look," she said with a sigh and roll of her eyes. "I don't want you to get in trouble. I'll drop it off if you tell me where to take it."

"Really?"

"Of course." She pinched the bridge of her nose. "We might have broken up, but we don't have to go out of our way to be nasty to each other. I can do you one favor."

"Bren, you're an angel."

She squeezed harder, but it did nothing to ward off the incoming headache. "It's no big deal."

"No. Seriously, sweetheart, what would I do without you?"

The pet name had her frowning at the phone. "Oliver, you don't have m ___"

"Maybe when I get home, I can take you to dinner as a thank you." His voice dropped to the husky timbre she'd once loved but hadn't responded to in ages. Too long to have stayed together for as much time as they did.

A date? Was he crazy? "That's not necessary, Oliver. I'm happy to help you out this one time. Just text me the address, and I'll drop it off right now." She disconnected the call before he had time to insist on dinner.

"Guess you will have to wait," she said to her beer bottle as she stood.

By the time she ran upstairs and slipped out of her work clothes and into her standard cutoff shorts and graphic T-shirt, she had a text with an address waiting for her. He'd also added a line about how beautiful he found her and a second offer of dinner or drinks.

"Not responding," she muttered as she grabbed her purse and the envelope.

Despite living in the area her entire life, the street wasn't one she recognized, but it only took about fifteen minutes to drive to and find the address with the help of GPS.

Frowning, she steered through the parking lot entrance, a wide gap in a ten-foot-high chain link fence adorned with barbed wire. "You've gotta be kidding me," she muttered, taking in her dismal surroundings.

The place was nothing more than an abandoned warehouse with graffiti all over the exterior walls, a stack of tires, and a fifty-five-gallon drum beside a dented metal door. She'd rather die than peek inside the drum. If television had taught her anything, someone bigger than her could fit inside along with a vat of acid.

She shivered as she navigated a maze of deep potholes, not eager to take out her tires and screw with her car's alignment.

"There's no way this is right. There isn't even a place to leave this." As an estate lawyer, Oliver's day-to-day didn't lend to meetings with nefarious clients, but that was the vibe this place gave off. She felt like a character in a suspense thriller waiting on a CIA handler or mafia boss.

No more TV for me.

The faster she got out of the car, the faster she could finish this chore and return home to her beer.

And her blessedly empty house.

She grabbed the package before exiting the car. When her sandals hit the cracked pavement, a chill ran up her spine. The air, thick and hot as always in a Florida summer, felt still and stagnant. No sounds greeted her ears—no birds chirping, frogs croaking, or bugs humming. It seemed the local creatures knew this place was dead and stayed as far away as possible.

"Thanks, Oliver," she muttered as she walked toward the building. She watched every step to avoid breaking an ankle in a pothole. "Hello?" she called as she strode toward the door. "Anyone here? I have a package from Oliver. Uh, Oliver Swanson, your attorney."

The lack of response infuriated her. Was she really going to have to call

him back and get a new address so she could waste more of her evening doing favors for her ex-fiancé?

“If that asshole sent me on a wild goose chase—”

A loud rumble shattered the silence, nearly giving her a heart attack.

Brenna whirled around as three huge motorcycles tore into the lot like they were being chased by, well, other motorcycle bandits. Dust swirled up in thick clouds as they skidded to a stop, choking her, and reducing her ability to see.

She backed up on instinct, waving a hand to clear the air. The bikes formed a semi-circle around her. With the building at her back, they blocked any chance of escape. Her heart raced even louder than the roar of their bikes. Hopefully, they'd take the envelope and go, but her insides twisted in a way that let her know something was wrong.

Why the hell hadn't she grabbed her purse from the car? She kept a can of pepper spray and a fancy weaponized keychain she could use to gouge a man's eye out. None of that helped if twenty feet and three bikers were between them.

The engines quieted to an idling whir as her breathing went from worried puffs to frantic pants. The man on the middle bike climbed down, yanked off his helmet, and then marched toward her with angry strides. With his dark hair and an air of confidence, he'd be attractive if he didn't appear so aggressive.

Brenna held her ground even as her knees wobbled. Not that staying there was much of an impressive feat. She didn't have anywhere else to go.

“Who the fuck are you?” he barked in a tone so terrifying her stomach bottomed out.

“I, uh, I...”

“Who. The. Fuck. Are. You.”

If she'd thought his tone menacing before, it had nothing on the cold, lethal one he laid on her now.

Her mouth dried up until all she could do was flap her mouth open and shut without uttering a sound. Another one of the bikers climbed off his motorcycle and strode her way. This one was so huge he made her knees knock in fear.

“Dude,” the big guy called out as he approached. “Maybe ease up a bit. She looks ready to shit herself.”

Yes. Yes. If he eased up on the death glare, she could speak.

“Is that my money?” Scary-as-hell-guy barked.

Money? She glanced down at the envelope. *Money?*

“Uh, no,” she managed to squeak. “Oliver sent me.”

His face remained stoic and flat-out scary. Did he not know who Oliver was?

She could do this.

You can do this. You have to do this.

“Uh, your lawyer. He had some, um, papers for you.”

The envelope. Give him the envelope.

She extended her arm, holding the bulky manilla envelope toward him. It shook, betraying her fear on the off chance they hadn’t picked up on it yet.

The giant started laughing. “That little fucker ain’t our lawyer, sweetheart. Not in a million years.”

Oliver wasn’t small, but he wasn’t a large man either. At five foot ten, he was a runner with a lean build to prove it—nothing like the bulk of the enormous biker laughing at her statement.

“Give it.” Scary-as-hell-guy snatched the bundle from her. His leather vest had a patch near his heart that read *Enforcer*.

Enforcer?

Shit. Weren’t those the people gangs sent out to bust kneecaps if things didn’t go their way? Did that mean he’d bust her kneecaps if she did something wrong? Wasn’t the enforcer the man they sent to rough people up? What the hell had Oliver gotten her into?

“Well, I, uh, gave you the papers. I’m gonna go now.” She took a step forward, but they didn’t give any sign of moving out of her way.

“Papers?” The big guy laughed again. “You hear that shit, Spec?”

“Oh, I hear it,” Scary-as-hell-guy said. *Spec. His name must be Spec.*

“Don’t fucking move,” Spec ordered as she lifted her foot to take another step.

The third man remained on his bike and stayed quiet throughout this exchange.

No one spoke as Spec opened the envelope, but when he pulled out a thick wad of cash, Brenna couldn’t help but gasp. “Oh my God,” she whispered. What was Oliver paying these guys for? And so much money. Had he put a hit out on someone? Were they about to give her a buttload of drugs? Or a military-grade weapon? What else did someone pay a gang of bikers an enormous pile of cash for?

“Okay, um, there’s your money. Can I go now?”

He didn’t answer, too focused on counting the cash.

She tried walking toward her car again on unsteady legs. None of the men stopped her this time, though the two not busy counting cash watched her like hawks.

“Hold up, toots,” Spec said when she was only ten feet away. “You’re not going anywhere. Lock?”

She could ignore him. Maybe bolt to the car, lock the doors, and floor it, but an unspoken warning in Spec’s tone had her rooted to the ground.

The third guy removed his helmet and finally got off his bike.

Her breath lodged in her throat. Any other time, she’d have swooned at the sight of the attractive man. The light brown shaggy hair and unshaven stubble came straight from her fantasies, as did his muscular but not bulky frame. But today, she trembled because his eyes were cold, flat, and determined as he grabbed her arm. “Sorry, sweetheart,” he said without the affection the word implied.

He spun her around and towed her back to where she’d been. Together, they stood before Spec, but only one received the man’s furious scowl.

The following words from the enforcer’s mouth had her swaying with disbelief.

“You’re fifteen thousand short.”

CHAPTER TWO

THIS WAS ANYTHING but a routine debt collection, and it had nothing to do with the panicked woman trembling in Lock's hold.

It was all him and the fact that this was the first time since his rehab discharge a month ago that Curly had trusted him with important club business—backing up Spec. Some jackoff named Oliver owed the club a shit ton of cash and had already missed one payment date, earning him a stern *talking-to* from Spec. That was his freebie. Lucky bastard. Not everyone received the man's mercy. Spec's ol' lady must have given him the good shit that morning, getting him in a generous damn mood.

According to Spec, Oliver had whined and sniveled, promising to deliver the money today. Now it looked like the guy had chickened out like a little bitch and sent his in-the-dark girlfriend to do his dirty work. It sucked for her, but Lock had a lot to prove to his president and club, so she'd be getting little sympathy from him, especially if it turned out she wasn't as innocent as her quivering and rapid breathing made her seem.

Too bad she was exactly his type. He bet those melted chocolate eyes looked damn good when they weren't full of fear. And he'd love to pull that long clip from her head to see how far her dark hair hung down her back. It looked silky as hell and would feel like heaven running through his fingers. He loved dark hair, and this woman seemed to have reddish undertones to hers, which was enough to make him hard.

Focus.

Today wasn't the day for that shit.

"Stop fucking moving," he said with a growl as she nearly vibrated from his hold.

"S-sorry."

Her skin was smooth and warm beneath his fingers and, like most who lived in Florida, tanned. She wore short cutoffs and a Pearl Jam T-shirt with

sparkly flip-flops and pale pink toes. Any other time, say before his sister died, leaving him an infant and a drug problem, he'd have been all over this one. He'd have jumped in and told Spec to lay off on the murderous glare. But not today. Today, no matter how hot he found her, he'd play the hardass if it got Spec and Jinx to tell Curly he'd been an asset to the club.

"You take it?" Spec asked as he stalked toward her.

"W-what?" Her eyes nearly fell from her head as the shaky word tumbled forth. If the woman was lying, she deserved an Oscar because the full-body quaking and utter shock in her tone were believable as hell.

Fuck. Lock had a gut feeling she wasn't lying, and she'd been set up to take the fall for this Oliver asshole. And that added a whole extra level of pain the bastard would receive when Spec caught up with him, which he would. He always did.

"He tell you how much he owed?" Spec continued.

"N-no. I don't... I mean, I didn't even know it was money." She shook her head fast, scattering stray hairs loose from the clip. "I thought he was your attorney. M-maybe it was some papers you had to sign. I didn't know anything. I still don't know anything."

Spec stared at the clear blue sky as Lock counted the seconds to himself. When he reached ten, Spec's gaze returned to the terrified woman. His expression hadn't softened, but he'd never hurt her. Scare her? Sure, but Spec would never lay a hand on an innocent woman, which it seemed she was.

"How did you end up with this?" he asked as he lifted a wad of cash. "I want the whole story and the truth."

"Uh, yes, yes, of course. I have no reason to lie to you." She inhaled and then immediately blew out a shaky breath. "Okay, um, Oliver is... was... was my fiancé. We broke up about two weeks ago. It kinda sucked because it was a week after my thirtieth birthday. He finally got the last of his stuff out of my house while I was at work today. I'm an interior designer, and today was crazy as hell. I had to deal with this high-maintenance wealthy woman who changed her mind five hundred times and couldn't make a decision if the fate of her new Birkin bag depended on it."

Thankfully, her attention stayed locked on Spec because Lock couldn't keep his lips from quirking. His enforcer's death stare brought out strong reactions from most of its recipients, but rambling about rich people was a new one. What the hell was a Birkin bag?

"There a point to all this?" Spec asked.

“Uh, sorry,” she said before clearing her throat. She shook out her hands as though expelling nerves through her fingertips. “I found that envelope in a drawer when I got home from work. I didn’t open it,” she rushed to say as she shook her head. “I wouldn’t invade someone’s privacy like that, even that asshole, Oliver. But I did call him to tell him he left it. He’s out of town—”

“Of course, he is,” Jinx said as Spec mumbled, “Of course he fucking is.”

“Um, yeah, he’s away until tomorrow and told me this needed to be delivered here at this time and…” She blinked. “That motherfucker,” she said as the puzzle pieces slid into place. “He sent me here on purpose.” Her voice rose to a near shout. “He fucking knew he was short and sent me to deliver the money because he’s a chickenshit.”

Lock let her go.

She rubbed the spot where he’d held her arm even though he hadn’t used a punishing grip. Her gaze shifted to his face for the first time since he’d grabbed her. Their eyes met and, for one second, seemed to hold. His gut clenched, and his balls tightened as electricity hummed through his veins.

What the fuck?

The woman’s mesmerizing eyes flared, and she jerked her gaze back toward Spec.

Weird.

“Enough bullshit.” Spec stomped toward her. Lock had the most insane instinct to put himself between his enforcer and a woman whose name he didn’t know, but he held his ground.

Spec would skin him alive if he fucked up this deal after fucking up so many times over the past year.

“You know what I do to people who show up fifteen thousand short?” Spec yelled as he got up in the woman’s face.

Her skin lost all color as she tipped her head back to see him fully.

Lock clenched and unclenched his fists.

Spec won’t hurt her. He won’t hurt her.

Getting between them wasn’t necessary.

“I asked you a fucking question.”

“Brother…” Jinx took a step closer.

Thank God.

“Y-y-you’d hurt them,” she whispered.

“I’d fucking hurt him.” He stopped screaming. “But he sent you, so I can’t do that. So tell me, what the fuck am I supposed to do with you?”

She blinked. “You, uh, you’re not gonna hurt me?”

Spec sighed. “No. I’m not gonna fucking hurt you.”

Her knees buckled.

“Shit.” Lock lurched forward to catch her before she hit the ground.

She does not feel good in your arms.

“S-sorry. Thank you. I just... I’m okay now.”

Dammit, she sure as fuck did feel good.

Her ass brushed his cock as she straightened. Lock suppressed a groan and stepped way before he started humping her like a horny dog. His months-long celibacy hadn’t been an issue up until this point.

Christ, he needed sex, and he needed it fast. It’d been too damn long since he’d gotten laid and even longer since he’d done it sober enough to remember it. It should be easy enough to hook up with someone other than his hand at the MC’s party this weekend. Of course, if he could find someone to sit for Caleb first.

Who knew fatherhood would end up being the ultimate cockblock? That wasn’t entirely true. Sobriety was more of a cockblock for him. He’d fucked around plenty when he’d been high and neglecting Caleb.

Guilt tried to worm its way past his skin.

You’re not that guy anymore.

If only that were true. Lock spent ninety-nine percent of his waking hours fighting that guy. He was there, lurking just below the surface, waiting for a chance to fuck things up again.

“Yo, Lock, you okay, brother?” Jinx’s meaty hand landed on his shoulder.

Fuck. He’d drifted during a damn crisis.

“All good.”

Lies.

“All right.” Spec paced away, then walked back. He rubbed a hand across the stubble on his chin. “First thing’s first. What’s your name?”

“Uh...” The woman’s eyes shifted between the three of them.

Little did she know, she was probably the safest woman in Florida, surrounded by the three of them. None of them would hurt her, and they’d castrate anyone else who tried, including Oliver.

“It... it’s Brenna.”

“Okay, Brenna, first thing I want to do is promise you that nothing bad will happen to you here today or anytime you are with us,” Spec said. “We

will not lay a hand on you now or ever.”

“Ookay...” She glanced at Lock, and he nodded. Only then did she seem to accept Spec’s words, and he refused to dive into why that made him feel ten feet tall.

“But we have three problems here.” Spec lifted a finger. “One is that old boy, Ollie, is very late paying my club back a huge sum of money.” Another finger popped up. “Two is that I now need to find Ollie and get the money back the hard way... or the fun way, depending on how you look at it.”

Lock rolled his eyes as Brenna gasped. The man enjoyed a good beatdown without an ounce of concern for his more violent tendencies.

“And three, you’re smack dab in the middle of this shit whether you want to be or not.”

Fuck. It was true.

“Wha-uh, what do you mean?”

With a sigh, Lock stepped forward and spoke before Spec could, “He means that if you go home and everything is normal, it’ll be a huge red flag to your ex.”

Brenna frowned. “I’m not following.”

“He sent you here knowingly short on cash and thinking we’d do something about that. If we let you walk out of here, he’ll know you’re in on it.”

“So, what? You’re gonna kidnap me?”

When none of them answered her, she took a step back. “Look, I’ll say anything you want to Oliver. I’ll tell him you beat the crap outta me or that you threatened to kill me. Anything, but I need to go home.”

“Fuck.” Spec ran a hand through his hair and paced away. “She’s gotta come to the clubhouse.”

What a clusterfuck. His first task back with the club, and it ended up being a giant disaster. At least he couldn’t be held responsible for this goat fuck.

He froze as an idea popped into his head. Before he could second-guess it or talk himself out of it, he walked over to Spec, leaving Jinx to keep an eye on their semi-captive. “Hey, brother, I had a thought.”

Spec stopped pacing and stared at him. That searing skepticism sliced through the padding he’d tried to cushion around his emotions and pierced down to the mushy mess beneath. He felt every stab of uncertainty and mistrust like the tip of a knife repeatedly sinking into his flesh. The same skin

that crawled with the need to down a bottle of Jack or, better yet, find something more substantial to numb the self-hatred.

But as his therapist reminded him over and over, he'd gone that route, and it hadn't worked. The alcohol and drugs only created more self-loathing and opened the door to the loss of his job, his club, and his son—the only things in the world he gave a shit about.

Though he deserved it, the suspicion in Spec's eyes gutted him. The responsibility of cleaning up more than one of his messes had fallen on Spec's shoulders. It would take time, probably significant time, before his brothers trusted him again. He expected that, but it still sucked to have the men he considered family looking at him as though he was a fuck-up.

Instead of giving in to the instinct to leave and drown his sorrows, he straightened his shoulders and gave Spec the respect of eye contact.

After a long moment of charged silence where Lock imagined Spec searching for a way to say no that didn't make him sound like a dick, Spec finally said, "Let's hear it."

"What if we make Oliver believe his plan worked? Let him think he's in the clear. Then, when he lets his guard down and shows his ugly face, we nab him and teach him a lesson."

Spec pursed his lips and narrowed his eyes. Lock could see his wheels turning. "What's your plan to trick him?"

"We tell him she's with one of us. Club property until the rest of the debt is paid off, but we're happy with the collateral, and he bought himself another week." It made him a fucking caveman, but a flash of Brenna tied to his bed at his mercy had his dick twitching.

"That's not a terrible idea. We'll need to flesh it out a bit and convince her to stay with one of us until this plays out, but the idea's got potential. Who should we pair her with? Pulse?"

"She can stay with me." Lock spoke without thinking. His dick immediately rejected the idea of her sleeping under the same roof as any of his brothers. But, fuck, would Spec ever go for it?

"I gotta head straight home after this to let the sitter go. Why don't I take her with me? She can hang out at my place and get settled. I can work on getting her on board, and we don't have to overwhelm her by bringing her to the clubhouse. She might be more willing to work with us if she doesn't think we're kidnapping her and taking her to our lair. Plus, having Caleb around might make her more comfortable."

Women loved babies.

Spec snorted but immediately fell serious. His stare took on that judgmental gleam once again. This would be a big responsibility. Keeping their asset safe and getting her to play along with their plan to take Oliver down was no easy feat. It was a big ask. What woman would want to sleep in the same house as a man she didn't know? One who was part of a group that wanted to kick her ex-boyfriend's ass? Maybe this was a stupid idea, but he'd brought it up and would see it through. It was time he made himself a valuable member of the club again.

"Look." Lock stepped closer and lowered his voice to ensure only his enforcer could hear. "I'm clean. I swear it on my fucking life, on Caleb's. I'm clean, and my house is clean. As I told Curly, I'll piss in a cup anytime."

"It's not that—"

He held up his hand. "You trusted me once before, brother. Maybe I don't deserve it yet, but I'm asking for your trust again. Or at least the opportunity to show you I'm serious and won't fuck up."

Spec stared for a few more agonizing seconds before nodding. "Okay, here's how this is gonna go down." He strode over to Brenna. "You're gonna go with my man, Lock, over here. He'll tell you the plan when you get to his place."

"Go with him?" Brenna's eyes widened as she shook her head fast. "I... no, just no." She turned her panicked gaze on Lock. "I'm not going anywhere with you. I don't know you."

"It's that, or you come back to our clubhouse where the entire club will be."

She gasped. "No! No way in hell." She held her hands as though able to ward them off as she stepped back. "No. I'll scream. I'll go to the cops."

As though she could stop them from whatever they'd do to her. She must have realized it because her voice cracked.

"Please let me go."

Lock held a finger up to hold off Spec as he stepped toward her. Nerves and distrust rolled off her in thick waves. She was back to shaking and near tears.

"We promised no one would hurt you, and we stand by that. I can't head to the clubhouse after this because I have a baby at home, and his sitter can't stay late today. I thought you'd come with me because it'd be more comfortable than a clubhouse full of guys."

“W-why can’t I just go home? Please. I’ll forget all about this. I’ll keep my mouth shut, and no one will ever know this happened.”

Jinx grunted.

“Toots, this is about protecting you, not us,” Spec said with a roll of his eyes. “Lock, we don’t have time for this shit.”

“What do you mean?” She glared at Lock. “What did he mean by that?”

“We don’t know where Oliver is an—”

“He’s out of town,” she said.

Lock tilted his head. “Is he?”

“Yeah, he... I...” Her shoulders slumped. “I guess I don’t know for sure.”

“We don’t know what he’s planning or what he’ll do the next time he sees you.” He gentled his voice to a comforting tone in a way he never knew he could before becoming responsible for an infant.

“Oliver wouldn’t hurt me. He’s annoying and clearly makes terrible decisions, but he wouldn’t knowingly hurt me.”

Lock held back his laugh of disbelief. “Brenna, he sent you here knowing he was short cash, knowing what some men might do in that situation.”

He saw the moment the light dawned, and she realized exactly what it meant for Oliver to send her there. “Oh shit. I was... payment. To make up for not having the money. He sent me here thinking you’d *use* me and call it even. Do you think he’s lying about being out of town?” Her voice reflected the shock she must be feeling. “He could be home right now, sitting on his couch and patting himself on the back.”

Fuck, the world was full of shitty people.

Thank God he caught himself before he permanently fell into that category. Hopefully, he could keep it that way.

“You were,” he said with a solemn expression. “And we want to make him believe his plan worked.” The hard truth sucked, but what other choice did they have?

“Oh shit,” she said, pressing a hand to her stomach. “You want him to think you’re keeping me as some kind of collateral until you can find him and do whatever it is you’ll do to him?” Spec opened his mouth as Brenna lifted a hand. “I don’t want to know any more.”

“Fair enough.” Spec smirked. “You in?”

“W-will you kill him?”

Spec laughed. “A dead man can’t pay me.”

“Right.” She nodded. Lock could almost see the gears turning in her head

as she tried to process this quickly. “And I’ll be safe? From him and... anyone else?”

From you guys. She didn’t need to speak the words—her guarded expression said it all.

“Swear it on my fucking life.” Spec tapped two fingers over his heart. “You are not a prisoner. We’re just going to make him think you are.”

Brenna sighed. She tipped her head back and stared at the clear blue sky, exposing the long line of her throat. It’d be a fucking treat to lick from the fluttering pulse in her neck to her tempting mouth.

“Fuck,” Brenna whispered. The one word, filled with frustration and indecision, pulled him from his lustful musings. “Okay, fine. But once this is over, I never want to see any of your faces again.”

“Deal.” Spec clapped him on the back. “Good thinking, Lock.”

The praise washed over his battered soul. He’d made it another day without slipping and had added value to his club. Overall, a win.

Next, he had to make it through the night so he could add one full day to the sobriety tally. Tonight would be a particular challenge because he’d be babysitting a gorgeous brunette who had his dick working for the first time since he started getting wasted on the daily.

It’d be hard.

Fuck, it already was.

CHAPTER THREE

WHEN SHE'D ENVISIONED herself sandwiched between two men—that one time she had a stray threesome fantasy—the experience hadn't been anything like this. Following one biker in her little red coupe while another rode his motorcycle behind her, probably to ensure she didn't go rogue and try to flee.

Sexy.

Not that she knew much about sexy these days. She and Oliver hadn't exactly been setting the sheets on fire. At first, she'd assumed his lack of interest in tearing her clothes off was his personal issue. Maybe he had a low sex drive or couldn't settle after a demanding day at work. Who knew? But it turned out he'd reserved that part of himself for Becky.

And Kendra.

And Marley.

And she was pretty sure Jaclyn made the list of women he'd slept with—the college-aged barista who'd been serving them lattes every weekend for the past year.

So, Oliver didn't have a lack of interest in sex, but a lack of interest in sex with her, which did wonders for a girl's self-esteem and led her down a path of insecurity and ruined confidence.

As she drove, Brenna's mind became a runaway train of random thoughts, as it tended to be when faced with extreme stress. For her, dwelling on the ridiculous, like her ex-boyfriend's cheating habits, was easier than focusing on the immediate problem. And going to the home of some random, intimidating guy in a biker gang hit the top of the stress charts.

What the hell was she thinking? She'd agreed to be Lock's girlfriend, or toy, or whore, whatever these guys thought of their women. Basically, she'd agreed to serve as a loan repayment.

Real smart, Brenna.

Not that the bikers had given her much choice. As stupid as this decision was, going to Lock's house seemed safer than going to their clubhouse. At least she'd only have these two bikers to contend with instead of the entire gang. The stories she'd heard about what went on at the MC's headquarters were enough to turn her stomach and make her wish she could glue her legs together—the drugs, the violence, the orgies, and most of all, the way women were treated like objects.

Property.

Just last week, a client had regaled her with a horrifying tale about a bare-knuckle boxing fight on the MC's property that ended in a man's death and the wild party afterward where any female was fair game for any sexual advances just by being present. As though walking through the door gave the men an automatic green light for, well, whatever the hell they wanted. Another popular rumor had to do with an initiation ritual. According to the buzz around town, a woman wasn't considered an ol' lady until she slept with all the members of the club's executive board—the president, vice president, enforcer, and whatever other positions they had.

Brenna wasn't a prude, but she had no desire to go somewhere where women were passed around like live sex dolls.

The bike ahead veered toward an exit ramp, leaving the highway. Brenna followed closely as they navigated the streets, aware of the additional bike on her tail the entire time. After a few minutes, they turned into a residential neighborhood. Modest houses with neat lawns and charming flower beds lined the suburban street, not unlike hers. Her development had a more modern and newer flair, but this neighborhood appeared so normal. She frowned as she rolled past a house where two children chased a puppy on the front lawn while a young woman watered the plants. *This* was where a criminal biker lived?

“Not what I expected,” she mumbled.

What the hell had you expected?

A poorly maintained trailer park at best and a crack den at worst. People lived in those, didn't they? He parked his bike, then turned and waved her into the driveway. After pulling in, she glanced in the rearview mirror. The giant who'd shadowed her the entire way revved his engine and shot off with a two-fingered salute for Lock.

Guess I've been upgraded to only requiring one warden. Lucky me.

Brenna exited her vehicle with a heavy sigh and a queasy gut but didn't

walk up the driveway. She stood there, taking in the simple home that could have belonged to any suburban Florida family—palm trees, a few flowering bushes, and a neatly manicured lawn matched most of the other homes on the block.

As she met Lock's dark gaze, nausea morphed into a flutter of rabid butterflies. Nerves. Just nerves. Of course, she was nervous. She was seconds away from walking into this man's home—alone and without protection. What if he tried something? What if that green-light rule applied here as well?

Fighting wasn't one of her skills. Knocking clients on their asses with her killer home designs? Sure. But not fighting. She scolded herself for begging off those self-defense classes her best friend had tried to rope her into.

"It's not pointless, Bren," Lauren had said. "Even though you're in a relationship with Oliver, you never know what situation you'll find yourself in. Learning to defend yourself is just good sense."

Now she was back in the singles market and still helpless. "Well, screw you and your rational thinking," she muttered to an invisible Lauren.

"What's that?" Lock said, breaking their odd staring contest.

"Oh, nothing." Her face heated. She'd die before admitting she'd be at his mercy if he turned on her.

Before he could question her further, the front door opened, and a young, maybe late teens, *kid* walked out onto the porch. "Hey, Lock," she said with a familiar smile.

"Hey, Alison, everything good?"

She wore jean cutoffs and a cropped tank top, showing her flat stomach. "You bet. He was an angel as usual." She jogged down the steps leading to the front door.

"Right," Lock said with a chuckle.

Alison's gaze landed on Brenna, and her lips quirked in amusement as a twinkle entered her eye.

Yeah, sister, not what you're thinking.

"He's sleeping, but it's been a while, so he might wake up and... interrupt you at any moment." The girl winked.

Oh my God. Brenna's face burned. "No. We're not—"

"Don't you have a psychology class to get to?" Lock asked with a roll of his eyes.

"Yes, I do. Same time tomorrow?"

“If that works for you.”

She gave Lock a sunny smile. “See you then. Tell the little man I said goodbye.”

Lock huffed a laugh. “I’ll Venmo you the money.”

As Alison strode to her car, long ponytail bouncing with her peppy gait, she waved away his promise. “I’m not worried. You never stiff me.”

Yeah, Brenna didn’t buy that for one minute. Chances were the guy *stiffed* her every chance he got.

She blinked as she tore her attention from the young woman and planted it back on Lock. Humiliating assumption aside, the interaction between the younger woman and Lock was *normal*.

He could have been any average father seeing the babysitter off. Alison couldn’t possibly be immune to who he was and what club he belonged to. His leather vest was as obvious a hint of his lifestyle as a highway billboard.

Dangerous criminal.

Sexual deviant.

Violent man.

Yet, Alison didn’t radiate an ounce of discomfort at being alone with the man or taking care of his son day after day.

Brenna had the urge to run her hands over her scalp to check for signs of a head wound. Maybe she’d fallen or been in a car accident she didn’t recall. It might be the only explanation for this madness that made any sense.

A rumble sounded overhead. The familiar warning to all Floridians that the daily evening summer storm would be upon them soon.

“C’mon,” Lock said. “Let’s get inside before we’re drenched.”

She nodded and followed like a brainless puppy.

Light gray walls without any art or pictures greeted her in the foyer. He didn’t seem to have much style from the little she could see, but the house didn’t reek of wild bachelor either. His home was neater than she’d expected for a biker with a baby, but nothing had gone as expected since she found that stupid envelope in her drawer.

Damn you, Oliver.

A sharp cry had Lock sighing. “I was hoping for a few minutes to talk first, but he never seems to get the memos on my schedule.” He pointed toward a den. “Grab a seat. Make yourself comfortable. I’ll be right back,” he said as though she were a friend who’d come for coffee and a chat.

Brenna blinked, wordless again, as she watched him disappear down the

hall. The man filled out the seat of those pants very nicely—exactly what she needed to avoid noticing.

Hopefully, she'd find her tongue before he started making plans around her.

Brenna blew out a breath and turned toward the den. Sitting and making herself comfortable was out of the question. Too much nervous energy coursed through her blood to do anything but move. She wandered the space, glancing at the few books he had on a dark wooden shelf—mostly motorcycle repair, a few crime thrillers, and two baby pop-up picture books.

Adorable.

What? No. Not adorable. God, her mind was a mess. She hadn't had a second to process anything since she'd returned home from work. The time felt like days, but it had only been a few hours ago. Hell, it wouldn't even be dark for another hour.

The heavy fall of booted feet had her whirling around. Anything she might have tried to say died in her throat as every ounce of saliva disappeared.

Holy shit.

Lock was a very attractive man. She'd admitted that to herself the moment she laid eyes on him. Fine, attractive was a major understatement—he was hot as the damn sun. All the men at the warehouse had been, though she'd put Lock at the top of the list. His unruly hair and stubble just rubbed her the right way. But the combination of fear, confusion, and shock had enabled her to view him through a non-sexual lens, as though watching a movie. Gorgeous, but with enough distance, she could keep her head about her.

And her neglected body under control.

But now, the intriguing man held a baby on his hip—a cute-as-a-button chubby baby boy who was patting his little fingers on Lock's scruff and babbling with a drooly smile.

Ovary crack—plain and simple.

Not a straight woman alive would be immune to the picture they made.

“Brenna, this is Caleb. Caleb, can you say hi to Brenna?” He waved, and the baby mimicked him with an awkward open and close of his palm.

She pasted on a kid-friendly smile. “Hi, Caleb,” she said as she waved back. “Aren't you a cutie?”

He giggled and clapped his pudgy hands.

Ah, hell. It'd be a miracle if she made it through the next ten minutes without ripping off her clothes and demanding Lock plant one of his babies inside her.

"Can I get you anything?" he asked with an easy grin. "I don't have any alcohol in the house right now, but I've got water, soda, baby formula." He chuckled. "Actually, I may have a few White Claws one of my brother's ol' ladies left last week," he added as he grimaced like they were the most offensive beverages in the world.

Brenna's head spun. She couldn't take it anymore. "What are you doing?" she asked with more venom than was probably wise, given who he was.

He studied her, relaxed as could be. "What do you mean?"

She waved her hand in his direction. "This whole I'm-a-normal-guy act. I thought I was here because we're supposed to pretend you bought me from Oliver. I thought you wanted help getting your money back. I already said I'd do it. You don't have to pretend you're not... I don't know, in a gang or whatever."

She froze. *Idiot.* Why did she call it that? Would the switch flip now, turning him into the hard-core biker she'd anticipated?

He laughed.

Guess not.

"Come with me to the kitchen. I gotta get this guy fed before he revolts. Trust me, you don't want to see that. If you think my club is scary, we've got nothing on a hungry ten-month-old."

She stared as her head began to throb. "I, uh... okay." What option did she have? She hurried after him into a small kitchen where he was settling Caleb in a highchair with motorcycles on the cushion. As if they had a mind of their own, her lips curled into a smile at the sight.

Who knew a motorcycle highchair was a thing?

"Here," he said as he went to the refrigerator, pulled out a watermelon White Claw, then handed it to her. "You look like you could use a drink. Sorry, it's not something stronger."

"Um, thanks." She popped the top and took a sip—anything to take her attention off Lock and how his arm muscles rippled as he moved about. The last thing she needed was to have a sexual awakening over the man pretending to own her. She gulped her drink. Too bad there wasn't a bottle of vodka to beef this guy up.

"You lived around here long?"

Small talk? Now they were making small talk? Was he going to ignore everything she said?

“Yes.” She swallowed her sip. “My whole life.”

He nodded and made a noise of understanding. “So you were around when my president, Curly, ran another club. When he was arrested?”

“Uh, yes. I was a kid, but old enough to remember and have a basic understanding of what was going on. I think I was in my early teens. Now the news says he’s innocent and was wrongfully convicted.”

Lock nodded as he screwed the cap on a baby bottle. “Yes, to all of that. But it’s his story to tell you sometime. Since you were around then, I’m guessing you’ve heard all sorts of rumors about MC life.”

She paused with the can near her lips. “You could say that.”

Chuckling, he shook the bottle. As soon as Caleb saw it, the baby shrieked and smacked his little hands on the highchair tray. “Stop acting like you’re gonna say something that’ll set me off,” Lock said. “I don’t offend easily, and I won’t lose my shit on you. Say what you want.”

“Okay.” She set her drink down and looked him in the eye. Damn, his eyes were a light brown, almost golden color. Did he wear contacts?

Doesn’t matter!

“Uh, back then, everyone knew that club sold every drug imaginable, trafficked weapons, ran prostitution rings, and had a hand in just about every other crime. Everyone had heard the stories about the orgies and how they treated women. There were all sorts of crazy rumors swirling around. Still are.”

“You’re not wrong. That club was a shit show. Curly will be the first to tell you.” He finished shaking up the bottle and set it on the tray. Caleb immediately reached for it with both hands and shoved the tip into his mouth. His cheeks worked fast as he downed the contents.

This was the second time Lock had referenced Curly sharing his story with her. That would never happen. This collaboration would be over as soon as Oliver returned the club’s money. And if she got her way, that’d be tomorrow.

“You have no reason to believe me, but our club is nothing like the rumors you hear.”

She scoffed. “You’re loan sharks.”

His shrug spoke to his indifference to their illegal activity. “I didn’t say we were saints, just that we aren’t fucking assholes. The women associated

with my club? Well, they're fucking queens to their men. Not sure I've met other women who are treated so well." He winked as he dumped some sort of puffed snack out on Caleb's tray. "As they should be."

Queens? As they should be? Who were these people? If he spoke the truth, everything she thought she knew about the Hell's Handlers Motorcycle Club was wrong.

She chugged the rest of her drink. It'd take a few more to ease her tension. Tonight had been the most bizarre evening she'd ever experienced, and it didn't seem to be ending anytime soon.

"You'll see," he added. "They're great. You'll love them."

"What? No. Why would I meet any of them?" Was he insane?

He laughed again. Brenna refused to admit she liked the sound of his deep, rich laughter or the way it lit up his face with a genuine smile, making him even hotter.

"The ladies have a way of... let's call it adopting women they like. And they're gonna love you. Be prepared to be pulled into the fold."

She shook her head. Never going to happen. "But they're not gonna meet me, so it's a moot point."

Lock grunted. "Oh, you'll meet them." He leaned against the counter, folding those very nice arms across his chest. "If we're gonna do this, there's no way you won't meet them. Trust me, as soon as they hear about you, they'll be inviting you to their margarita nights or spa toe things or whatever it is they do that terrifies the rest of us."

This time, she couldn't help but laugh. It might have come out a bit hysterical, but at least she wasn't crying. This conversation had gone off the rails like the rest of the day. "Spa toe things?"

"Whatever, you know what I mean. Bottom line, Brenna..."

She shifted her gaze to the infant. He was much easier to look at.

"Look at me. This is important."

Damn him. She shifted her gaze back to him with reluctance.

He uncrossed his arms, pushed off the cabinet, and stalked to her. The closer he got, the more she had to tip her head up to keep eye contact. The man wasn't huge, maybe an inch over six feet, but he was tall compared to her five feet five inches. He cupped her shoulders with a gentle grip. Those hands were warm on her. She fought to suppress a shiver of delight at how his calluses scraped her skin. It wasn't him, per se. It'd been so long since any attractive man touched her that she'd respond this way.

Right?

“You’re safe here in my home or at our clubhouse,” he said. “You’re safe with any man in my club. Spec promised you that, and I’m reiterating it. You have nothing to fear from any of us. Oliver, on the other hand? Well, he’s fucked.” For the first time since they got to his house, darkness crossed his face, and she saw a man who could do severe damage if he wanted.

Her stomach plummeted to the floor.

What the hell had Oliver gotten her into? And worse yet, why did Lock’s promise of safety and protection make her feel all warm and gooey inside?

CHAPTER FOUR

“SO, WHAT EXACTLY is the plan?” Brenna asked an hour later as they sat on the couch finishing up a large pizza.

Lock had been pleasantly surprised when she’d let him pick the toppings, then smiled at his choice of sausage, mushrooms, and peppers. He liked a woman who ate more than lettuce and carrot sticks.

What he didn’t like was the way his dick reacted to her tongue licking pizza sauce off her lip or the tightening in his gut when she moaned her delight after the first bite. Getting a permanent hard-on for the woman Spec charged him with protecting would be the worst way to prove his worth to the club. Lock wanted back in their good graces more than anything. Brenna was a job, nothing more, and he needed to excel at that job so he could finally start feeling like he belonged with his brothers again.

He mentally kicked himself in the ass, then said, “Spec and my president are supposed to swing by tonight to iron out the details with us.”

She froze with the pizza slice halfway to her pink lips. “Your president?”

He smirked. “Not guilty, remember?”

“Yeah, no, I know. It’s just... never mind.” She took a bite and shifted her gaze to the table.

Lock gave her this one and didn’t press the issue. Sometimes, he forgot most people were wary of his club, if not downright afraid, especially its president. Throw in this overwhelming situation, and no wonder Brenna had serious concerns. If she hadn’t already begun to soften toward the club, she’d find out soon enough that her preconceived assumptions were off base.

“So, uh, am I going to have to contend with a jealous girlfriend or ex-wife or something when Caleb’s mom realizes I’m here?” A nervous chuckle followed her question. She’d probably asked hoping to diffuse some tension. Too bad she stepped into a minefield.

Lock stiffened. The soul-crushing ache he fought to keep from his chest

twenty-four hours a day snuck in, stealing his breath. The instinct to snap at her hit strong, but he swallowed it down mainly because Caleb sat on the floor playing with blocks in front of them, and he didn't want to scar the baby more than he'd already been scarred in his short life.

"No," he managed to say as his blood began to bubble with the need for something to take the edge off—something to chase away the heart-wrenching pain.

She chuckled again. "Well, that's good. Are you and Caleb's mom together?"

The pizza lost its flavor, so he dropped the uneaten slice back into the box. Every ounce of joy left his body as he tumbled into the same deep sorrow that had him seeking drugs that first time. It was a horrible, crushing combination of grief, guilt, and emptiness.

He gazed into her eyes and cleared his dry throat. "I'm not Caleb's biological father. And his mother's dead."

She gasped, her pretty eyes filled with shock first, then despair. His flat voice would have let her know how her simple question gutted him.

"Lock, I'm so sor—"

A knock on the door had him bolting to his feet—saved by his president again. "That'll be Curly," he said before she could apologize again. Whether she'd apologize for the death of his sister or her prying, he didn't give a shit. Repeatedly hearing how sorry people were for his loss drove him insane. He fucking hated their pity and their weak platitudes.

Nothing anyone said helped.

Nothing brought Deanna back.

Nothing made the pain go away.

And nothing erased the mountain of significant mistakes he'd made since Deanna died.

He turned his back on Brenna and strode toward the door.

Who cared if she thought he was an asshole? Who cared what she thought of him at all? She didn't know him, and he didn't know her. Brenna was a means to an end. A job he had to perform to regain the club's trust and help get their money back from Oliver.

That she happened to be hot and just his type made no difference whatsoever.

Neither did the compassion in her gaze.

"Mind taking Caleb into the kitchen?"

“Oh, uh, sure. I can do that.” She stared at the baby as though he was a bomb waiting to explode, which made Lock chuckle. It was nice to know he wasn’t the only one who had no idea what to do with a kiddo. Well, he supposed he knew now.

“Hey, Prez,” he said as he yanked the door open with too much force.

As usual, Curly did a head-to-toe visual scan before returning the greeting. It had become his little ritual every time Lock had seen him since leaving rehab. The prez probably wasn’t even aware of performing the assessment. Apparently, he needed a few seconds to clock whether Lock was wasted before choosing how to interact with him.

It hurt like hell, but he deserved it and wasn’t stupid enough to challenge his president.

Curly must have liked what he saw because he stepped into the house and clapped Lock on the back. “Hey, brother. Looking good.”

Spec followed the president into the house with a muttered, “Sorry, man,” two seconds before his ol’ lady, Olivia, appeared.

“Lock!” she said, with a sunny grin revealing her perfect teeth. She wrapped her slender arms around him and squeezed tight. “You look so great. I hear you have a special guest.”

For fuck’s sake.

As he returned Olivia’s hug, he scowled at Spec, who shrugged. “I said sorry. She promised we could try this thing I saw online the other day if I let her tag along. It’s—”

“Ugh.” Lock lifted a hand. “Keep it in your pants, fucker. I don’t need to hear that shit.”

Spec snickered and followed Olivia, who made herself right at home searching out his *special guest*. It took her all of three seconds to spot her in the kitchen.

“You must be Brenna. I’m Olivia, but call me Liv,” Lock heard her saying as he walked back toward the kitchen.

“Oh, uh, hi,” Brenna responded.

“I am so sorry for this mess you found yourself in. I can only imagine how these brutes handled everything and what you must be thinking.”

Spec snorted as Lock entered the kitchen to find Liv sitting at the table with Brenna. A beaming Caleb sat perched on Liv’s lap, playing with her long, sparkly necklace. As was typical for Liv, she looked like she had just walked off a runway in Paris instead of off her ol’ man’s motorcycle.

“I’m a little... overwhelmed,” Brenna said. She sat wide-eyed, taking in Olivia.

Lock couldn’t help but snicker. Considering her preconceived thoughts on the club, Olivia had to be making her head spin. Liv was the opposite of everything Brenna thought she knew about MC life, at least their MC life. Liv would crush Spec’s balls beneath the spiky heel of her thousand-dollar sandals if he so much as tried to treat her like his property.

“I’m sure you are. Spec filled me in a little.” Liv bounced her knee and smiled at Caleb as she spoke to the dazed Brenna.

Now that he’d found sobriety and could think clearly, Lock recognized how goddamn lucky he was to have so many incredible women in his life, showering his son with love each day.

“Sorry your ex turned out to be such a douche. If there’s anyone who knows about evil exes, it’s me. Isn’t that right, you cutie pie?” Her voice rose about six octaves as she shifted her attention to Caleb. “Yes, it is. Your Auntie Liv was engaged to a real piece of work.”

Spec grunted, making Liv roll her eyes. “Sorry. Spec gets all squirrely when I talk about my ex.”

Lock cleared his throat loudly.

Brenna jumped and focused on him.

“Can we get on with it? Uh, I’m sure Brenna would like some time to herself to catch her breath.” Not to mention he needed to start Caleb’s bedtime routine or he’d never get the little guy down, and the ripple effect would fuck up the entire night and the following day.

Liv winced. “Sorry, you’re right. I’ll shut up now.”

“Brenna, you met Spec and now Liv, and this is Curly,” he said, pointing toward his prez. “He’s the president of our MC.”

Curly pushed away from the refrigerator where he’d been leaning. “Hello, Brenna. Nice to meet you, even under the circumstances.”

She gave Curly a tentative smile. “Same. I’ve heard a lot about you.” As the words left her mouth, her eyes bugged, and she shook her head. “Uh, no, sorry. That’s not what I meant. I—”

Curly and Spec both laughed.

“Kill me now,” Brenna muttered.

“If you grew up around here, I’m sure you’ve heard all sorts of shit about me,” Curly said. “Unfortunately, many rumors of my past are true, but that was another lifetime and an entirely different club. People love to talk, and

what they don't understand scares them. Our club is often on the tip of many wagging tongues, and what they say is usually bullshit.”

She tilted her head. Whatever made her nervous to be around Curly seemed to have evaporated as she straightened her shoulders and spoke. “They say you're criminals. Isn't that what that patch right there means?” She pointed to the one-percenter patch proudly displayed on Curly's cut.

Lock bit off a groan and dug a fingernail into his palm. It was a trick he used to bring himself back to the present when grief and guilt tried to take over. It turned out it worked well to stave off poorly-timed boners as well. Christ, why was it so fucking hot to watch Brenna stand up to the MC president as though the guy couldn't snap her in two with a few flicks of his wrists?

Lock shifted as his distraction became less effective, and his cock thickened.

Across the room, Spec smirked. The fucker knew exactly where Lock's sex-starved mind veered. He flipped Spec off.

Asshole.

Curly smiled at Brenna. No doubt he also enjoyed her spunk and lack of fear, though Lock had a feeling her insides were quivering like the palms before a hurricane.

“I like you, Brenna. You've got guts,” Curly said. “And you're smart. We're involved in several businesses. Are they all legal? No. In my club, we make our own rules and stick to them. One of those rules is that we don't fuck with innocents in our business or personal ventures. Oliver broke that rule by setting you up, and he involved my club in doing so.” His voice deepened. “Today could have turned out very differently for you if we were the type of men Oliver assumed we were. If we were what the rumors say.”

The color drained from Brenna's face, leaving her pale and smaller than she had been only seconds ago. Lock fought the urge to jump in and rescue her from the uncomfortable conversation, but it'd serve her well to understand the severity of her situation.

“I know,” she whispered.

Liv squirmed in her seat. Not long ago, she'd been assaulted by her ex, and were it not for Spec, the situation could have been a thousand times worse. As it was, she struggled with nightmares afterward. “No one will hurt you here,” she said, probably unable to stay silent any longer. “I swear it on my life. I've never felt safer than I do since I met Spec.”

Spec moved behind her and rubbed his ol' lady's shoulders. She gazed up at him with so much love in her eyes that Lock had to look away. Once upon a time, he'd wanted a partner like many of his brothers had found—someone to go through life with. Contrary to most of the guys he knew, he'd never gotten off on being a player. Sure, he'd had his fair share of meaningless sex—who didn't like to get off with someone besides their own hand—but he'd never made it a sport. He'd always liked the idea of tying himself to one woman permanently.

Once in rehab, he'd broached the topic with his therapist, who'd hypothesized his desire for monogamy stemmed from being a twin. Living with a constant companion from birth spawned his desire for a single life partner as an adult. Deanna herself used to tease him, calling him a romantic or Prince Charming.

Little did they know his desire for a single companion arose from something more profound and darker.

Primal.

He likened himself to an animal searching for its bonded mate. He wanted to damn near own his woman. To possess her in every way. To become part of her on a cellular level and have her become part of him.

He wanted the type of relationship where he couldn't bear to let his partner walk out the door in the morning without a good, hard fuck because he needed a taste of her to survive his day. And he wanted her to crave him and his touch just as much.

Sometimes, most of the time, he wondered if such a relationship existed.

He hoped it did. The universe had a way of fucking him, and recently it'd done him in the ass without so much as a drop of lube which meant he was probably doomed never to find what he wanted almost as much as he wanted his next breath.

“So, what? Do you want me to pretend to be Lock's girlfriend? His captive sex doll? What are we talking about here?”

Christ, if the conversation continued along these lines, he'd have to leave the damn room. Imagining Brenna tied up in his bed, at his mercy, had him sweating bullets.

Curly chuckled. “Maybe somewhere in between?”

Not helping, Prez.

Lock shook his head and stepped forward. “You'll stay with me here and be seen out with me and at the clubhouse. Wherever you go, I go, and if I

can't because of work or Caleb, one of our prospects will accompany you."

Frowning, Brenna ran her finger over a scratch on his table. "Because you want it to look like I'm not allowed to go anywhere alone." She lifted her gaze to meet his, and the gut punch caught him by surprise.

Fuck, she was gorgeous. Exactly his type—innocent and sweet with a hint of dark curiosity. Lock may have preferred monogamy over sleeping around, at least when sober, but that didn't mean he wished for vanilla sex. He was down for anything, anywhere, any place, and the dirtier, the better.

His poor dick.

"Yes," he managed to say, though there wasn't much blood left to power his brain. "We want it to look to the outside world, especially Oliver, like we own you. Like I own you."

Was it his imagination, or was that a flare of heat in her eyes?

If so, it vanished in a flash.

"And you think this will bring Oliver to you."

She didn't phrase it as a question. She knew and only wanted them to agree.

Spec jumped in. "Yes. That's exactly what we think will happen. He'll keep his distance until he no longer worries there will be repercussions for shorting us. Once he realizes we accepted his... gift," Brenna and Liv winced, "... we're anticipating he'll come sniffing around to borrow more money."

That had Brenna frowning again. "Why did he need money in the first place? He's an estate attorney who makes a great living. What the hell did he need fifty thousand dollars for? Is he doing drugs or something?" Her attention bounced between the three men as she asked the question.

"It seems our friend Ollie has a bit of a gambling problem," Spec said with a sideways glance at Lock, whose skin suddenly felt too tight. Brenna's question about drugs hit a little too close to home.

He could barely swallow as an invisible hand squeezed his throat.

Oblivious to anything besides Liv's necklaces, Caleb let out a happy shriek.

Focus on your son. You're not that man anymore.

"No way. I was with him for almost two years. I mean, he goes to a poker night once a month, but wouldn't I have noticed if it had gotten out of control?"

"Probably not." Spec shrugged. "I'm sure he's a master at hiding it. But

that's not all, unfortunately. Ollie also—”

Brenna snorted. “He hates that name.”

“Good.” Spec winked, making her chuckle.

The slight hint of comic relief helped loosen the fist crushing Lock's throat.

“Ollie also seems to have a penchant for certain types of ladies.”

Liv straightened. After being engaged to a man involved in trafficking women and witnessing him assault one, she was particularly sensitive to these issues.

“What do you mean?” Brenna asked, but her voice had gotten small.

Sighing, Spec rubbed Liv's shoulders again. “I mean women who came here seeking asylum, mostly from Mexico and Cuba, I'm guessing, but managed to land themselves, very unwillingly, I might add, in the middle of a prostitution ring.”

“You-you're talking human trafficking,” Brenna whispered.

“I am.” Spec nodded.

Instead of looking at Spec, she straightened and spoke directly to Lock, “Then I'll do anything you need as long as you promise me one thing.”

He raised an eyebrow. “What's that?”

“You make it so he can't ever use his inadequate pencil dick to hurt another woman.”

Lock's lips twitched. He took two steps forward and extended his arm across the table, offering her his hand. “One castration coming up.”

Brenna slid her palm along his. The second their skin came in contact, he sucked in a breath.

Did she feel it? The bolt of lightning streaked straight to his core.

Fuck, this woman was going to be trouble. He was trying to get his life back on track. The last thing he needed was a woman who gave him a constant hard-on living in his house. He couldn't fuck her. Not if he wanted the club to take his promise of commitment and loyalty seriously, and that was his number one priority. Well, that and Caleb.

Brenna nodded. “Deal.”

And with that one word, Lock realized the coming days would be a challenge like he'd never experienced.

CHAPTER FIVE

IF BRENNA MADE it through the day without a major screw-up that caused a client to leave her a scathing one-star review, she'd consider it a miracle. By eleven in the morning, she'd missed a virtual meeting, ordered the wrong cabinet hardware for a commercial client, and spilled not one but two cups of hot coffee on one of her favorite sandals, scalding her toe. Her concentration was shit, and it didn't take a skilled investigator to uncover why.

Lack of sleep plus constant obsessing over the bizarre situation she found herself in had her hands fumbling and her mind a chaotic mess of runaway thoughts.

"Dammit," she muttered as she pulled her car too far forward in the parking spot, scraping the curb. A glance in the rearview mirror revealed a smirk on the face of the biker who had the unlucky job of babysitting her all day.

A prospect, they'd called him—some barely-old-enough-to-drink kid on a mission to join the MC. He was nice enough and had stayed out of her hair throughout the day but never far from sight, watching her like a hawk.

Had he been reporting back to Lock or Spec all morning? Maybe he skipped them and went straight to the top of the food chain, giving Curly a rundown on her clumsy morning. With a sigh, Brenna backed her car up a few inches and then killed the engine. In about thirty minutes, she had a meeting scheduled with a new client at her favorite coffee shop. She'd arrived early, planning to spend her time wisely and get her head in the game.

Maybe if she gave herself a dedicated chunk of time to think about her problems, she could shove them aside when it came time to perform her job like the professional she claimed to be.

As she exited the car, her gaze went to her warden. Should she offer to buy the guy a drink? A snack? How did this work? She'd never had an MC prospect tailing her all day.

The thought had her snorting out a laugh, which earned her a head tilt and a curious eyebrow raise from her babysitter. “You should wear a helmet,” she called out on impulse. Seriously, why wouldn’t he wear a helmet? The kid was way too young to splatter his brains across the highway.

He laughed. “I’m good, darlin’,” he said as though they were flirty friends instead of people who’d met that morning. And what was he, nine years younger than her?

She rolled her eyes. “It’s your funeral. Maybe literally,” she muttered the last part.

This time, her comment earned her a wink and a smirk.

Brenna huffed and turned her back on him as she walked toward the entrance. He could get his own damn coffee.

“Sit by the front window,” he called out. “So I can keep an eye on you.”

“Whatever,” she mumbled but lifted a hand to acknowledge his command.

One extra-large iced brown sugar oat milk latte later, Brenna sat at a café table adjacent to the front window as instructed. As she sipped her beverage, her mind wandered to the same place it’d been stuck since last night.

She cringed, recalling how she’d practically sprinted to the guest room after Curly, Spec, and Liv left. She’d pled exhaustion but hadn’t fallen asleep until long past midnight. In the span of a few hours, her life had gone from dull and slightly sad to wholly fucked.

How could she have spent the past two years with a man without knowing who he really was? They went to sleep together, woke up together, and ate together. They shared a home, friends, and a *life*. She hadn’t broken up with Oliver because he had a gambling addiction and owed an MC a shocking sum of money. She hadn’t ended their relationship because he was a monster who’d hurt her to save his ass. No, she’d cut things off because their connection had gone stale. They lacked passion. There wasn’t any rip-your-clothes-off desire or intense need to have each other no matter where they were. They’d drifted to a place where they acted like roommates or buddies. After she’d ended it, a mutual friend confessed to sleeping with him while he and Brenna had been engaged. She’d also found out about a few others, and by that point, she felt relief at being out of the broken relationship.

Staid, predictable, boring. Those were the words that came to mind when she thought of their sex life toward the end. Hell, they’d never had the kind of hot-as-Hades connection she yearned for, but it’d at least been on the hotter

side of warm.

She couldn't take it anymore after months of lukewarm, bordering on chilly nights. Maybe consuming hunger for another person only happened in books and movies, but she was still too young to throw in the towel and commit to a passionless relationship.

Right?

What the hell did she know about anything? It turned out she was too dumb to realize she'd agreed to marry a man who'd rather she get assaulted by bikers than pay his debts.

Crap.

And now she was living with one of those bikers as they enacted a revenge plot on Oliver. And said biker happened to be one of the sexiest men she'd ever laid eyes on. Plus, he had a cute baby.

If she hadn't yelped from the genuine pain when she'd spilled that hot coffee on herself earlier, she'd have been convinced this was all a fever dream.

God knew what Lock thought of her, especially since she'd been too chicken to stick around and find out. At five this morning, she'd fled from his house, determined to leave without talking to him. The prospect followed her to her home, where she'd showered, dressed, and packed enough to last a few days before beginning her disastrous workday.

"Excuse me, Brenna?"

Brenna blinked and gazed up into the smiling face of a woman maybe ten years her senior. Her client wore distressed denim shorts and a black ribbed tank with a dog rescue logo. Her brown hair was pulled up in a long ponytail, and her face appeared free of makeup.

"Brenna?" A frown of doubt crossed the woman's face.

"Yes, sorry." Brenna stood and extended a hand, which the woman shook it. "I was lost in thought. I'm Brenna, and you must be Brooke?"

"Yes, that's me," she said with a warm smile.

"Please sit." Brenna indicated the vacant seat across from her.

"Thank you." Brooke sat and placed her icy drink on the table. "I'm so excited to get started. Wait—" She peered out the window. "Is that Four?" she asked of the prospect staring at them from astride his bike in the parking lot.

Frowning, Brenna followed her gaze. "You know him?"

"You know him?" Brooke's forehead creased as she bounced her attention

between Four and Brenna.

“Kinda.”

They looked at each other and then burst out laughing.

“Let’s try this again,” Brooke said. “I’m Brooke, your new client and ol’... uh, girlfriend of Curly, the president of the Hell’s Handlers MC. That’s how I know Four. Are you dating him?”

Brenna snorted. “Oh God, no. He’s way too young for me. He’s my, um, well...” For crying out loud, how the hell was she supposed to explain this?

“Ohhh.” Brooke’s eyes widened. “*Brenna*.” She slapped a palm to her forehead. “That’s not the most common name. I can’t believe I didn’t put two and two together. You’re the woman from last night.”

Okay, she guessed she didn’t have to explain. “That’s me,” she said with a sheepish smile.

“Well, shit. I can’t believe you’re working today with everything you’re going through.”

Canceling had crossed her mind, but she’d needed the distraction. “Yeah, I kinda need something to think about besides my ruined personal life.”

“Okay then, let’s talk business, and if you’re feeling up to it later, we can chat about other things.”

“All right.” With a nod, Brenna swiped her iPad open and pulled up her favorite note-taking application. “You said on the phone you’re creating a women’s shelter, correct?”

“That’s right.” Brooke rested her elbows on the table. “We’re about ninety percent done with exterior construction. The shelter is on the MC’s property. They own an enormous plot of farmland. We built the shelter far enough back on the property that the women we serve won’t be running into giant bikers all the time, and we just finished paving a private entry road.

“Probably smart,” Brenna said as she jotted notes. The more she learned about this club, the more baffled she became. None of what she’d encountered met her expectations. Burly bikers who ran a women’s shelter? What planet had she landed on? “You’ll be serving women who’ve survived domestic violence? Is that correct?”

“Yes, absolutely, but we’re also hoping, especially hoping, I guess you could say, to serve as a safe place for victims of human trafficking.”

Brenna glanced up. “Oh, wow. That’s amazing.”

“We want to be a place for women to receive the support and care they need while transitioning back home or living independently.”

“That’s really impressive, Brooke.”

Her client smiled. “Thank you. It’s an issue that’s near and dear to us.”

“Us?” Did she mean the MC?

“Us ol’ ladies.”

“Oh, that’s like girlfriends of the bikers, right? I met Liv last night.”

Brooke’s face lit up. “Oh, you did? Great. She’s my business partner and planned to be here today but got... sidetracked.” She winked. “... if you know what I mean. Spec tends to have that effect on her.”

Brenna’s cheeks heated. Had she ever bailed on a meeting to have hot sex with her man? Nope.

Lucky bitch.

“So, recognizing we will be serving a vulnerable population who might be experiencing severe trauma, we are looking to create a welcoming and comforting environment that is also empowering.” Brooke chuckled. “Is that even possible?”

Bubbles of excitement began to zip through Brenna’s veins. She loved projects like this. Designing trendy homes for wealthy clients or sleek corporate interiors was fun and the bread and butter of her business, but creating a space with a life-altering purpose gave her immense joy. Those projects were few and far between but made her heart sing.

“Yes, absolutely,” she said with conviction as her mind began to pop and fizz with ideas. “I’m assuming we’re talking bedrooms and some common areas?” She typed away on her iPad as she spoke.

“That’s correct. Once open, we’ll be set up to house twelve clients at a time. Each woman will have her own room... no roommates. We felt it was important to give everyone their personal space. There will also be two bedrooms for staff. Someone will always be there, even throughout the night. We haven’t determined yet if we’ll hire someone to live on-site or if my partners and I will rotate days.” She chuckled. “Not that any of that matters to you.”

Brenna waved away her concern and encouraged her to continue with a one-hand motion.

Brooke sipped her drink. “Let’s see,” she said, setting the tall cup down. “We’ll have a rec room, a fitness space, a group therapy area, and a few individual therapy rooms. There’s a kitchen, four administrative offices, a large outdoor space, and two other common areas we haven’t fully fleshed out. Maybe a craft room and... something else.”

Brenna's jaw dropped. "That's huge." What a project. She practically salivated as she imagined the possibilities.

Chuckling, Brooke nodded. "It is. You'll find that any project Liv is involved with is above and beyond. The good news is we have the budget to make it spectacular." She leaned forward and lowered her voice. "I wouldn't divulge this to just anyone, but you're connected to the club now, so..." Brooke shrugged.

Connected to the club? Because of what happened only one day ago? That was wild. And why did it have a sense of warmth spreading across her chest?

Madness. She really needed some sleep. Or maybe more coffee. Lots more coffee.

Brenna grabbed her drink and took a long gulp.

"Liv was involved with a man who had ties to a human trafficking ring. She fled for her safety once she found out. Eventually, her ex came after her. Long story short, he is no longer alive, and Liv ended up inheriting a fortune she wanted nothing to do with. It was all blood money in her eyes."

Brenna's jaw dropped. "Um..." That explained some of the woman's reactions the previous night.

"Yeah, how else do you respond to a story like that, right?" Brooke said with a sideways grin. "Liv is fine and ended up with Spec, so you don't need to worry about her. Anyway, she wanted to refuse the money, but we made her wait before making such a rash decision. After a bit, she decided to accept it and put the money to good use, as I had no doubt she would." Brooke beamed, obviously proud of her friend and their project. "Her entire inheritance has been allotted for the shelter and its future. Trust me when I say money will *never* be an issue. We want to go all out."

"I don't even know what to say." Holy crap, a spectacular cause *and* an unlimited budget. It was a designer's dream. "You certainly know how to dangle a carrot," she said with a smile for her new favorite client. "What do you say? You give me a few days to come up with some vision boards for you to review, and you can decide if you'd like to retain my services from there." She'd come up with ideas so spectacular, they'd blow anyone else's out of the water.

Brooke shook her head at Brenna's suggestion. "By all means, design some ideas for me to show my partners, but we won't be meeting with anyone else. Now that I know you're a club friend, we're all in with you. Just

tell me where to sign.”

Well, that certainly wasn't an intelligent way to run a business. As much as it killed her, she'd be remiss in not mentioning her situation to Brooke a bit more.

“Um, I'm not really a club friend. I found myself in an unfortunate and potentially dangerous situation. I'm sorta bound to the club by the situation, not so much by choice,” she mumbled that last part.

Brooke tilted her head. “From what I heard, your ex turned out to be a son of a bitch who set you up, thinking the men in our club were the type to take a woman as a form of payment.”

The coffee soured in her stomach. Hearing it from another woman's mouth made it feel even worse. “Yeah, that's it in a nutshell.” It's funny how she could simplify an extremely complicated situation down to a few words.

“Well,” Brooke slapped a palm on the table. “If I know anything, it's that my man and his club brothers are protectors of the innocent. Your ex has no idea what he's up against. And that makes you a friend of the club, and it makes me your new and best client!”

Brenna hadn't thought her head could spin more, but Brooke proved her wrong. She was in so far over her head here, but she might as well try to stay above water. “Okay, well, thank you. This is an incredible opportunity for me.”

“I like you, Bren. Can I call you that?”

“Uh, yeah, sure.” Brooke could call her whatever the hell she wanted for an unlimited budget.

“Great. Tomorrow we're having a barbecue at the clubhouse. I'll make sure Lock knows to bring you along.”

“Oh, I—”

“Actually, are you free tomorrow afternoon? You can come by and meet the rest of the ladies, see the space you'll be designing, and then stay for dinner.”

She did a quick mental review of her schedule. “I think that'll—”

“Great! It's settled. I'll text Lock.” Brooke stood, rounded the table, then bent to give Brenna a tight hug. “I'm excited to be working with you.” Her wide smile verified her words.

“Uh, yes, me too.”

“See you tomorrow!”

With that, Hurricane Brooke was out the door and making her way to

Four, who still sat on his bike. He straightened when he noticed his president's girlfriend walking his way.

Brenna sat in her chair, head reeling as she tried to process the past fifteen minutes. It seemed as though she'd be living in a perpetual state of shock if the past twenty-four hours accurately represented life with the Hell's Handlers Motorcycle Club.

The rest of her afternoon passed without any major catastrophes. Somehow, she managed to pull herself together and get her job done. By the time she returned to Lock's in the early evening, she was beyond exhausted and annoyed that she couldn't go to her own house and veg on her couch with a beer.

She waved goodbye to Four as she climbed the three steps to Lock's front door and let herself in with the key he'd provided. As soon as she stepped inside the house, a heavy sense of awkwardness overtook her. How weird was it to be making herself at home in the place owned by a man she'd met yesterday? A man whose real name she didn't even know.

Very weird.

What the hell was she supposed to do now? Could she kick off her shoes at the door? Should she offer to help make dinner? Did he expect her to retire to her room and not be seen until morning? She stood at the entryway, paralyzed with indecision.

"Brenna, is that you?" Lock called out from her left.

"Uh, yes," she croaked.

"We're in the den. I've got a beer on ice for you and dinner on the way. Drop your shit and join us."

Oh. She blinked. Wow. That was super nice of him. Had Oliver ever gone out of his way to make her workday end on a relaxing note like this? Not that she was comparing Lock to Oliver. That'd be ridiculous. Lock was not her boyfriend and would never be her boyfriend.

Then why is he already doing more for you than your fiancé did?

"Thank you," she said as she kicked off her heels and set her bag down. "That's really ni—"

Brenna nearly swallowed her tongue as her gaze landed on Lock sitting shirtless on the floor with his son. The temperature shot through the roof as the urge to fan herself became almost impossible to resist. Didn't he have the air conditioning running? Come on, it was summer in Florida, for crying out loud.

Lock was built without being bulky. Firm muscles with a smattering of tattoos greeted her hungry gaze. He had a barbell through one nipple and a smooth, defined chest. His body had character and captured her attention more than expected. The men she'd dated before, including Oliver, had all been so vanilla compared to him. Rougher, more edgy men had never attracted her in the past, but something about Lock had her knees wobbling and her throat drying up.

"You okay?" he asked as he stacked three foam blocks on the floor in front of Caleb.

"What? Yeah, I'm great," she rasped as though she'd walked through the desert to get there.

Just about to combust from the heat

Maybe the air conditioner was broken.

Caleb shrieked and then smacked the blocks with a chubby hand, sending the foam tower tumbling to the floor. He broke out into a chorus of baby giggles that had Brenna's ovaries quivering.

Lock raised his arms and cheered like Caleb had scored a Super Bowl touchdown. His shoulders bunched, and the muscles in his abdomen rippled in a way that was impossible to look away from.

How would all those ridges feel against her tongue?

What the hell is wrong with you?

The lack of sex with Oliver had clearly had a detrimental effect on her brain.

The baby laughed so hard at Lock's cheering that his tiny face turned red, and he toppled over on his side.

"Whoops," Lock said with a chuckle. "You okay there, little man?" he asked as he helped right Caleb.

"Excuse me," Brenna managed to say despite her arid tongue. "Gonna grab that beer."

No word could describe what happened next better than flee. Brenna turned on her heel and practically sprinted to the kitchen, wrenched the refrigerator open, and shoved her entire head inside. As the cool air washed over her, she sighed.

Was there anything more appealing than a sexy man playing with his child?

I think not.

This entire arrangement just became a hundred times more complicated,

but not because of Oliver or being stuck with a bunch of bikers.

No, her own neglected libido was to blame for this new mess.

CHAPTER SIX

THE SHRILL CHIME of the doorbell pulled Lock from his and Caleb's demolition game. The baby's attention shifted, and he crawled toward the front door.

"Hold up, you little terror." Lock hopped to his feet, then scooped up his son and settled him on his hip as he went to grab the food delivery. As he walked toward the door, an icy blast from the air conditioner had goosebumps breaking out across his skin. After a particularly nasty post-nap diaper surprise, he'd taken off his shirt while bathing Caleb and hadn't bothered to re-dress.

He'd planned to toss on a shirt until he saw the blatant interest in Brenna's gaze. Now, fuck it, he'd give her something to gawk at all evening. It was only fair, considering the sight of her bare legs in that professional yet porn-worthy skirt gave him an instant boner. And that was before he'd gotten a glimpse of her tits in the fitted blouse. Damn, the woman was a stunner.

Had he known his dick would be tested this vigorously, he'd never have suggested letting her stay in his house. The last thing he needed when he was trying to get his head on straight and focus on his son was a sexy-as-fuck distraction.

He adjusted his junk and then opened the door. The delivery driver handed over the food, accepted his tip, and smiled. As Lock shut the door, soft footsteps sounded behind him.

"Can I help you carry anything?" Brenna asked.

Christ, if she stood any closer, he'd feel her breath on his neck.

Behave. He shot a nasty glare at his dick.

"I got the food. Can you grab Caleb from me?" He turned, and his jaw hit the floor.

For fuck's sake.

Not a chance in hell he'd stay soft now. Wearing business attire, Brenna

was sexy, but it had nothing on a casual Brenna dressed in sweat shorts and a skin-tight tank that left a two-inch strip of bare stomach for him to imagine licking. And boy, did he picture it. It wasn't the only place he thought of sticking his tongue. His imagination had been running wild since he laid eyes on her.

A few weeks ago, he'd have said alcohol and drugs would be his greatest temptation post-rehab.

He'd been dead wrong.

Dead *fucking* wrong.

"Oh, I, uh... I don't know if that's a good idea," she said as she closed the distance between them. "I mean, I like them but don't have much experience. I can try to take him. Think he'll come to me?"

"Yeah, he's super chill." Thanks to Lock's initial shitty parenting job, Caleb had plenty of experience being passed around among his club brothers and their women. Strangers didn't bother Caleb in the least.

Brenna reached out stiff arms for Caleb. He gurgled and practically leaped from Lock over to Brenna. "Oh, shit, I mean, shoot. Ah! Sorry. I wasn't expecting him to launch himself at me." She held him out with straight elbows like a bag of dirty trash.

Lock chuckled. Not long ago, he'd been just as clumsy and uncomfortable. Now, he was an old pro, or at least he faked it well enough to pass most people's critical eye. "You can bring him into you. I can't promise he won't bite, but he's not a bomb."

"Ah, right." Brenna pulled Caleb close and settled him on her hip after a few awkward attempts to get comfortable. "I think he's the first baby I've held."

"Same here."

Her face transformed into a sappy smile as Caleb reached up and patted her nose. "It's kinda nice," she whispered so low he most likely wasn't supposed to hear. But since living with Caleb, his hearing had become as sensitive as a damn bat.

"C'mon, let's eat. Hope you like Cuban food."

"Absolutely. Oh, man. That sounds perfect."

They didn't speak much as they ate, using the food as a shield to keep the awkward conversation at bay, but it wasn't long before they finished and made eye contact across the table.

Heat filled the open space between them, but it wasn't enough to eclipse

the heaviness of their situation. Brenna swallowed, and while he couldn't help but watch how her throat moved, he remained aware of the tense set of her shoulders. Only a few months ago, it'd have been easy to ignore the reason she was there in favor of his hard dick and the promise of a good orgasm. But these days, he was actively trying to be a better man.

"Sorry, buddy," he muttered to his poor horny dick.

Growth, thy name is Lock.

"What?" Brenna's forehead wrinkled. "Did you say something?"

"Nope." He wasn't admitting that one for anything. "What do you say you grab another beer and join me on the couch? We can find a shitty movie to pass the time." He lifted an eyebrow in challenge. "Unless you'd rather run away and hide in your room again tonight."

Brenna cringed. "Not gonna lie, that had been my plan."

"I figured. C'mon, I'll even let you pick."

She didn't say anything, clearly unsure of him and their situation.

With a sigh, he pushed off the table. "Look, this situation is weird as fuck for both of us. We can make it even weirder by tiptoeing around each other, or we can acknowledge it and roll with it."

Therapy for the win. He'd sure turned into a mature fucker over the past few months.

After a few tension-filled seconds, Brenna finally stood. "Got any popcorn?"

"Atta girl." He winked. "Cabinet above the coffee pot. You get that going while I get the slobber monster taken care of. C'mon, Bubba," he said to a filthy Caleb. Let's get you cleaned up and ready for bed.

After changing the squirmy baby's diaper, Lock got Caleb in his sleeper, fed him a bottle, and laid the nearly sleeping infant on his back in the crib. He paused, taking a moment to listen to the gentle sound of his son's breathing and reflect on the vast changes in his life over the past months. Deanna's death had been the catalyst for the worst and best moments of his life, and that was a mindfuck he still struggled with daily. How could he be so grateful for Caleb and mournful of his sister's death at the same time? Had Deanna not died, Caleb most likely wouldn't be in his life at all. He wouldn't have spiraled downward until he hit the concrete bottom of the barrel at full speed and wouldn't owe his life to his club brothers.

Would Brenna be waiting on his couch had Deanna lived? Probably not. He'd probably be at the clubhouse, working his way into some random's bed.

Part of him missed that life and the lack of responsibility, where no one would be counting on him except for whatever woman he'd made it his mission to pleasure that night.

But the other part of him—this new, moderately healthy version of himself—was happy right where he was, battling every day to keep from becoming a full-blown piece of shit.

Who the fuck knew what life had planned?

Christ, he needed to stop with the introspective bullshit and get his ass out to the couch before Brenna gave up and went to bed.

After a final stroke of Caleb's soft head, Lock went to the couch. The sight of Brenna's bare legs had him biting off a groan. Shit, maybe this had been a terrible idea. How the hell was he supposed to sit next to her and not want to pounce?

"Ever seen this?" she asked of the movie she'd queued up.

"*Unfaithful*? Nah, can't say I have. Diane Lane is hot, though."

Laughing, she rolled her eyes. "Does that mean you approve of the movie?"

He shrugged. "I'm not picky." He didn't give two shits what they watched. Whatever it was, he'd spend the entire movie trying not to lean over and sniff her. What was that incredible scent? It was more damn enticing than any drug he'd taken.

"All right."

She pointed the remote at the television, but before she could hit the play button, he said, "Hold up."

"Yeah?" She turned those gorgeous eyes his way.

"How are you holding up with all this shit?"

"Oh, um, I'm okay." She blinked as though surprised by the question.

"Can't imagine you planned on hanging with a bunch of bikers this week." As he spoke, he turned her way only to find her body angled toward him.

"Uh, no... can't say that was part of my original plan." Her laugh wasn't pleasant, more uncomfortable and nervous. "I don't know. I guess I'm a little off. I couldn't concentrate worth a damn at work today. I kept dropping stuff and messing up everything. I keep wondering how I could have spent so long with a man without picking up on clues." She frowned. "There had to be clues. Right? Something I missed to let me know he was willing to throw me to the wolves?"

“Don’t you mean ‘throw you to the bikers?’ ”

She huffed a half laugh. “Right.”

“People hide their shit really well when they want to.” He sure knew better than most.

Their gazes met, and he lost anything he planned to say. God, he sucked at this kind of shit. Give him a pussy and a set of tits, and he’d rock it, but an emotional conversation? A shudder rippled through him. He sucked.

“Besides...” he said, “... you can always blame it on the sex. Good sex warps your mind.” Humor took much less mental energy and felt safer. Easier.

Brenna snorted. “If only. Wish that had been the problem.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Old Ollie sucked in the sack?”

Her cheeks turned a light pink, and she averted her gaze. “I wouldn’t say he sucked. It just wasn’t... it wasn’t what I wanted.” She chuckled and covered her face with her hands. “Oh my God. I can’t believe I said that. Ignore me. It was fine.”

Fine. Christ. His skin prickled with hot need only a man who’d gone too long without fucking understood. “And what is it you want?” he rasped through a thick throat.

She turned her head and met his gaze again. Fire replaced the discomfort in her eyes. “Crazy,” she whispered. “I want it to be absolutely, off-the-wall crazy intense. I want it to make me stupid and make me think of nothing else. I want it to be all-consuming, no matter where I am or who I’m with.” Then she blew out a breath. “I want something that I’m not sure exists.”

For fuck’s sake.

His body nearly burst into flames at her honest words. His dick was so hard it ached like hell. That existed all right, and he could fucking give it to her, but goddamn, would it fuck up her life.

“Ignore me,” Brenna said with a half-laugh. “I’ve clearly lost my marbles. Let’s just watch the movie.” She settled back against the couch and hit the play button without another word.

Lock forced himself to stare at the television, but he couldn’t ignore how the air thickened between them or how her body felt magnetic, drawing him in.

I want it to be all-consuming, no matter where I am or who I’m with.

The movie began, but it didn’t register. Instead, Lock watched a different film in his mind—one in which Brenna was the star, where she lost control, shed her inhibitions, and found that wild passion she spoke of. Lucky for

him, he had the male lead in this little fantasy.

He couldn't act on the desire. Not with how many times he'd already fucked his club over. Curly was counting on him to keep Brenna safe, and that included from him and his greedy dick. He nearly groaned aloud. How the hell was he supposed to make it through living with her until they solved this problem with her ex?

He had no idea how long the film was playing when he heard Brenna curse and felt her stiffen beside him. The harsh word pulled him back to reality, where he found a very spicy scene playing out across the screen—one that did nothing to calm his raging lust.

Brenna seemed to be suffering a similar fate. "Oh, for fuck's sake," she muttered as she drew her legs up and buried her face against her knees.

Lock burst out laughing. "Problem?" he asked as she groaned.

"I did not pick this on purpose. I promise I had no idea what this movie was about. The description just sounded good."

"Suuure, I believe you."

"Oh, my God. Shut up!" she said without lifting her head.

"You should look at the screen. You don't want to miss this," he said, laughing at her humiliation.

"I hate you," she muttered. "I seriously hate you right now."

That only made him laugh harder. "C'mon, I fed you, gave you beer, and let you watch porn on my TV."

"Lock!" she shrieked. Her head popped up, and she glared at him before glancing at the screen, where the scene had only gotten raunchier. "Kill me now." Her face flamed bright red, and he swore he could feel the heat of embarrassment wafting off her, whereas he couldn't stop laughing.

Shit. Who knew the night would end up being so much fun? As Brenna hid her face again, Lock couldn't help but feel they'd crossed the line from awkwardly forced roommates to some semblance of friends.

Friends who watched erotic movies together then retired to their separate beds to deal with their arousal alone.

Fun.

CHAPTER SEVEN

“THIS IS INCREDIBLE. Really, Brooke, you guys thought of everything.” Brenna took in the unfinished space with genuine awe. No need to blow smoke up anyone’s ass to secure the job. The shelter would be one of a kind once finished.

“Thank you.” Brooke beamed with pride. “Oh, there’s Liv. Hey, hon, come join us,” she called to Olivia, who stuck her head through the recently installed front door.

“Hi, babe. I have some papers you need to sign,” Liv said before her eyes widened. “Brenna, hi! Oh my gosh, I’m so glad you’re here and that you decided to take on this project.” She dashed into the hallway with a squeal, not seeming to care that her designer pumps were getting covered in dust from the recently sanded drywall.

Liv was one of those lucky women whose style came effortlessly. At least, that’s how it appeared to Brenna, who never thought clothes fit right on her body. Oozing panache and luxury, Liv seemed like she’d be a high-maintenance snob, but her personality didn’t match her taste. So far, she’d been warm, welcoming, and not a bit pretentious.

It was a good lesson on not making judgments based on outward appearances. The more she thought about it, everyone she’d met affiliated with the club fell into that don’t-judge-a-book-by-its-cover category.

“Thanks,” Brenna said, accepting a tight hug from Liv. “I’m honored to be given this opportunity.”

“I can’t wait to see what you come up with. Did Brooke give you the tour?” Liv asked.

“We were just getting to that,” Brooke said. “But now we can do it together, and then we can head over for a drink at the clubhouse while we chat. Sound good?” She focused on Brenna, whose stomach flipped at the thought of entering the MC’s lair.

As uncomfortable as the idea made her, she wasn't about to piss off her new clients on the first day. "Sure. That sounds perfect." Hopefully, she did an adequate job swallowing her nerves, and her voice didn't sound as uncertain as her head felt.

Liv chuckled. "Don't worry. It's not nearly as scary as your face thinks it is." She winked.

So much for my acting skills.

Brooke looped her arm through Brenna's and began to lead her down the hallway. "Promise you don't have anything to worry about. You're one of us now."

One of them.

The statement had her mind drifting to the previous night, where she'd embarrassed herself beyond reason in front of Lock. What the hell was she thinking talking about her unfulfilled desires and pitiful sex life? Then, to go and choose the sexiest movie on earth?

Humiliation to the max. Maybe she could have withstood her own stupidity if Lock didn't tempt her on every level, but every time the man came near, her stomach fluttered, her heart tap-danced, and other parts of her body went haywire—parts she tried not to think about too hard due to that pitiful sex life.

The biggest problem resulting from last night was the realization that she liked Lock. *Really* liked the man. The physical attraction was one thing, and something she could handle since there was no way he'd feel the same about her, but to *like* him? Enjoy spending time with him, listening to him talk, sharing laughs and stories? That had disaster written all over it.

For God's sake, she'd had so much fun with the man she'd been reluctant for the night to end.

Disaster.

Fun led to wanting to be around him more, which led to connecting with him, which led to vulnerability, emotions, and eventual pain.

"Okay, here's the kitchen..." Brooke interrupted her downward spiral of severe negative thinking.

"Oh, wow, it's huge." The cabinets were in, but not the countertops, and the kitchen space was more than large enough to hold a dozen women without feeling overcrowded.

"Yeah." Liv chuckled and gave a sheepish grin. "We may have gone a bit overboard on a few things."

“No. I didn’t mean that as a bad thing.” Brenna swiveled her head to take it all in. “It’s a fantastic room for a bunch of people. You could hold cooking or baking classes for your clients. I imagine that would be valuable for some of the women transitioning to living independently, maybe for the first time.”

“Dayum,” Liv said, laughing. “Look at you with the incredible ideas. We should mention that to Harp,” she added, speaking to Brooke.

Brooke nodded. “Harper is our social worker. I bet she’d loved the idea of incorporating that into her educational plans.”

Brenna beamed. How good did it feel to have her input appreciated?

“I bet a lot of the women you’ll serve would benefit from... oh, excuse me,” Brenna said as her text notifications chimed three times in a row. “Let me just check that real fast.”

“Please, take your time,” Brooke said, releasing Brenna’s arm to take a step back. “I’m actually going to text Harper your idea right now.” She pulled her phone from the pocket of her denim shorts.

“Thanks.” Brenna walked three steps away as she dug her phone out of her bag. A barrage of texts always made her nervous. Her parents weren’t living, but she had a few cousins around her age. They stayed in relatively close touch despite living in different states. One of her cousins had serious health issues and occasionally needed assistance. Brenna always tried to be available in case of a medical emergency. With quick fingers, she swiped the screen and read the awaiting texts.

Her blood ran cold. She’d been right to be nervous, but not for the reasons she’d assumed.

Oliver: *I’m sorry.*

Oliver: *I had no choice.*

Oliver: *I can pay the rest now.*

Oliver had the money. What the hell did that mean? Was he going to try to trade for her or some shit? Like she was a piece of property to be partnered over. Did he expect the club would let him repurchase her like she was a returnable product?

“What the fuck?” she whispered. Her brain stalled, unable to process the insanity that had become her life.

“Bren?” Liv said, concern thick in her voice. “Are you okay?” She hurried over and placed a hand on Brenna’s arm. “Shit, your skin is cold, even though it’s about a million degrees in here. And you’re pale as hell. Brooke, c’mere.”

Brooke rushed over. “Brenna! What happened?”

She looked up into the concerned faces of her two—what? Acquaintances? Clients? *Friends*? She needed to tell them, if for no better reason than to erase the fear in their eyes, but words failed her. Instead, she held her phone out to Brooke.

The ladies huddled together, reading the fucked-up texts.

“Oliver?” Liv asked with a frown as she read who the messages were from. “Is that...”

She nodded.

“Oh shit.” Liv’s eyes grew stormy.

“We need to go.” Brooke snapped to attention. “We need to take this over to the guys. Now.”

Nodding, Liv said. “Your right. The quicker they see this, the better.”

“I don’t know...” Brenna’s brain couldn’t catch up with the conversation. She was still stuck in the shock of Oliver assuming he could hand over some cash and get her back.

What kind of monster was he?

Gripping her upper arms, Brooke leveled her a grave stare. “Look, I know this is crazy, and we barely know each other, but you need to trust us right now. The best thing we can do is take this to the club. They’ll work together to figure it out in a way that keeps you the safest and makes sure Oliver can’t hurt you now or ever.”

Hurt her? “I don’t think he’d hur—”

“He basically sold you to the club, Bren. I say this with love, but don’t be stupid. If our men weren’t as honorable as they are, your situation would be very different right now.”

Beside Brooke, Liv nodded with a solemn expression. “She’s right, Brenna. You know she is.”

Right. Why did she insist Oliver wouldn’t hurt her when the evidence proved otherwise?

Brenna blinked and shook out the cobwebs. “You’re right. Yes, of course, you’re right.” She reached out and squeezed Liv’s hand. “Thank you. I trust you guys. Let’s go.”

Please don’t let me make a devastating mistake.

“Good.” Brooke gave her a smile that was probably supposed to ease her mind, but concern still shone from her gaze, negating any comforting effects.

Knowing this was the right choice didn’t eliminate the fear that she was a

fluffy rabbit walking into a hungry lion's den. Unease sat in the pit of her stomach like an anvil.

"Let's go." Liv grabbed her hand and practically yanked her shoulder from the socket as she tugged her out of the building. How the woman walked so fast on those spiky heels would be a mystery Brenna never solved. She'd be in a wheelchair with two broken ankles if she tried to move half as quickly in half-as-tall shoes.

"Sweetie, slow down!" Brooke called as she jogged to keep up.

For Brenna's part, she appreciated the women's take-charge attitude. Until the shock wore off, she didn't trust herself to make rational decisions.

A loud woof preceded a giant German Shepard charging their way. Brenna's heart leaped into her throat.

"Ray, sit," Brooke called.

The dog immediately plopped its fuzzy butt on the ground.

"Whoa," Brenna muttered. "He listens well."

"My primary job is as a dog trainer. That's my baby, Ray. He's the best boy in the world. Saved my life on more than one occasion. Literally."

Brenna glanced at Brooke from the corner of her eye. Those were stories Brenna would want to revisit later. She looked at the dog with newfound respect. Someone had told her the women in the club all had pasts that were complicated and fraught with trauma. Maybe once her life got back on track, she could stay in contact with the ladies and learn more about them. They seemed like they'd make good friends, and Brenna would love to be involved with the shelter more permanently.

As she drew closer to the clubhouse, still at a near sprint, a man ran out onto the porch. Brenna recognized him as Jinx, the intimidating giant who'd been present the night Oliver tried to destroy her life.

"Saw you all charging over here out the window. You okay?" he shouted from the porch.

"Brenna got a text from Oliver!" Liv called back.

"Shit. Okay. Get your sexy asses in here, and I'll round up the boys." He disappeared into the building before Brenna could register the comment regarding their rear ends.

They ran the last few feet to the clubhouse and up the steps to the porch. As Liv yanked the door open, Brenna came to a dead stop, panting. Brooke slammed into her from behind.

"Shit! Sorry." She also breathed hard from the run.

Her shoulder protested as Liv tried to continue forward. The other woman stopped and turned, keeping her hold on Brenna's hand. "What's wrong?"

What was wrong?

The thought of going in there terrified her. Every movie she'd ever seen with bikers displayed the clubhouse as a den of sin and debauchery, and a place where she'd have to be hypervigilant and prepared to fight off aggressive advances when her "no" wouldn't hold any weight, and she'd have no voice. Hell, it's what Oliver thought. It's why he'd gifted her to the club.

"I, um..."

Brooke slung an arm around her shoulders. "You're safe, Brenna. We promise."

"*Promise,*" Liv reiterated with force.

How come she wasn't short-winded like the rest of them?

"Okay," Brenna whispered, then allowed herself to be guided into the clubhouse. She blinked as she stepped inside and gave her eyes time to adjust to the dimmer lighting. The place looked nothing like the filthy, alcohol-soaked party house she'd imagined. It was gorgeous, even to her critical decorator's eye.

A striking bar lined the left wall, made of high-quality wood that matched multiple round tables. Biker memorabilia hung on nearly every inch of wall space, but someone with a tacky taste hadn't decorated the room. It had been designed by someone with the true love and knowledge of the Handlers' men at heart. Whoever had decorated it wanted this building to be a home for the club, not merely a meeting place or party house. She ran her hand over a round table crafted from solid mahogany. The wood floor lacked sticky residue, and the staircase leading to a second level had a custom iron handrail that had to cost a pretty penny—a true masterpiece.

The heavy tread of footsteps had her whirling around and into a crushing embrace. Two strong arms closed around her, gathering her against a firm chest. Surprise at the embrace faded in seconds, leaving behind the delicious feeling of being held by a man. By Lock. Already, she'd know the spicy scent of his cologne anywhere. Half his house smelled that way.

"You holding up okay?" Lock whispered in her ear, sending a zing down her spine. His lips brushed the shell of her ear as he spoke, and she had to fight the urge to shiver visibly. How long had it been since a man took one look at her and sensed she needed physical contact? Oliver thought of himself

too much to notice her needs. And even if he found her upset, he wasn't the type to draw her against him and use his body to comfort her. She'd almost forgotten how much she loved it. Physical touch had always been her strongest love language, and she'd suppressed that side of herself for too long to appease Oliver.

All it took was one tight hug from Lock, a man she barely knew, to bring her long-neglected needs to the surface.

God, he felt so good. So warm, strong, solid, and, dare she think it, safe. They'd formed an unspoken bond in the past day and were now a team of some sort.

Her eyes drifted closed, and she let the bold and masculine scent overwhelm her senses. If a hug felt this incredible, what would it feel like if he leaned in a little more and pressed his lips to her cheek? Or her jaw?

Her neck?

Her lips?

She nearly groaned aloud as her body began to spark to life, growing heavy between her legs. Her nipples tingled. God, how she wanted to rub all over him for relief.

"Come on," he said. "Let's figure this shit out so we can get this fucker out of our lives."

The words hit like a bucket of icy water. Right. There she was, clinging to him in the clubhouse like a needy puppy. They weren't there for a hug fest. They had plans to make.

Again.

Would she ever not make herself look like a fool in front of Lock?

"Hell yes!" Spec shouted with near glee as he read the messages from her phone. "Knew this motherfucker wouldn't stay away for long." He glanced up, eyes glittering with evil delight. "Looks like you're about to get your life back, Brenna."

She should have felt elation, and she did, to an extent. Oliver would get what he deserved and hopefully never be stupid enough to borrow from loan sharks again—loan sharks she was currently cohabitating with—or set up a woman to be harmed, and that thrilled her. What she hadn't expected was the nagging feeling of disappointment. Soon, this would all vanish, and she'd return to her everyday, staid, lonely life. And as much as she'd wished for this very scenario just a few days ago, she'd quickly come to enjoy the women's company.

Lock's too.

To a startling degree, which meant it was the perfect time to end this nonsense and return to reality.

“Okay,” she said, taking a healthy step away from Lock. He frowned, but she forced herself to ignore the look that had her wanting to press her body right back against him. “What do we do?” She faced Spec. “Should I answer him?”

The club's enforcer scratched what appeared to be a few days of beard growth. His expression darkened as he no doubt mulled over even darker thoughts. Funny how only a few days ago he'd terrified her, and now she found comfort in the fierce expression.

A glance at Lock revealed an even more murderous expression. Holy shit, if looks could kill, Oliver would drop dead wherever he stood at that moment.

Again, instead of fearing the violence promised by Lock's appearance, she felt safe and protected. The temperature in the room rose, and she resisted the urge to fan herself as sweat broke out across her forehead.

Why couldn't she get her body under control? This was the worst time to get hot and bothered over the man.

Her strong desire to grind against him felt like her body's way of mocking her. She could make all the plans she wanted and keep all the decisions rational, but she'd still be turned on by Lock's nearness alone. What the hell had happened to her over the past few days? She barely recognized the horny woman drooling over a man the opposite of anyone she'd ever been attracted to in the past.

“Let's keep it simple,” Spec said, making her jump.

“You okay?” Lock whispered, placing a hand on her lower back. Pleasant tingles immediately spread straight up her spine.

“Fine,” she rasped.

Just imagining you throwing me down and ravishing me right here. No big deal.

“Tell Ollie-boy to fuck off. Act fucking furious with him.”

What? Oh, right, Oliver. Get your head in the game, girl.

With a snort, she shook her head. “It won't be an act. I am fucking furious with him.”

Spec gave her a half smile. “Fair enough. Make him think he's a genius. We're keeping you until he pays up, and you're pissed as hell about it.”

Lock cursed, and his hand flexed on her back. Two inches down, and it'd

be on her ass. Would he squeeze it? Knead the muscles and smirk as she reveled in his touch.

Mind out of the gutter, you fool.

The pep talks weren't working for shit.

"Um," she said, fighting to keep her feet flat on the floor. If she rose to her toes, his hand might slip down to where she wanted it.

Lock shot her a concerned glance as he moved his fingers against her skin once again. This time, when she couldn't contain her shiver, his lips curled into a mischievous grin. He winked and mouthed, "Focus," before flirting his fingers along the band of her shorts.

Damn tease.

"Think you can do that, Bren?" Spec asked with a frown.

She jerked her gaze in his direction. "Yes. Sorry. Yes, of course. I'll do whatever you guys need." The need to fan herself grew unbearable, so she did just that, using her hand to move the air toward her face.

Lock snickered.

"All right. Call him some nasty names, tell him you won't help him with shit, and he needs to contact me directly. He knows how."

"Okay, uh, yeah, I'm ready," she said, though the brick in her stomach said otherwise. "I got this."

Liv gave her a gentle smile as she grabbed Spec's hand. "We'll give you two some privacy while you text back."

She knew. The damn perceptive woman knew Brenna was seconds from jumping Lock's bones. That embarrassment was enough to deflate her lust.

A little.

"Wha—" Spec started with a frown, but Liv glared at him.

"Give them a minute."

"Absolutely," Brooke agreed.

Before Brenna could respond, the others filed out, leaving her alone with Lock in the clubhouse. "They didn't need to leave."

"Yes, they did." He pulled her close and wrapped her in a hug. He wasn't huge compared to Jinx or some of his other club brothers, but he had a solid muscle that felt luxurious pressed up against her. Her body continued to react, flushing and growing needier by the second.

Lock blew out a long breath, squeezing his arms tighter. The move brought their torsos even closer.

Something firm pressed into her stomach. Brenna's eyes widened, and

she sucked in a quiet breath.

Holy shit, was he hard? Did he feel the crazy chemistry too?

“What is happening?” she whispered without meaning to.

“We’ll figure it out,” he spoke against her ear. If she’d thought she’d been turned on before, the hot feel of his breath on her skin proved there was so much higher she could go. He pulled back and looked her square in the eye with an intense stare she felt beneath her skin. “Okay?”

“O-okay,” she whispered as if there wasn’t any other response. The world had tilted beneath her when she drove up to that abandoned warehouse and hadn’t righted since. At first, she’d feared the shift, but now she found herself never wanting to return to solid ground.

Her life had always followed a plan. Go to school, get a job, save money, date, and get engaged.

Check, check, check. All boxes ticked, even if she’d craved something different in her head. Something heavier, something deeper, something hotter.

And now she’d landed in a world she didn’t understand, but one that got her blood pumping in the way she’d always wanted but didn’t follow any plan. It was crazy, exhilarating, and confusing.

But she wanted more.

More of the friendships.

More of the excitement.

More of Lock.

CHAPTER EIGHT

LOCK'S BLOOD RAN hot with the urge to wrap his hand around Oliver's neck and squeeze until the man could no longer exist in the same world as Brenna. What the hell had she seen in that motherfucker in the first place? He'd shoved down his rage in favor of making sure she could hold her shit together.

But now he felt heated for a different and much harder-to-ignore reason. The woman's smokin' body was pressed flush against him like a magnet. Her full tits pressed against his chest, making him barely manage to swallow his groan. God, how he wanted to tear that tank top over her head and bury his face in her chest. To kiss, lick, and suck until she writhed and grew wet for him. He hadn't fucked anyone since before rehab, and he barely remembered the women he'd had while he was high. Sex was a drug in itself, one he was permitted to indulge in. Brenna made him want to get high off her again and again.

But first, they had to get rid of an asshole.

"Let's do this shit," he said, releasing his hold on her, even though he'd much prefer to run his hands over every inch of her.

"Yeah." Brenna exhaled as he guided her to sit at the bar.

"Need a drink?"

She wrinkled her nose. "It's barely after noon."

He shrugged. "Extenuating circumstances."

"I'm good. Besides, you don't need to sit here and watch me drink."

Shit. Gorgeous, intelligent, strong, and sweet too.

"All right." She rolled her shoulders and then blew out a breath. "Here we go."

Lock watched as her fingers flew over the phone screen. Her lower lip was tucked between her teeth, and a fucking adorable furrow formed between her eyes. The only way to keep from reaching out and smoothing the wrinkle

was to sit on his hands, which he ended up doing.

“What do you think?” she asked a few minutes later as she handed over the phone.

Brenna: *They’re watching me. I rarely get access to my phone. Do your own dirty work. I hope you choke on the goddamn money.*

He burst into laughter as he read the final line. “Damn, babe, you’re vicious. Remind me never to hand you over as collateral for a loan repayment.”

A half laugh, half snort escaped her. Her eyes widened, and she slapped a hand over her mouth, but it was useless. Laughter bubbled out, and within seconds, they were both hysterical. “Shit, I needed that,” she said as she got control. “Thank you.”

He grabbed her hand and brought it to his mouth. The way her eyes flared as he kissed the back of her hands had his blood heating again. “It’s perfect. Send it.”

“Yeah.” Their gazes locked, and the same fire burning in him crackled between them. “Can I have my hand?”

“Nah.” He laced their fingers together. “I think I’ll keep it for a while,” he said with a wink.

Brenna sucked in a breath and then reached for the phone with her left hand. It was awkward, but she fired off the text and then set it on the bar between them.

The kitchen door flew open not thirty seconds later, and Spec burst into the room. “Jackpot!” he called, holding up his phone. “Don’t know what you said, darlin’, but the old boy is fired up. Look at this little bitch thinking he has some power here.”

Spec handed over his phone, which Lock grabbed before Brenna could.

Oliver: *Warehouse. Two hours. My woman better not be hurt.*

A low rumble left Lock’s throat. *His woman?* Fuck that. The piece of shit lost the right to call Brenna his anything when he treated her like a piece of property. Hell, even before that, when she dumped his ass at the curb.

“Whoa... down, boy.”

Lock glanced up to see Jinx standing beside Spec with a sly grin. He waved his hand between Lock and Brenna. “Something you wanna tell us, killer? You moving in on Ollie’s girl?”

“Fuck y—”

“I am not *Ollie’s* girl,” Brenna snapped before Lock could finish telling

Jinx to get fucked. “I’m not his anything.”

“Ooo, babe, she *told* you. I like her already. Hi, I’m Harper.” The pretty brunette sidled up next to her giant of a man, who slung a thick arm around her shoulders and yanked her close. “I apologize for this brute,” she said, patting Jinx’s stomach. “I’m pretty sure wolves raised him.”

“Awooo.” Jinx howled, then buried his face in Harper’s neck, playfully biting until she slapped his arm and giggled.

“Get off me, beast,” she said with the least amount of conviction possible.

“Get a fucking room. Or a damn cave, you animals,” Spec muttered.

Christ, his club was nuts. Lock couldn’t keep the grin off his face. He’d missed this over the months he’d been in a downward spiral. The laughter, camaraderie, the fucking support he’d taken for granted before his life went to shit. These men and women had his back, and now was his chance to show them he deserved their loyalty. And that meant not trying to get in the pants of the woman in his charge.

He put distance between him and Brenna with a step back.

Her immediate frown didn’t bother him.

It didn’t.

“So what’d you say, Spec?” Lock barked. “We’re playing too much when this shit is serious.”

“Okay, drill sergeant,” Jinx said, rolling his eyes, which Lock responded to with a one-fingered salute. “You heard the man, Spec, what’d you say to Ollie-boy?”

Lock snorted. Ollie-boy. It was a nickname for a dog, not a man who could give a woman like Brenna anything she needed.

“I told Ollie-boy we’d meet on his timeline the day flowers sprouted out of my ass,” Spec replied.

Brenna tried and failed to hide a laugh behind a snort. Even the strangled noise had Lock wanting to go to her. To be near her. To touch her.

“We’re meeting tomorrow morning. Five a.m. Right here. I want him on our turf, shaking in his fucking loafers and shitting his Calvins.”

“I like it,” Jinx said. “He needs to see the full power of our club and know how hard we’ll come down on his ass if he ever tries to pull shit like this again.”

“You know,” Spec said as he held a hand out for Olivia, who’d just walked back into the room. “That won’t be a worry at all if I kill the fucker.”

“No!” Brenna said with a gasp. At the same time, Lock said, “Works for

me.”

She whipped in his direction, eyes wide with panic. “What? No. There will be no killing. Oh my God,” she muttered, rubbing her forehead.

“He’s kidding,” Liv said in a soothing tone.

“I’m not.”

“Spec!” Liv whacked her ol’ man’s stomach. “You’re freaking her out. Tell her this is just your sick sense of humor.”

“I’m not kidding,” Lock said. And he wasn’t. If Spec didn’t want to take the asshole out, he’d be more than happy to end his miserable life. He deserved no less for what he did to Brenna, and Lock would gladly die on that hill.

“Lock,” Brenna whispered. “I can’t have that on my conscience. Even if he deserves it.”

He ground his teeth so hard his molars creaked, but one pleading look was all it took for him to fold. “Fine, but he better be in serious pain when he leaves here.”

“Well, that I can promise you,” Spec said with a sinister grin.

“I want to be there.” Brenna stood, spine straight, and spoke the words with ultimate conviction.

Lock staggered back as though he’d been socked in the gut by a man Jinx’s size. “Hell no,” he said at the same time Spec said, “Fair enough.”

He whirled around on his brother and club enforcer. “The fuck is with everyone talking over me? There’s no fucking way she can be there.”

“Lock,” Brenna said in that same soft voice she’d used a moment ago. Instead of falling for it, this time, he held his ground.

“No,” he said, facing her. Despite everything that had happened in the past few days, Brenna was an innocent. Sure, she was fired up now, but watching Spec torture her former fiancé wasn’t an image she needed to fall asleep to at night. “Two days ago, you were terrified of us. You didn’t want to come here earlier today because you were all worried about going into an MC clubhouse. Now, you think you’re ready to see how we do our dirty work? You think you can handle watching Spec beat the shit out of your fiancé?”

“Ex.”

“What?” A sharp pain behind his eyes had him pinching the bridge of his nose. Fuck, he could use a damn drink.

“Ex-fiancé.” Brenna clenched her fists at her side and glared at him.

Damn her for making him admire her willingness to go toe-to-toe with him.

“Ex-fiancé who thought nothing of throwing me to the wolves and who literally set me up to be assaulted. I need to see this through, Lock. You’ve gotta be able to appreciate that.” She uncurled her hands and placed them on his chest.

The gentle touch was his damn undoing.

“Fuck.” He spun and paced the room. It hadn’t registered until that moment that everyone had left again, giving them privacy as though they were a team who made decisions together when, in reality, his reasons for keeping Brenna away tomorrow were eighty percent selfish.

Of course, he didn’t want her to have to live with the weight of seeing someone she once loved be hurt, but the deeper reason had to do with the way she saw him. Last night, she’d looked at him in a way that had his heart pumping and his shattered ego piecing back together a fraction. That would disappear if she knew the real him and saw the side of his club she’d feared all along. They might never hurt her, but they spent plenty of time on the wrong side of the law, and while he wouldn’t apologize for it, it was a world she didn’t know or need to learn about. It was the same reason he didn’t want to talk about Deanna or for her to know how bad things had gotten since her death.

“Brenna.” The one word held more emotion than he knew how to express with words. “You don’t know what you’re asking.”

She walked to him, and with each step, his breath caught until she was so near he could share her air. But she didn’t put her hands on him this time, and he tried to command it with his mind.

Touch me.

What was happening? He’d never felt this before—the insane need to protect her from the world while also wanting to throw her on the floor and do the dirtiest things imaginable just to hear her moan.

“I do. I do know. And I need it for closure.” She stared up at him, eyes pleading but also with something akin to awe.

He felt his resolve weakening with each word she spoke, but he couldn’t cave yet. “I like this,” he whispered, running a finger between her eyes.

Her nose wrinkled. “Like what?”

“The way you look at me.” He stroked the pad of his thumb over her cheek. “That’ll change if you’re there tomorrow.”

She shook her head. “I—”

He pressed his thumb over her lips. “It will.” He sighed. “But you deserve to make your own choice. And you deserve that closure.” Who was he to make decisions for her? Some random dude passing through her life for a few days? No one with any power to sway her, even if he liked the idea of his opinion mattering to her in a big way. Who cared if she saw him differently? Hell, it would make it easier for her to walk away, which was what she needed to do.

Maturity fucking sucked.

“Thank you.” She spoke against his finger, and he couldn’t keep his mind from running with the fantasy of her drawing his thumb between her lips and giving it a hot, hard suck.

Lock yanked his hand away. Emotions bombarded him from all angles—frustration, fear, regret, the ever-present grief, the heavy weight of responsibility over Caleb, and now a new one—desire.

Always fucking emotions.

Fuck, he wanted to get high. It was the only thing to stop the swirling in his mind. To numb the pain, kill the feelings of failure, decrease the loneliness of losing his only family, and ease the constant worry over life depending on him. But what he’d learned during rehab was how, with each hit, those feelings compounded because he added the fear of losing his club and letting down the men he’d pledged his life to. It became a vicious cycle that only the imminent threat of losing his patch had been able to stop.

“I have to pick up Caleb,” he said as he turned his back on the only woman he’d truly wanted in a long time.

“Oh. Do you want me to come?”

Fuck yes, he wanted her to come. On his fingers, on his dick, on his goddamn tongue.

“Don’t you have to finish up at the shelter with the ladies?”

She smacked a palm to her head. “Oh God, right. We were in the middle of a walk-through when Oliver’s text popped up. We still have a lot to go over.”

He nodded. “All right. Sounds good. Off to get the little man.” He’d been hanging out with Curly’s sister, Rachel, for the morning.

“Great,” Brenna said with an obvious forced enthusiasm. “I’ll see you back at home this evening.”

Home. His home. And hers for one more night. “See you there.”

But he didn't see her. Whether it was because he was a fucking coward or she was the one avoiding him, they'd never know. He picked Caleb up and took him to the beach. Little man loved nothing more than being a sandy mess. While bathing him in the early evening, he heard Brenna come in, but she went straight to her room and didn't emerge again.

It was for the best. What the hell had he thought was going to happen? They'd eat and play with Caleb together again before falling into bed to spend hours lost in pleasure?

The thought played on his mind as he stared at the darkness late into the night. "Fuck," he said with a groan as he rolled to his back for the fiftieth time. His cock was hard and aching as it had been for much of the night. Hell, pretty much since he first laid eyes on Brenna. That damn smile of hers went straight to his dick every time. And her eyes. The way she looked at him. She tracked him sometimes.

Fuck, she left him no choice. He thought of her as he shoved a hand down his shorts and wrapped a hand around his dick in a firm grip. One rough tug had him biting his lip to keep from shouting a curse. He liked it like that. Harsh and without mercy.

He had a feeling Brenna could give it to him like that and revel in it. The things she'd said, the hints she'd dropped. She wanted to fuck with the same fierce intensity he did.

His fist flew over his cock as he imagined the ways he'd take her. How hot it would be. How hard they'd both come.

Even the need for lube to eliminate the sting of a dry fist didn't give him pause. He fucked his hand until it grew slick with precum. Barely a few minutes passed before he imagined Brenna bent over his bike with her gorgeous ass on display for him, and his dick erupted like a fucking geyser.

His shout couldn't have been stopped even if he'd gagged himself.

Did Brenna hear him? If so, would she guess why he'd yelled?

Did she wonder if he was lying one room over, covered in a puddle of his cum?

Would she have any idea she was the sole reason?

CHAPTER NINE

“WELL, YOU’RE A massive coward, aren’t you?” Brenna stared at her reflection in the full-length mirror behind Lock’s guest room door.

She’d stayed away from the house long past dinner, then snuck in when Lock typically bathed Caleb, only to hide in her room like she’d done the first night. During the sleepless hours, she’d told herself she’d merely wanted alone time to prepare to see Oliver.

It was a stressful thing, confronting the ex who’d set her up for a terrible ordeal.

But in the light of day, as she dressed in a sexy leather miniskirt and skimpy crop with the sole goal of an eat-your-heat-out moment with Oliver, she couldn’t lie to herself any longer.

She’d been too chickenshit to spend more time alone with Lock. Somewhere over the past few days, she’d caught feelings on top of how badly she wanted him physically. Her reason for staying with him, hell for knowing him, would disappear in a few short hours. She’d be back home, and the past few days would be nothing but a brief intermission for her regular life. The smart thing was to cut ties last night, even if it felt like cowardice at this very early hour of the morning.

With one last glance in the mirror, she nodded, then ran a hand over her hair. She looked good, strong, and sexy in a way Oliver had never seen, probably because she’d never dressed like this before and had only purchased these clothes yesterday.

“Fuck you, Oliver.”

She opened the door and stepped into the hallway only to stop dead at the sight of Lock.

His jaw dropped, and his eyes bugged. “Jesus fucking Christ,” he muttered. “Forget bringing a gun... you’re a goddamn weapon all by yourself.”

Her face heated. “Thank you?”

He groaned and stared up at the white ceiling before looking at her again. “You are out for blood, woman, aren’t you?”

Cocking her head, she stared at him. “He deserves it, don’t you think?” Lock looked good, too, dressed in dark jeans and a black T-shirt that hugged his frame and did nothing to dissuade her from wanting him.

“Deserves death by blue balls?” He chuckled. “You’re cold, baby, but fuck yes, he deserves it and more. Unfortunately, you might take a few of us out with him.”

Her breath caught in her lungs. He didn’t mean it. Calling her baby was nothing more than banter. But it sounded so good—too good. She wanted him to say it again. And again. As he took her clothes off. As he touched her. As he thrust—

Shit.

She cleared her throat. “We should go. Spec said five.” The air between them felt so thick she could practically see it hovering.

For a moment, he didn’t speak, and she thought, feared, and *prayed* he would close the distance, put his hands on her, grab her, and kiss her until her mind blanked. Her heart thudded a slow, powerful rhythm of anticipation as the heat in his gaze scorched her very exposed skin.

But then he cleared his throat and jerked his head toward the door. “Let’s go. Caleb’s sitter just got here.”

Her throat was too dry to talk, so she only nodded once.

He lifted a hand, indicating she should walk ahead of him, so she did. She spun on one spiky heel—how the hell did Liv wear these damn things all the time—then strutted down the hallway. The groan he didn’t bother to hide let her know the skirt hugged her ass just the way she’d hoped.

“Give me fucking strength,” he muttered.

Brenna’s lips twitched.

They said a quick goodbye to the sitter, who told Brenna she was fire, and then went outside.

“We’re taking the bike.” He pointed toward the open garage where he kept his motorcycle

That had her stopping in her tracks. “What? I can’t ride in this getup. My whole ass will be on display.” She indicated to her skimpy clothes.

Lock smirked. “I don’t mind. Consider it your tax for making me suffer all morning.”

“Suffer?” She shook her head. What did he mean? She scanned him up and down until—“Oh.”

Another of those sinful smirks. “Yeah. Oh. Get on the damn bike while I can still drive.”

A significant bulge tented the front of his jeans.

Brenna giggled. Instead of embarrassment, she felt elated at the thought of him wanting her so much he couldn’t hide the evidence. “Isn’t it going to be hard to ride with... that?” she asked as she waved a hand toward his erection.

“Yep. About as hard as it will be for you to ride in... that.”

“Fair enough.” Who knew where this bold seductress came from, but she sauntered over to the bike and threw a leg over the rear seat. As predicted, the skirt rode up so high her ass was basically on display, and Lock had a clear view of her tiny black panties.

“Jesus, I’m a fucking masochist.” Lock shook his head and climbed on the bike in front of her.

“Comfortable?” she asked in as innocent a voice as she could muster.

He grunted. “Fuck no. How’s the breeze back there?” he asked a second before he revved the engine as loud as possible, probably waking the entire neighborhood.

Brenna yelped and clutched at his cut. Laughter bubbled from deep in her stomach. This entire situation was bananas, and she was insane for having as much fun as she was.

The trip to the clubhouse was quicker than usual since the sun hadn’t risen and traffic was sparse. Brenna clung to his back and fought to ignore how delicious he smelled. It’d be easy to press her lips to the back of his neck to see if he tasted as good as he smelled.

But she needed to get her head in the game if she wanted to stay in control and calm when she encountered Oliver. So, instead of continuing to play with Lock, she rested her cheek on his back and breathed as they flew through the streets toward the clubhouse.

They arrived all too soon and only seconds before Jinx.

“Hot damn,” the big guy said as she walked through the parking lot. “You don’t fuck around.”

“Eyes off, you big oaf,” Lock grumbled as he smacked the back of Jinx’s head.

“Ow! What the fuck was that for? Jesus.” Jinx rubbed his head, but his

smirk told them all they needed to know. He loved getting a rise out of Lock.

“How about we focus, boys?” Brenna asked.

“Oh, Lock is focusing, darlin’. He is focusing right on that juicy a—”

“Do I need to call Harper?” Lock raised an eyebrow.

Jinx frowned. “Why you gotta kill my fun?”

“Come on.” Lock placed his hand on the small of her back and guided her toward the clubhouse. The heat of his palm on her bare back had shivers dancing across her exposed skin. Spec, Tracker, and Ty were already in the clubhouse. Frost had been outside standing guard so he could alert them the moment Oliver came near.

Thankfully, no one else commented on her outfit, though she did get some sideways glances. Whatever. This was her armor. It made her feel strong and powerful, and it would drive Oliver insane. He’d always had something to say about women he felt dressed “slutty.” As though any woman gave two shits what he thought of them.

“We ready?” Spec asked.

“Hell yeah,” Jinx said as he rubbed his hands together. “Always ready to teach motherfuckers a lesson.”

“You good, Bren?”

Now that they were there, her confidence began to slip, replaced by a flurry of nerves in her stomach. “Yeah,” she answered with more conviction than she felt. “Let’s do this.”

A radio crackled before anyone could respond. Spec lifted a walkie-talkie off the bar. “Go, Frost.”

“Shithead incoming. I’ll follow him to the door and escort the bastard to the party.”

Brenna’s stomach bottomed out. Her palms began to sweat. The outfit that had felt like a shield only moments ago left her exposed and vulnerable.

“Hey.”

She turned her head toward Lock, who wore a solemn expression. “You got this. No doubt in my mind.” Then he winked.

How had he known she needed to hear those words? Could he read her that well already?

I have this.

“Thank you,” she whispered as the door opened, and Frost shoved Oliver into the clubhouse.

His eyes immediately landed on her, and she froze like a deer in

headlights. Her ex looked like shit. His usually flawless suit was rumpled, his sandy hair jutted out in various directions, and the tan he worked so hard to maintain had faded to a dull gray. He wore dirty dress shoes and held a thick envelope in his left hand.

The missing money that had started it all.

Thank God she wasn't required to speak first because her tongue lay heavy and limp in her mouth.

Spec didn't have the same problem. "Ollie-boy, the guest of honor. Come on in." He waved Oliver into the building.

"Uh, hey, Spec. Here you go. This is what I owe." He held out the packet. Straight to business.

Spec waved it away. "Nah, we'll get to that. How about a drink first?"

"It's, uh... it's five in the morning." His eyes darted around the room. No one else was drinking, given the early hour.

"Exactly," Spec said. "Five o'clock. Drinking time." He grabbed a shot off the bar and handed it to Oliver, eliminating the man's choice.

"Well, okay. Thank you," Oliver said, accepting it as though he wanted it. "Uh, cheers, I guess." He glanced around the room once more before tipping his head back and letting the shot slide down his throat.

As Brenna watched, she tried to remember what she'd found attractive about him in the first place. Was it the perfectly coiffed blond hair? The sharp blue eyes? Maybe his lean, gym-honed muscles. His confident, bordering on arrogant, personality? What she'd considered attractive and appealing, she now found lacking in every way possible.

"Like you said, I believe you have something for me." Spec held out a hand.

"Yes. Here you go." He thrust the envelope forward.

"Thank you." Spec snatched the packet and handed it off to Ty without looking. Ty immediately opened it and began counting while a heavy blanket of tension settled on the quiet room. Oliver fidgeted, clearly uncomfortable. Every so often, his gaze shifted to her, then back to Spec.

"All there," Ty announced a few moments later.

"Okay, so I can take Brenna and go?"

Over my dead body.

Spec tsked. "Well, see, that's where we have a problem, Ollie. You gave Brenna to us, and I'm not sure we're ready to give her back just yet. She and my boy Lock, here, are getting on real nicely if you know what I mean."

“Um...” Oliver blinked as though the words shocked him. “But I just, I mean, she was just...”

“What? Collateral? Ollie, I gotta ask what the fuck you were thinking, man? Acting like you had the right to trade a woman like that. Cuz I gotta tell you, my club doesn’t stand for that shit.”

“What?” He blinked again. “I mean, you guys...”

“What?” Spec lost the fake friendly tone as he approached Oliver. “We what?”

Oliver paled and stepped back, but Jinx had moved behind him, blocking any retreat. “You’re bikers. One-percenters.”

“Oh, I get what you’re saying. So, because of this patch here, you thought we’d be down with keeping a woman against her will.” He reached Oliver, who braced as though expecting a punch. “You know, you’re right, Ollie,” he said as he landed a hand on Oliver’s shoulder, giving a squeeze.

“I-I am?” Some of the color returned to Oliver’s face.

“You sure are. About one thing.”

Oliver visibly relaxed, but it didn’t last long. Lock stepped forward. Aggression and hatred wafted off him in waves, making Oliver’s eyes widen. Suddenly, Spec wasn’t the biggest threat in the room.

Shit, Lock was sexy like this. All fired up on her behalf.

“We are one-percenters.” His voice rumbled, low and full of menace. “But you were dead wrong when you assumed we’d keep an innocent woman prisoner. We’re not into hurting women, though we do love to make them scream.”

The comment almost had her choking on her saliva. She locked out her knees to keep them from buckling.

“Fuck you.” Oliver puffed up to his full height, which was around Lock’s six foot one. “You got your money. What else do you fucking want?”

“This isn’t about what I want. If it were, you’d already be bleeding out.” Lock took another step closer to Oliver. “But I think Brenna would like to see you cry, for starters. Maybe beg for mercy.”

A shitty grin turned Oliver’s face from smug to downright narcissistic. He shifted his gaze to her. “We’ll the bitch sure as fuck isn’t gonna get that.”

Rage surged through her. How dare he?

Lock lunged forward, but Spec stepped in front of him and propelled him back with a hand to the chest. “Why don’t we let Brenna have a say?”

Lock met her gaze. The same burning fury she felt in her chest flamed in

his eyes. The moment she'd been imagining all night. How many ways had she envisioned herself blasting him with words that would cut worse than any damage Spec could inflict? This man she'd once thought she loved without knowing what a bastard he was—the monster that lurked beneath the polished exterior.

But as she stood toe to toe with him, her mind blanked, and she couldn't think of a single thing to say to convey the magnitude of hurt and betrayal he'd caused.

Then he opened his stupid mouth. "You look like trash," he said, shaking his head as he sneered. "Don't know what you're so upset about. Seems more like you should be thank—"

Fuck words. She cocked her fist and rammed it into his face in a move so lightning-quick it happened before her brain processed what her arm had planned.

Pain ricocheted up her arm through her knuckles, but she clenched her jaw to keep from crying out. Oliver didn't deserve that satisfaction.

"Ow, fuck! You fucking bitch." Blood poured from his nose down his chin. He swiped at it with the back of his hand.

"Yeah, girl!" Jinx yelled. "Damn good hit."

A rush of adrenaline surged through her. It was a high that made her feel strong, powerful, and sexy. Now, she was the one wearing a smug grin as she slowly walked backward until she bumped into a rigid body.

Lock. His intoxicating scent soothed and ignited her at once. "Maybe you're right," she said, her voice taking on a seductive lilt. "Maybe I should be thanking you."

A hard bulge pressed into the small of her back, ramping her up even more. Lock wrapped an arm around her waist, splaying his hand across her bare midriff. She shivered as his calluses brushed her sensitive skin. It was a claiming move, so possessive and sexy that her pussy clenched and her panties dampened. His pinkie flirted with the waistband of her skirt.

Brenna bit her lip to stave off a lusty moan.

She'd never know what came over her, what alien force made her act so out of character, but she lifted her right arm and wound it around the back of Lock's neck while staring straight at Oliver. Then she winked and pushed up on her toes to press a hot, open-mouthed kiss to the hollow of Lock's throat.

His entire body tensed, and the erection at her back twitched. He stared down at her with a molten gaze, bringing their lips a fraction of an inch apart.

Nothing in the world could have prevented her from yanking his mouth down to hers.

She parted her mouth and allowed him in the second their lips met. If Lock was surprised by the bold move, he didn't show it. He invaded her mouth with his tongue, making her toes curl against her strappy high heels. The intoxicating taste of him immediately went to her head. She floated on a cloud of delicious sensation, letting him lead the blazing-hot kiss. The hand on her stomach held her firmly in place, allowing him to grind his erection into her back, which he did.

Brenna whimpered into his mouth, and he swallowed the sound as he greedily devoured her.

Whoops and hollers from the men went unheard, and the reason for kissing him in the first place—straight-up screwing with Oliver—was all but forgotten. Brenna lost herself in the feel of Lock's soft lips against her mouth, his hot and skillful tongue moving against hers, and his hard body making her so needy she wanted him to ravish her right there.

No wonder this place had a reputation for drawing in women by the dozens. Thirsty women would be lined up for miles if the men were half as potent as Lock.

Brenna lost track of time and place until Lock nipped her lower lip. The tiny sting made her moan but also brought her back to the present, where she stood in a room full of bikers and her ex making out with a man she barely knew.

Shit.

She drew back and met Lock's lust-drunk gaze. He looked like she felt—dazed, hungry, and ready for more. Somehow, she dug deep and stayed in character, turning to face Oliver. The utter shock written across his slack-jawed face was enough to propel her forward and slake her need for revenge. Whatever Spec had planned, he could finish without her.

“See you at home,” she said to Lock, who released her, but not without letting his hand slowly drag across her stomach. She suppressed tremors and faced Oliver. “Well, I got what I came for. Enjoy the rest of your day, boys.”

With that parting shot, she sashayed her way toward the exit.

With each click of her heels, her façade crumbled a little more. The pain returned to her hand in a rush of throbbing knuckles and aching bones. The gaze of every eye in the place followed her, and she felt them like hot pokers jabbing her back. With great effort, she kept her spine straight and head held

high. Hopefully, no one noticed her steps quicken to a near run as she got closer to the door. Or how she yanked it open with too much force.

The second she stepped out into the steamy early morning light, she deflated. She folded in half, bracing her hands on her knees as she gulped in warm air. Her head swam, and her legs quaked.

What the hell had just happened?

CHAPTER TEN

LOCK WATCHED BRENNA walk out with a spike in his pants and fire in his veins. What had happened in the last five minutes made up the hottest moment of his life. Brenna had managed to deliver a fuck-you to Oliver and an I-want-to-fuck-you to him at the same time. And he was more than up to the task.

Literally.

He turned back to Oliver, who looked like he'd sucked a rotten lemon. "Damn, Ollie. Gotta thank you for sending that one my way." With a wink, he made a show of adjusting his hard dick. Not that he'd find an ounce of relief until he was buried somewhere, anywhere in Brenna.

Oliver seethed. "Fuck you," he muttered, but with much less heat than before.

"Nah, I think I'll let your ex take care of that." It was a good thing none of the women were around to hear that. They'd kick him square in the nuts. But he couldn't help himself. Pissing Ollie off was too much fun.

Jinx snickered. "Damn, it's good to have you back, brother."

The simple statement hit him straight in the soul. It fueled him. Acceptance from his club was eighty percent of what kept his ass in rehab. He wished he could say it was being an excellent father to Caleb, but he hadn't dealt with his bullshit enough for that to have been his number one priority. Providing for Caleb drove him more than anything, but the club was a close second.

Spec caught his eye and gave him a single nod, which had Lock smiling. Typically, this was the enforcer's game, but Lock got the green light to run with it. After a wink for Spec, he walked toward Ollie.

"Hey, man, I-I'm sorry, okay?" Oliver said as he lifted his hands to ward off Lock's approach. "I didn't want her hurt. I was just desperate. Y-you gotta understand that."

“Desperate?” Lock repeated. “Like you didn’t have the money and were too chickenshit to take the consequences like a man, so you desperately decided to hand over Brenna instead? That what you mean by desperate?”

“I... no... that’s not... it...”

Oliver tried to back up, but every time he did, Jinx shoved him forward again.

“Look, I’m sorry. I’ll stay away from Brenna. I’ll stay away from your club. I’ll be better with money. I learned my lesson. Really.” He spoke with a nasal inflection that hadn’t been there before Brenna clocked him.

Lock scoffed. “Will you fucking relax? I just want to check your nose.”

“Oh.” Oliver let his hands fall away. His face uncrunched as his shoulders relaxed. “I think she broke it,” he said, prodding the purpling skin around his nose.

“Probably. Lemme see.” Lock stepped into Oliver’s personal space. Instead of reaching for the man’s nose, he curled his fist, cocked his elbow back, and rammed Ollie in the gut with a powerful uppercut.

The asshole groaned as he doubled over, clutching his stomach and coughing. “What the fuck?” he managed between choked sounds.

“Oh, shit! My arm slipped. You okay, buddy?”

“Stay the fuck away from me.”

“Oh, I don’t think so.” Lock grabbed Oliver’s hair and yanked his head up before kneeing him in the same place he’d punched. This time, Ollie’s knees failed to hold him up. Lock released his hair so the man could land in a heap on the floor.

“Damn, Ollie,” Spec said. “Looks like you fell. Need a hand up?”

“No! N-no. Don’t touch me.”

Lock gave him a swift kick to the ribs, which had the fucker curling into the fetal position to protect himself from further pain as he coughed and moaned. Blood ran from his nose, combining with a line of spit dangling from the corner of his mouth and pooling on the floor next to his face.

“Stop,” he whispered. “I get it.”

“That’s it, huh? Three hits, and you’re out.” Jinx laughed. “Pussy. Thank fuck Brenna ain’t yours anymore. That woman deserves a whole lot more than you.”

Truth.

“You done, brother?” Spec asked. “Or you wanna play a little more. Your choice, but you know what gets my vote.”

Oliver moaned and then spit out a gob of blood and saliva.

Lock stared down at the miserable man with pity. “Nah, I’m good. Well, hold on.” He grabbed the front of Oliver’s wrinkled and now bloody shirt and lifted him. “I find out Brenna’s name even leaves your lips, I’ll make sure that pencil dick of yours can’t fuck another woman as long as you live. We clear?”

“C-clear,” Oliver answered. “Never heard that name before.”

“I’ll be paying attention.” He stood abruptly and released Oliver’s head. It hit the floor with a loud crack that had Jinx laughing.

“That sounded like it hurt.”

“You got ten seconds to get your ass off our property, or you won’t be able to leave,” Spec announced. “Ten... nine...”

Oliver scrambled to his feet and stumbled toward the door, bent over and cradling his torso. They all watched with varying levels of amusement and laughter.

But not Lock. He just wanted the fucker gone and never heard from again.

“Nice work, man,” Spec said, clapping Lock on the back as soon as Ollie left. “Good to have you back in action.”

“Thanks. Feels good to be back.” Understatement of the year.

“Come on. Let’s call the prez and fill him in. Think Brooke left us some of that pie she made too, and I’m fucking starving.”

“Hell yeah,” Jinx said before heading toward the kitchen.

Lock shifted his attention to the door, but Spec steered him in the direction Jinx had walked. “I know you wanna go after your woman, but trust me, she needs some time. Frost radioed and said she asked for a ride to your house. He took her. She’s safe.”

Yeah, he wanted to go after her almost as much as he wanted to fuck her, but he had to keep his priorities straight. The club and Caleb.

They were all he could handle at the moment and were what he needed to focus his energy on. Not a woman he barely knew who’d probably have her stuff cleared out and be back at her place before he even got home.

Of course, she would be. There wasn’t any reason for her to stay.

And it wasn’t crushing disappointment he felt at that realization.

When it was still early enough to be considered dawn, Lock finally pulled into his driveway. The babysitter had offered to stay as long as needed so he didn’t have to rush.

He sat on his bike, heart hammering away, and stared at Brenna's car still parked in his driveway.

She hadn't left.

She's still here.

What the fuck did it mean?

He walked inside and down the hall toward her room, only to come up short when she stepped out of the bathroom.

"Oh, Lock. Hey." She froze in her task of towel-drying her hair upside down.

One look at her with wet hair, tiny cotton shorts, and one of those damn skimpy tank tops that kept him sweating, and he forgot all about his vow to stay away. His dick went rock-hard so fast the room wobbled before his eyes.

"You okay?" she asked as she straightened.

"You're still here."

Brilliant.

"Yeah, is that okay? I thought about going straight home, but I needed a shower and a few minutes to calm down before I got behind the wheel."

He drank in the sight of her with her pebbled nipples peeking through the thin fabric of her white tank. Clearly, she'd skipped the bra, and with her skin slightly damp, the material was nearly see-through. Was she *trying* to kill him?

"You let the sitter go?"

"Yeah. Is that all right? There was no point in her staying since I was here. I checked on Caleb, and he's sound asleep."

"It's fine."

Use words, asshole.

"Fine that you're here and that you let Alison go." Thinking became a challenge, with all the blood rushing away from his brain toward his cock.

"Okay." She narrowed her eyes and gave him a skeptical assessment.

"So, uh, is everything over with Ol—"

He stepped forward. "Don't say his name. Don't ever say his fucking name again."

Her eyes widened, and she sucked in a harsh breath. "Okay," she whispered.

They stared at each other across the five feet of hallway separating them. Tension crackled and fizzled like a live wire in the rain. Brenna's chest visibly rose and fell with each inhale. Lock was seconds away from pouncing

on her, and he tried his damndest to keep from turning into a rabid animal.

“So, I owe you an apology,” she said as she shifted from one foot to the other.

Even her polished toes were a turn-on. He’d never given a shit about feet, but they were as sexy as the rest of her.

“Wait. What?” he asked as her words registered. That had his lust dimming a bit. “What the fuck are you talking about?”

Her cheeks flushed. “For how I treated you back at the clubhouse.” She gazed at the floor before seeming to summon the courage to look at him again. He hated the guilt in her eyes. “Kissing you and all that. I used you to get back at Oliver. And I’m sorry. It wasn’t right of me.”

Was she for real? He barked a laugh. “You used me?”

“Yes. The whole thing was so out of character for me. I just... lost my mind, I guess.” An uncomfortable chuckle escaped her. “I didn’t even have your consent, and I basically attacked your face.”

Christ, she could use him like that every day and twice on Sunday for all he cared. Hell, he’d beg her to use him. But her voice held so much misery she couldn’t possibly be joking even if he fought the urge to laugh. “My consent?”

She frowned. “Yes. Why are you just repeating me?”

If it wasn’t for the way her nipples were currently trying to cut through her shirt or how she’d rubbed her stellar ass all over his cock earlier, he might have thought she didn’t want him. But those things and more gave her away. She was too damn sweet to admit she loved it as much as he did.

“How’s your hand?”

She jerked at the change of subject and then stared at her hand. “Oh.” She opened and closed her fist with a wince. “It’s fine. I’m a little embarrassed that I lost control like that. I’ve never hit anyone before.”

“You’d never know it. Your form is spot on.”

That had her chuckling. “Thanks, I think. And thanks to that one self-defense YouTube video a friend forced me to watch last year, I knew to keep my thumb tucked.”

He didn’t laugh even though she was trying to lighten the weird vibe. “Did you ice it?”

“Yes, Lock, I did. It’s fine. I promise. Doesn’t even hurt right now.” Tilting her head, she smiled at him. “You don’t need to worry about it.”

“Good.”

“Yeah.”

Silence fell again. He breathed the slow, controlled way his therapist taught him in rehab. It helped to control him when he felt out of control. When anxiety spiked, his heart rate rose, or he needed to keep from doing something stupid.

Something incredibly stupid like touching the woman who made him so hard he could knock down the wall next to him with his dick.

“Well, I should—” She gestured toward her room. The movement stretched her tank top across her tits. Her goddamn nipples were hard.

Fuck it.

“Turn around,” he ordered in a sharp voice.

“What?” Her question was a breathy whisper, and her eyes were wide as saucers with blown pupils.

“Turn. Around.”

Her throat moved as she swallowed, but then she did as he asked, giving him her back in a slow, tantalizing turn.

He walked forward with the same unhurried pace until his front met her back. His dick nestled between them.

Brenna gasped.

“Lift your arm like you did in the clubhouse. Put it around me.”

She was breathing so fast he could feel her back moving against his chest, but again, she obeyed. Her arm came up and around the back of his neck. For a second, he had a flash of that movie his sister made him watch countless times when they were teens—*Dirty Dancing*.

If he had his way, things were about to get beyond dirty.

He wound his hand around her waist and slipped it under her shirt, pressing his palm flat against her stomach as he'd done in the clubhouse. They were now in the same position, except his hard cock was nestled a bit higher against her back since she no longer wore the heels.

She trembled as he inched his fingertips down into the band of her sleep shorts and came to rest right above her pubic bone.

“For the record,” he said in a deep rumble against her ear. “You had and have my consent to do whatever the fuck you want to me. Anytime you want.”

“Oh God,” she whispered as her eyes fell shut.

“The only question left is whether or not I have your consent?”

Eyes squeezed tight, she nodded in a rapid clip.

“Say the words, Brenna.” It took everything he had not to press her against the wall and grind his cock all over her ass. Having patience killed him, but it’d be so worth it in the end.

“Yes.”

He grinned. God, he liked her like this, all breathy and needy. “Yes, what, baby?”

She whimpered. “Yes, you have my consent.”

“Open your eyes.”

They flew open, and she met his gaze, all wild and unfocused.

He pressed his hand firmly against her lower belly. “And what do I have your consent to do?”

She shuddered. “Um, uh, anything. You can do anything... please, Lock.”

“Mm, I like that.” He nuzzled the side of her neck with his nose. Her scent hit his bloodstream faster than any drug he’d ever indulged in. “Such a pretty sound, you all desperate. Please, what? Tell me what you want.”

She trembled in his arms, and he’d never loved anything more. If he could, he’d stay right there for the next twenty-four hours, reveling in how badly she wanted him. The best part was how he’d remember this in the morning. He’d remember every breath, sound, and touch because he was stone-cold sober.

“Touch me,” she cried. “Touch me, Lock. Please fucking touch me.”

Hell yes. He skimmed his hand farther into her shorts and straight to the soaking-wet evidence of her arousal between her legs.

He danced his fingers across her opening before sinking his middle finger deep inside her.

“Oh, yes.” Brenna surged in his hold as she tightened her arm around his neck.

Lock licked the shell of her ear. “You’re needy. Oliver didn’t do a very good job of keeping you satisfied, did he?”

“N-no,” she whispered, then turned her head until her gaze collided with his. “No one ever has. Not like I know you will.”

Hell yes, he would. He kissed her with all the pent-up desire she’d built in him over the past few days.

The way she opened for him, allowing his tongue to play with hers, drove him fucking wild. There were no games, no pretenses with Brenna—just pure and honest want.

He tore his mouth from hers and pulled his hand from her sex. Brenna

cried out in protest. “Shh,” he soothed. “There’s no way in fucking hell I’ll leave you hanging.”

Before she could reply, he turned her and pressed her back against the wall, then grabbed her wrists, anchoring them high above her head with one hand. He used his free hand, wet from her pussy, to shove her shorts down. In a blink, his finger was back inside her warm, wet pussy, and Brenna was arching off the wall with a moan.

“Shit,” she whispered. “This is crazy.”

“Want me to stop?” It might kill him, but he’d do it.

“No. No, no, *no*. Never stop.” She punctuated the words by squeezing his finger with her inner muscles.

“Want me to give you more?”

“Yesss.”

He worked a second finger into her. The way she bit her lip and arched her back made him groan. Her hard nipples made his mouth water for a taste. “Goddamn, those tits are lethal,” he said before closing his mouth over one fabric-covered tit.

His eyes nearly rolled back in his head.

“Oh, Jesus,” Brenna said, echoing his thoughts. “This is insane. Oh, God, it feels so good. Please don’t stop.”

Her answer was the scrape of his teeth over her nipple as he fucked her with his fingers. Brenna moved with him, working her hips on his digits like she’d die if she didn’t get to the finish line soon. He’d love to take his time. To pull his hand out and listen to her cry of dismay, make her beg before he worked her up all over again, but the need to watch her come was sharper than anything he’d ever felt. It was stronger than any drug craving ever to hit him.

“I love your mouth on me,” she whispered, so he sucked harder, cursing the cloth that kept him from getting the whole feel of her taut nipple on his tongue.

He finger-fucked her until sweat dotted her forehead, her eyes went glassy, and her face flushed. Her warm arousal coated his hand and made it easy for him to play with her from the inside out. Each time he crooked his fingers, she mewled like a happy cat. He fucking loved that sound and wanted to listen to it on repeat.

“Lock,” she said, sucking in large pulls of air. “Lock, I’m close.”

Fuck yes. He lifted his head to watch her face as he snuck a third finger

into her. The way her eyes popped wide had his dick leaking in his boxer briefs. She snapped her legs closed, trapping his hand as she rode his fingers with abandon until she shouted and trembled like the floor was quaking beneath them.

“Holy fuck,” she whispered. Her head thunked against the wall, then whipped side to side.

Lock fingered her until her body went slack, and her eyes slowly opened. He chuckled at the dazed expression on her face. “You’re come-drunk as fuck.”

“Mm,” she said with a sloppy grin. “You have no idea.”

With a grunt, he withdrew his fingers from her body, earning a sexy pout for his efforts.

“I like them there,” she whispered. “Feels good.”

His cock jumped.

Damn her.

He lifted his dripping fingers to her mouth and smeared her wetness over her lips before capturing her jaw between his fingers. “You’re going to be the fucking death of me,” he whispered before he slammed his lips to hers, gathering up every ounce of her flavor with a sloppy kiss. He even licked across her jaw where his fingers had been, then cleaned his hand as she stared with a shocked expression.

A sharp cry drew their attention to Caleb’s door.

“Oh no, we woke him,” Brenna said.

He kissed her again. “I’ll settle him. It’s still early so he’ll probably go back to sleep for a bit. Don’t fucking go anywhere.”

She nodded, so he kissed her one more time. Then again. And a final time. They could pick up where they left off as soon as he got Caleb sleeping again. There wasn’t anything he wanted more than to slide his cock into the tight pussy his fingers had just become acquainted with.

But when he returned to the hall a few moments later, Brenna was nowhere to be found. Her room was empty, her suitcase gone, and her car missing from the driveway.

If not for the scent of sex lingering in the hallway, he’d have worried he’d dreamed up the hottest encounter of his life. But it had happened, and she’d left. All he had now was the hard-on from hell he’d have to take care of himself.

Lock sighed. This was probably for the best.

Brenna wasn't meant for his world.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

“GOOD AFTERNOON, MARLENE, it’s Brenna. I just wanted to confirm tomorrow’s delivery of the Contemporary Farmhouse armoire.”

She paused, drumming her fingers on her desk while she tapped her toe. The usual two cups of coffee she pounded before feeling human weren’t necessary that morning despite a horrendous night’s sleep. Anxious energy had her buzzing more than if she’d drunk an entire pot of the liquid gold.

“Yes, the address is 4722 Crescent Avenue in Lithia.” Nodding along, she jotted down the delivery window Marlene rattled off. “Between ten a.m. and two p.m. Excellent. The homeowner will be there to meet the delivery truck. Thanks, Marlene. You’re the best. Mm-hmm, you too,” she finished, wishing the woman a great day as well.

“A great day,” she muttered. “Not likely.” It’s hard to have a great day when she couldn’t stop obsessing over the life-changing orgasm Lock gave her hours ago and how she fled the scene of the crime like a dirty criminal before returning the favor.

She loved a good orgasm. Who didn’t? But, holy hell, she honestly didn’t know it could be that good. She’d always written people off when they bragged about having a full-body, mind-melting orgasm that left them feeling like a puddle of goo and craving more. One that made her vision go white and her ears buzz.

But it had happened to her in the early hours of the morning.

With Lock. An outlaw biker. In the middle of his hallway. After she’d punched her ex and he’d done God knew what to Oliver.

Oh, and while his baby slept in the nearby room.

“Argh,” she grumbled as she thumped her head against the desk several times. “Work. Do more work. Must distract myself.”

She grabbed her list and crossed *Call Marlene* off with a flourish. “Next is... oh shit.” Her heart sank. “Send Liv an estimate.”

Great. Just when she'd been trying her hardest to avoid the thought of anything or anyone who'd remind her of Lock.

"Might as well get it over with." A few clicks of her keyboard later, she had the rough estimate for the women's shelter pulled up on her computer. After a final scan, she fired it off in an email to Liv. "Don't be a chickenshit," she said, staring at her phone.

The thing rang, making her jolt so hard she bumped the phone.

"Jesus," she shouted, as she managed to keep the phone from falling. She pressed her hand to her runaway heart. Liv's name flashed on the screen. "Seriously? Could she freakin' hear me? Hey, Liv," she said in as chipper a voice as she could manage after hitting the speaker button. "I was just about to call you."

"Girl, we must be connected. I'm sure you're calling because you have business to discuss, but first, how are you after this morning?"

Brenna paused. How on earth did Liv know? Did Lock tell her? And what could he have said? Her face burned with a mix of embarrassment and the same renewed lust that cropped up anytime she remembered his hands on her. Or in her.

Dammit.

"Bren? You okay? I assume all this shit with your ex has you all messed up today."

"Ohhh." She huffed a laugh. "You're asking about Oliver."

"Of course. What did you think I was talking about?"

She wasn't going there unless she had to. "Uh, nothing. Sorry, my brain is a little slow today. Coffee must not be working."

Liv chuckled. "I know how that goes. Listen, hon, here's what we're gonna do. We'll finish our workdays, then get together for some girl time. Drinks, junk food, the works, okay?"

"Oh, um..." She didn't want to be rude, but spending time with those ladies was a terrible idea. But they were so lovely. Being her clients added an extra layer of complication. She really liked them and would have loved to be friends if it wasn't for the fact that she needed to stay far, far away from Lock after this morning.

"Come on, you know you want to."

Oh, what the hell. Peer pressure for the win. It wasn't like Lock would be at their girls' night. Maybe a night out would be the perfect distraction.

"Okay, I'm in."

“Yay.”

She heard noises that sounded like Liv was jumping as she cheered.

“I’ll text you the details on where and when to meet. K?”

“Perfect. And before you go, I wanted to let you know I emailed a very rough estimate for the shelter based on the design plans we’ve discussed so far. It will change as we get into the nitty-gritty of choosing specific materials, furniture, and such. When you get a chance, please give it a look through. If you have any questions, call me any time. If not, you can E-sign, and we’ll be official.”

“Thanks, Bren. We really appreciate how quickly you got to work on this. I’m not worried about the estimate. I’ll sign it as soon as we hang up. Seriously, none of us can wait to get started on the interior.”

Neither could she. This would be her biggest and most lucrative project to date, not to mention how amazing this was for her professional portfolio. They were giving her a very long leash on the design, and her creative side rejoiced at the opportunity. If only all her clients could sign an estimate without worrying about the budget. If only she could live her life that way. She chuckled to herself, then bid her goodbyes to Liv with another promise to join the ladies that evening.

Next on her list was an in-person appointment at an outdated dental office she’d been hired to modernize. The busy morning passed without a hitch, and by the time she pulled into her favorite sandwich shop to grab a late lunch, she’d forgotten her promise to meet the girls for drinks.

That was until she checked her phone and found a text waiting from Liv.

Liv: *Six tonight. Bonfire out behind the clubhouse. We aren’t above showing up at your house to drag you out if you don’t show.*

Dread settled low in her stomach. At the clubhouse? Where Lock could be? There was no way she could face him after her cowardly display this morning. Or the wanton one where she’d come harder than ever before on his fingers in his hallway. When she’d agreed, she assumed they’d meet at a bar or maybe Liv’s house.

“Gah. Don’t think about it,” she said as she banged the heel of her hand against her forehead.

Her phone chimed with an incoming text.

Liv: *I can feel you thinking of bailing from miles away.*

Dammit, Liv.

She blew out a breath and tapped out a response.

Brenna: *Wouldn't dream of it. Can I bring anything?*

Liv: *Just your gorgeous self and an empty stomach.*

Brenna: *Great. See you later.*

“Whyyy?” Brenna groaned. They better have a lot of alcohol.

The afternoon blew by too quickly, and before she knew it, it was time to head to the clubhouse. After a quick trip home to change into something more casual and reapply her makeup—not because she wanted to look fresh in case she ran into any particular man—she was on her way. The drive wasn't long enough, and within fifteen minutes, she found herself parking in front of the clubhouse way before her brain was prepared for a potential run-in with Lock.

“Hey, Brenna!” Liv jogged down the three steps from the clubhouse porch.

Finally, she wasn't wearing a super trendy outfit that made Brenna feel like a frump, yet she somehow still looked glamorous in a pair of loose joggers and a fitted T-shirt. She wore designer sneakers that probably cost more than Brenna's entire outfit, yet her smile was warm and welcoming. Despite her expensive tastes, the woman didn't have a pretentious bone in her body.

“Hey!” She lifted a bottle of wine. “Couldn't show up empty-handed.”

“You're sweet.” Liv hugged her and then grabbed her hand. “Come on around back. I have a super cute setup, and Spec got a fire going a few minutes ago.”

Together, they walked around the back of the clubhouse, where a large beige blanket had been spread out near a raging fire. Someone had scattered chunky pillows around the blanket and placed a platter of snacks in the center. Lanterns sat at the four corners of the blanket, providing the perfect glow to make up for the setting sun. “Wow, Liv, this looks amazing.”

“Thanks. Coming from a hotshot designer, I'll take that as a huge compliment. Sit. I'll pour you a glass of wine. Red or white?”

“Um, let's go white.” She kicked off her shoes and stepped onto the soft blanket. “Where are the other ladies?” she asked as she sat.

“Oh, uh...” Liv averted her gaze. “They're coming. Brooke is feeding her army of dogs, then she'll be here. Jo is with her, I believe. Rach can't make it because she's working, and I'm pretty sure Harper and Jinx are doing dirty things to each other in one of the apartments over there,” she said, pointing to a nearby building. “They'll all be here soon. Here you go.”

“Thanks.” Brenna accepted the heavily poured glass of wine.

“To new friends,” Liv said, lifting her glass.

“I’ll drink to that. Cheers.” They clinked their glasses together then Brenna took a healthy swallow of the crisp white wine.

“Whoa,” Liv said, chuckling. “Rough day?”

Whoops. So much for playing it cool. She gave Liv a sheepish grin. “Uh, no, not really rough. Just got a lot going on in my brain.”

“Yeah.” Liv tilted her head and studied her with a knowing smirk. “Been there, girl.” She glanced at the platter in the center of the blanket. “Oh, crap. I made cookies and left them inside. Let me go grab them.”

“You made them?” Brenna asked as Liv hopped to her feet, glass in hand. “I’m impressed.”

“Well, I drove to the fancy cookie shop and picked them out. That counts, right?” She shrugged with an unapologetic grin.

Laughing, Brenna nodded. “That’s baking in my book.”

“See, we get each other. Be right back.” Liv darted the fifty or so feet toward the clubhouse.

Alone, Brenna inhaled the woodsy scent of the fire. It’d been years since she’d done anything like this, and she should make sure not to wait that long again. Nature was good for the soul. So was girl time.

Oliver would have shuddered at the thought of spending an entire evening outside, even with such a luxurious arrangement. He’d have flipped out if his clothing smelled of smoke at the end of the night or if he’d gotten dirt on his loafers.

Why are you wasting brain power on him?

She gulped another giant swallow of wine as the clubhouse door creaked, announcing Liv’s return.

“I’m drinking too fast. You’re gonna have to catch... oh.” Her breath left her lungs in an audible whoosh of air.

Instead of Liv, Lock stood frozen a few steps from the door. The shock on his face said he hadn’t known she’d be out there. “Oh, hey. Liv said she needed help with the fire. Something about it almost dying...” His gaze went to the large flames jumping from Spec’s impressive fire. “Hmm...”

Brenna sighed. A sinking feeling settled low in her stomach. “That sneaky bitch,” she muttered.

“You say something?” He walked closer to the blanket.

“No, but, uh, I’m starting to think I’ve... we’ve been played.”

He frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Liv asked, more like demanded I come over for a girls' night. She claimed the other ladies are on their way over, and we're making big a thing of it."

He scratched at the stubble he must have forgotten to shave that morning. "Brooke and Curly went home like ten minutes ago, and Jinx left to pick Harper up for a beach date. Jo is helping Tracker at the tattoo shop this evening since his receptionist is sick, so I don't think they're coming." He laughed. "Fuckin' Liv."

"Yeah." Christ, they'd been easy to trick.

"Spec's got his hands full with that devious one."

"Seems like it."

Now what...

It'd be nice if her brain worked and she could say something besides inane small talk.

They stared at each other across the blanket as the fire flickered, casting a romantic light on the entire area. Nerves and lust battled inside her. Stupidly, she'd hoped the early morning's activities would satisfy her desire for him, but it only intensified it. Now, when she saw him, she didn't have to imagine how incredible it would feel to be touched by him. She knew firsthand, and she wanted more.

"Wanna sit?" It looked like she had no choice but to face the music.

After a beat, he nodded once. "Sure."

Those muscular legs carried him the rest of the way to the blanket. He sat, taking up most of the unused space. Wearing jeans, heavy boots, and his cut, he couldn't have looked more out of place on the frilly blanket if he tried, yet something about the contrast of the dreamy setting and tough biker made her want to swoon.

"What the fuck is with all these pillows?" he asked as he yanked one from under half his ass.

Brenna laughed. Thank God for tension-breaking humor. "Ambience, I think."

He snorted, and silence fell again. It wasn't uncomfortable, but it was intense. He had this way of looking at her that made her feel as if he could see her thoughts, and that terrified her. Her brain was so chaotic these days that it would freak anyone out.

Clearing her throat, she stared at her fingers, playing with the fringe on

the edge of a pillow. Time to put on her big girl panties and address the elephant in the room or on the blanket. “So, I owe you an apology.” If only she’d had more time to drink her wine. Liquid courage. Instead, she forced her gaze off the fire and onto him.

“An apology?” He stared right at her, not seeming to have the same problem with nerves.

God, this was painful. “Yeah, for running out this morning. Uh, after...” He tilted his head.

“I was just, um... overwhelmed.”

“Did I hurt you?” Those delicious chocolate eyes filled with concern. She blinked. “What? No. God no. Not at all.”

A weight seemed to lift off his shoulders as he visibly relaxed.

“Were you seriously worried about that?” Had she been so self-absorbed she didn’t even consider his feelings? Now she felt guilty, which was so much worse than the embarrassment.

He nodded and reached for a cracker. “I figured I crossed a line somewhere. Been stressing about it all day.”

“Oh, no.” She placed her hand on his without thinking. Electricity sizzled between their skin. “I am so sorry. I promise you I liked everything we did.” Her stomach fluttered at the memories. “That was the problem. I liked it too much, so I kinda panicked.”

“You sure?” He kept the intense stare as though trying to dissect her brain.

Brenna huffed and rolled her eyes. She might as well lay it all out there. She could die of humiliation later. “Okay, look, you gave me the most intense orgasm I’ve ever had. I got a little overwhelmed and ran away like a chicken.”

A slow, self-satisfied smile curled his lips. “Seriously?” He drew out the word.

“Oh God. Don’t get a big head about it.” He deserved to feel smug, though. It really had been a world-class orgasm.

He laughed. “Can I tell you something?”

“Sure.”

Lock leaned in until he was close enough that she could count his eyelashes. Then he whispered, “Apology not necessary. The only regret I have is that my fingers are the only thing to have spent time inside your tight-as-fuck pussy. My dick and my tongue have been jealous all fucking day.”

Thank God she was sitting with the speed the arousal slammed into her because her knees would have buckled right out from under her.

“Lock,” she said on an exhale as she squirmed to relieve the empty ache in said pussy. “Y-you can’t say things like that.”

Straightening back up, he raised an eyebrow. “Why not? Make you uncomfortable?”

She groaned. “Parts of me.”

That had him laughing loudly. “So where does that leave us now? Liv didn’t go to all this trouble for nothing. She’s gonna grill my ass the second she sees me again. Might as well figure out our shit.”

“Right. Well...”

I’d like more of those orgasms. Many, many more. Everyday. I’d also like to sleep in your bed with your arms wrapped around me.

But she didn’t say any of that. She couldn’t. There was no way she’d be able to spend that much time with him and not catch feelings. And developing those kinds of feelings for an outlaw biker whose life was so far from her own would be a disaster.

“I just got out of a really bad relationship.”

He snorted.

“Yeah, you’re aware of that. I just mean, I’m not in a place for anything heavy.”

Lock blew out a breath and stared at the fire for a moment. Then he said, “How much do you know about Caleb?”

“Not much. Just that you aren’t biologically related. And that his mother passed.” She’d assumed the mother had been a recent girlfriend of his unless he’d been married to a woman who’d had a baby.

Oh my God, was he a widower?

“Actually, we are related. Just not the way you think. His mother was my sister. My twin. She died of an overdose when she was eight months pregnant with Caleb.”

Her heart stuttered then filled with pain for a man she’d come to admire. “Your twin,” she whispered. “Oh my God, Lock. I had no idea.” She shifted to her knees and scooted over to him, grabbing his hand. He immediately curled his fingers around hers. “I am so sorry. That must have been incredibly painful.”

“We weren’t close anymore. She’d given up most of her life to drugs, but yes, it was horrible. I had to fight like hell, but a judge eventually granted me

custody of Caleb. He was born with a shit ton of medical issues so he had to spend months in the NICU. After dealing with that and the death of my sister, I wasn't in the right headspace to be a parent, even though I wanted him."

She could see the pain written across his face as he told his story. It was clear as day as if someone had taken a knife to his skin. The desire she felt for him morphed into something different. Not only did she want pleasure for them both, but she wanted to take away his suffering and promise him he was succeeding as a parent with her words and her body. "Lock, Caleb is great. He's healthy and happy. You're an incredible father."

A dark, ugly laugh left him. "Now, I'm doing an okay job, by some miracle. But I didn't at first. I spiraled downward fast. So fucking fast. I started using drugs and drinking way too much. I did all sorts of reckless shit to numb the grief, pain, and fear of my newfound responsibilities. My actions led to Harper and Jinx both being hurt. I let down my club in the worst way and almost lost Caleb in the process." His head bowed, and his heavy sigh told her more than his words could.

His days were filled with guilt and remorse.

Her heart broke for what he'd endured. "I'm so glad you found your way back," she whispered.

He nodded. "Curly kicked my ass into gear. He and Brooke kept Caleb while I did a stint in rehab so we could keep it off child services' radar."

"They're amazing." She tightened her grip until her knuckles whitened, but he didn't seem to notice how hard she squeezed his hand.

"Yes. They saved my ass in a way I'll never be able to repay, but I'm damn well going to try. Everyday. Paying back that debt is what I live for now."

Brenna swallowed a lump of emotion. He'd been through so much. What words could she say to show the depth of her appreciation for his trust in telling her that story? "Thank you for sharing that with me." Maybe keeping it simple was best. Perhaps he didn't want platitudes or another person to remind him he needed to release the guilt.

He met her gaze. "I wanted you to know. To know me and understand why I don't have anything to offer you. You'll heal from your bad relationship and be ready for another, but Caleb and the club own my life. I'll spend the rest of my days proving to them that I'm worthy of the help they've given me."

What? No. Did he honestly think that little of his worth? If she'd thought

her heart broke for him before, she'd been wrong. It fractured into a million pieces, all beating for him. "You can't—"

He pressed his thumb over her lips. "I have to. It's the only way for me to survive. I have to show them the man I can be. I have nothing, Bren. Nothing to offer anyone. Caleb is my only family, and I refuse to fuck him up."

"You're wrong," she said as she circled his wrist and drew his hand from her lips. "You're so wrong. You have the most incredible family. The club is your family, and every man and woman in there loves you."

He scoffed. "I hurt them. I betrayed their trust. I see the doubt in their eyes. I'm not family anymore."

She shook her head then cupped his face between her hands, capturing his gaze. His stubble tickled her palms and made her want to feel it all over. But there were more important things to deal with now. He needed to hear these words and make them his reality. "It doesn't matter. That's the thing about a family as strong as yours. They forgive. They move on. I dare you to go in there and tell Curly or Brooke they're not your family, or Liv, Spec, or Tracker. They'll kick your ass so hard you won't sit for a week. I'm the outsider here, and I can tell you with one hundred percent certainty every man and woman associated with your club loves you. They love you and have your back. No one holds a grudge or needs or wants you to prove yourself. Only you."

She could see how badly he wanted to believe her, but the guilt and lingering grief wouldn't let him. That was okay for now. She'd remind him every day until he believed it.

He was so close, and she wanted a taste of his lips so badly. She knew how they tasted now. How well they fit with hers and how her sex clenched when his tongue tangled with hers.

"You're too fucking sweet for this life," he whispered. "Too sweet to be anywhere near us. You should run away while you can."

Her chest ached, and she spoke the truth she'd been afraid to admit until now. "I can't. It's too late. You've all gotten under my skin."

But none more than him. She'd stay for him alone. To make sure he knew how much the people in his life loved him. To watch him succeed and be the one to say *I told you so*. And to do that, she needed to keep some distance. She'd have to keep her hands, mouth, and every other body part to herself, but mostly her heart. She couldn't hand that over and probably wouldn't to anyone ever again. Sure, the chances weren't high that another man would set

her up to be collateral for a biker club, but she'd never thought Oliver capable of such a thing. How could she hand over her trust again after that?

"So," she said as she forced her hands to release his scratchy face. "Friends?"

His lips quirked. "Friends."

And then, as though she'd lost control over her brain, she continued to speak words opposite what she had promised herself. "And if we happen to fall into bed now and again..."

His grin grew wicked. "Why, Brenna, are you asking me to be your fuck buddy?"

Fuck buddies, huh? She'd never had one of those, but yeah, that's exactly what she wanted. A friend she could scratch the itch with—someone she liked who'd give her smokin' hot sex without any of the messy emotions.

Perfect.

"I think I am," she said.

"Then fuck buddies it is."

Now what? Did they seal it with a kiss? A hand shake? A friendly climax? They were back to the weird staring that had her feeling squirmy in her skin.

The sound of the door opening had her lurching away from him as though she were a teenager caught making out with the boy next door.

"Sorry, you two." Liv flounced outside and strode their way. "Didn't mean to take so long. Hope you found something to do with your time."

Lock rolled his eyes as he shifted to face Liv. "Subtle, Livvy."

"Hmm? Whatever do you mean?" Her voice rose three octaves. She flopped down on the blanket with an innocent smile no one bought.

"Where are the cookies?" Brenna asked.

"What?"

"You went to go get cookies." She arched an eyebrow at the devious lady.

Liv snapped. "Oh, right. Sorry. You won't believe it... I dropped them on the floor."

Brenna barked a laugh. "You're right. I don't believe it."

"Hey, Liv?"

She turned her head and aimed a sweet smile at Lock. "Yes, Lock?"

"Your shirt's on backward."

Liv glanced down to find a blank shirt where there had been a cute logo earlier. "Whoopsie," she said with a giggle as her cheeks grew pink. "Guess I

got sidetracked.”

Brenna laughed along with her while Lock rolled his eyes. Their gazes locked, and he winked. She couldn't keep the broad grin off her face if she tried.

He might need some help to see it, but he was a lucky man. The chosen family he'd found was overflowing with incredible men and women. Where she'd been fearful of them only days before, Brenna now found herself craving their company. Envy tugged at her. She was far more alone in the world than he was. Liv and any of his club family would go above and beyond for him and his son without question.

What did she have?

An ex who'd tried to trade her like property?

A few cousins scattered across the country?

Friends who mainly were Oliver's and would never speak to her again?

At least she had one thing going for her.

A brand-new fuck buddy.

CHAPTER TWELVE

“LOCK? A WORD?” Curly stuck his head out of his office and called into the clubhouse’s main area.

The hair on the back of Lock’s neck rose. He hadn’t had a one-on-one conversation with his prez since the man came to his home and offered the gravest of ultimatums.

Get clean, or get the fuck out of his club.

Curly hadn’t been quite as blunt, but the meaning came through loud and clear. Luckily, the prez and his ol’ lady were absolute rock stars. They not only helped find a rehab center that was on the edgier and more progressive side while not affiliated with a church, they cared for Caleb the entire time he couldn’t and paid for the whole goddamn thing, a debt Lock would never be able to repay financially.

But one he’d work his ass off to pay back in trade, basically dedicating his life to the club and never fucking up.

The pressure felt suffocating at times.

“Shit,” he muttered as he slid off a bar stool where he’d been chatting with Ty.

Ty squeezed his shoulder. “Nothing to stress about, brother. The big man just wants to check in.”

As VP, Ty would know if Curly had an issue or if Lock had done something to erase the hard work he’d put in over the past few months. His words, which should have provided comfort, fell flat as Lock’s brain churned with anxiety.

“On my way, Prez,” he called back.

“Seriously, Lock, no worries.” Ty winked, grabbed his drink, and meandered outside. Of all his club brothers, Ty was the one Lock knew the least well. The VP tended to keep to himself more than the others. Plus, as the owner of the town’s most profitable tire shop, Ty had a fucking insane

work schedule.

“Thanks.” He cracked his neck and then strode toward Curly’s office. Hopefully, the extra swagger in his step made him look like the confident, badass biker the cut proclaimed him to be instead of a panicked kid on his way to the principal’s office. “Hey, Prez,” he said as he rapped his knuckles on the frame of Curly’s door.

Curly glanced up, then gestured toward the empty chair opposite his desk. “Have a seat.” He pushed back from his desk and folded his arms across his chest. Thirteen years in prison for a crime he didn’t commit had given the prez a glare and a steely exterior he’d never shake. That kind of brutal experience changed a man’s DNA and altered their personality permanently. He was a tough motherfucker but also a loyal and fair president who’d lay down his life for his MC family.

“Everything okay, Prez?” he asked, unable to keep the apprehension out of his voice.

Weak.

Curly studied him for a moment without answering the question. The seconds ticked by slower than a fucking prostate exam. Lock became hyperaware of every sensation in the room—the tick of a vintage Harley clock on the wall, the hum of Curly’s computer, and the bead of sweat rolling down the center of his spine.

“Just checking in,” Curly finally said. “Haven’t had a chance to catch up since you were discharged from rehab. You seem damn good, brother. Really fucking good. I love seeing it.”

As though he was a balloon Curly pricked with a pin, the tension hissed out of him until he sagged in the seat. “Shit, Prez,” he said as he rubbed his forehead. “Not gonna lie. Thought you called me in here to rip me a new one.”

Curly tilted his head. “What for? Guilty conscience?”

Huffing a half laugh, Lock said, “Something like that. I’m doing all right. My head’s on straighter than it’s been in a long time, and I haven’t slipped up. I won’t let you down again.”

Curly drew back as though startled by the words. “That what you think you did? Let me down?”

Lock snorted. “You, the club, my sister, my son. Name it.” The list went on and on, unfortunately.

“Hmm.” The prez leaned forward. “Well, that’s a load of horseshit.”

He blinked. “What? I, uh...” *What the hell?*

Shaking his head, Curly rested his forearms on the desk and speared Lock with a look so intense his skin prickled. “I said it’s a load of horseshit. You gotta know not even one of us feels you let us down.”

He snorted. “You sure about that? Might wanna check with Jinx and Harper before you sing my praises.” Truth be told, he hadn’t been able to face Harper and barely tolerated being in the same room as Jinx since both were injured by a drug dealer Lock owed money to. There was no way they didn’t harbor hatred for him. Jinx loved Harper and would murder anyone who hurt her without blinking an eye. His loyalty to Curly had to be the only reason Lock still breathed.

“I am sure, and I don’t have to check with them.”

He leaned forward. “Curly, Jinx was fucking stabbed in the gut because he was trying to clean up my mess. His woman was attacked right out there!” He practically shouted as he thrust his hand toward the window.

Curly steepled his fingers under his chin. “Remember what a fucking asshole Spec was to Liv when she first got here?”

What the hell did that have to do with anything? “Yeah, I remember.”

“I won’t give you details because it’s his shit to share, but he felt responsible for her brother, his best friend’s death. So much that it had changed him into a dark and violent man. It ate at him day and night for more than a year. With Liv’s help, he’s let the guilt go and can finally breathe again.”

He was still a terrifying enemy, but Lock kept that to himself. Curly already knew his enforcer could be extreme.

A heavy sigh left him. “So you’re saying I just need to learn to let it go. Feels like I’ve heard that before.”

That had Curly chuckling. “Your therapist, perhaps?”

“Yep.” He ran a hand down his face. “Hate how he’s always goddamn right.”

“Talk to Jinx. Talk to Harper. I promise they understand pain and suffering. They know you were deep in it and don’t hold any grudges. None of us do. We’re just glad you’re back and better. Clean slate, okay? You don’t need to prove anything to me. Let it go before it drags you down again.”

He’d work on it all, but his mind wouldn’t change overnight. He’d need time to release the death grip guilt had on him. But he got it. Typically, the

only times he craved a hit or fought urges to use were when guilt rode his ass hard. Letting it go would be the final hurdle, but it wasn't easy. Some days, it took more effort than he worried he had to give.

But he'd damn well try because no matter what Curly said, he did need to prove something, even if only to himself.

"Thanks, Prez."

Curly nodded. "You got anything going on right now?"

"Nah, need me for something?"

"Two big boxes came for Brooke. They were meant for the shelter but came here instead. Mind throwing them in the trailer and riding them out there for me?"

"Not at all." He'd walk through fire if Curly asked.

"Thanks. They're stacked on the porch. Don't think it's anything fragile."

"I'll do it right now."

Curly held out a fist, which Lock bumped. They'd finished with the deep personal invasion, thank fuck.

Jinx was sitting at the bar when he left Curly's office. It'd be the perfect opportunity to chat with the big guy, but despite Curly's words, he wasn't convinced Jinx wouldn't rip him a new one. He spent too much time doing that to himself and couldn't handle more now, so he called a quick hello and booked it outside.

The boxes weren't heavy but too awkward for him to carry both and walk out to the shelter. He loaded up the trailer and hooked it to the back of an ATV, then set off across the property toward the future women's shelter the ol' ladies were working their asses off to build.

He strode through the newly installed front door and deposited the first package before returning for the second. A silver Mazda he recognized well by now sat parked on the dirt patch that would eventually become a large driveway.

Brenna was somewhere in the building.

Awareness prickled along his spine. They hadn't had a chance to do more than send the occasional text in the three days since they agreed to be friends with the option to fuck each other's brains out on occasion.

A muttered curse came from one of the back rooms, which would become bedrooms for staff staying overnight. Lock unlaced his boots as he smirked. Sneaking up on someone was damn near impossible with those clunky things. Clad only in black socks, he padded down the hallway, peeking into rooms as

he went.

Finally, he reached the farthest room. A freshly installed plush carpet felt incredible beneath his feet, but the second he stepped into the room, he was rewarded with the sight of Brenna on her knees, ass in the air as she measured along the base of a wall, and nothing else registered.

All it took was two seconds of staring at her round ass and imagining how it'd look and feel without those sinful shorts to have his cock hard as a damn two-by-four. His brain didn't even need to work hard to conjure the fantasy as those damn shorts were so tiny they gave him a flirty peek of her cheeks as she bent over.

He groaned and adjusted his cock.

Brenna jumped and shrieked. "Holy crap!" she shouted as she hopped to her feet and plastered herself against the blank wall. "You scared the life out of me."

"Sorry." He smirked. "Didn't mean to. I was just admiring the sexy-as-fuck view."

She flushed as she slumped against the wall. "You're crazy. I'm a mess."

She was, with her hair up in a sloppy ponytail, tendrils popping free. A beige tank offsetting her tanned skin had streaks of ocean blue paint. So did her upper right arm. The shorts that cupped her ass so nicely were frayed at the bottom leading him to believe she'd cut them herself from an old pair of jeans. Clearly, her outfit was designed for comfort while she worked in a building that hadn't yet had air conditioning installed instead of fashion. Still, she looked cute as hell.

He walked into the room and sat on the carpet. It was thick and more comfortable than the beds in the clubhouse bunkroom. With a hum of approval, he laid on his back.

"What are you doing?"

"This is nice," he said, folding his arms behind his head. "Feels expensive."

"It is. Nothing but the best for Liv," Brenna said with a wry smirk.

"Ahh, I shoulda known she picked it. I feel like I'm practically laying on a luxurious mattress." He stared up at the amusement on her face. If she came a few feet closer, he might get lucky enough to catch a glimpse of her panties up her shorts.

Wow, desperate much?

"Yep. The others trust me to work with Liv on the style, and she has

expensive taste. She picked out incredible materials and furniture for every room here. This is a dream project.” Brenna blew out a long breath and wiped a strand of sweaty hair from her forehead, leaving a blue streak behind. “Ugh, it’s hot in here. They need to get moving on the air conditioning.”

Lock grinned. Disheveled looked good on her.

She frowned down at him. “What are you smiling about?”

“You’re what’s making the room hot. You’re too sexy for your own good.”

Her laughter made his cock twitch. “You should go make an appointment with an optometrist,” she said, still laughing. “Pretty sure I should be hiding from other humans right now.”

“And I’m pretty sure you should come over here and sit on my face.”

Her eyes widened, and she reached for her hair again. “I... what?”

She’d heard him. Every damn word. It shocked her, maybe, but she heard him, and the way her pupils dilated told him she was on board.

“I said you should come over here and sit on my face.”

Her hand moved to her throat. “Um, as in...”

He raised an eyebrow. “As in slide those wicked shorts down your sexy legs. Then your panties. Then walk over here, spread your legs over my head so I can see that pretty pussy and... sit. On. My. Face.”

Her lips parted, and she licked the lower one at the same time she let her hand drop to her side. “That’s... I’ve never...” Her words were breathy and soft. “Someone could come by anytime. Brooke or Liv or one of the others are usually in and out of here all day. It’s risky.”

He waggled his eyebrows.

He watched Brenna swallow. She wanted this. Oh, how she wanted it. She’d told him last week how much she wanted wild passion in an intense relationship she wasn’t sure existed. He wasn’t sure either about the relationship part, but the passion? Fuck yeah. He could give her that until her toes curled and the windows fogged.

And her heated gaze told him how much she wanted it.

But would she take it?

Brenna shifted her gaze to the empty doorway. No sound other than their breathing could be heard in the building. They were utterly alone for now. She looked back at him, and her lips moved subtly. He could have sworn she whispered, “This is crazy.”

But she moved her trembling fingers to her shorts button, flicking it open

with one twist of her wrist. She toed off her shoes and stepped onto the carpet, wiggling her bare toes in the softness. Lock rose to his elbows and stared as she lowered the zipper and then shimmied the shorts over her shapely hips.

He held his breath. Inch by inch, her black and white polka-dot bikini panties were revealed. Shit, she made the casual underwear appear more erotic than anything he'd seen, and he'd been watching more than his fair share of porn during this dry spell.

Neither of them spoke as she kicked the shorts away and then hooked her thumbs in the band of her panties. Again, those hips swayed side to side as she worked the fabric over her ass and down her legs.

Lock bit off a groan as more of her was revealed to him.

When the panties hit her ankles, she kicked them away as well, then straightened. Face pink and chest heaving with each heavy breath, she stared at him.

“Come here.”

Her gaze drifted down his body to where his cock was trying it'd damnedest to escape its denim captivity. It twitched under her hungry stare.

Shit, maybe he should have just offered to fuck her. It might kill him to be all up in her pussy without any relief for himself. But he'd do it a million times over to hear those sounds she made when she came.

And this time, he'd get to taste her as well.

Damn, he was a lucky bastard.

She walked to him with slow, unsure steps until she stood at his feet.

“Spread your legs,” he rasped. “Keep coming.”

Brenna bit her lower lip and did as he asked.

“Shit,” he whispered as she moved up his body, standing over him. His balls were tight, already begging for release. When she reached his chest area, he had a prime view of her pussy, slick and ready for him. She had a small, neatly trimmed patch of dark hair, which he appreciated. Completely bare pussies weren't his thing. Two more steps, and she was poised directly over his face.

He inhaled as he slid his hands around her smooth calves. “Fuck, I can smell you from here.”

“Lock...”

“Get on your fucking knees and give me a taste.”

Her eyes fluttered closed, and she blew out a breath. But when they

reopened, determination gleamed down at him. Her thighs trembled as she lowered to her knees above his face. He followed the movement, trailing his palms up her thighs to her ass, where he filled his hands with the luscious flesh.

Up close, he could see how wet she was and smell how much she wanted him. It was decadent.

“Closer. Gimme a taste.” He encouraged her with a gentle tug.

“Oh my God. This is insane.” She widened her knees until her pussy was only inches from his mouth. Her gaze stayed fixed on him the entire time.

“That’s it, baby. Just like that.” He gave her his most corrupt grin. “Look how much your pussy wants my tongue.”

She swallowed.

Before she could respond, he squeezed her ass in both hands and yanked.

Brenna yelped as she practically fell on his face. Her hands landed on the floor above his head, and she stared back at where she hovered a mere millimeter above his mouth.

He couldn’t hold back any longer. With his palms full of her sweet ass and her pussy in his face, he took a long, slow, teasing lick.

“Oh, Jesus.” Her mouth stayed open, and she panted. Already, her eyes looked dazed and drunk. The other night, he’d tasted her on his fingers, but there was nothing like drinking from the source.

So he licked her again. And again.

And that was it. Three licks, and he was addicted in a way no amount of rehabilitation would ever remedy.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THIS WAS HANDS down the craziest sex *thing* Brenna had ever done. If she were ever at a party playing one of those truth games in which someone asked where was the most outrageous place she'd gotten it on, the carpet in a partially built women's shelter on outlaw MC property in broad daylight would be the answer every single time.

But, holy shit, was she loving every second of it. The way she was half-naked in the middle of an unfinished building while Lock was once again fully dressed. How her friends and clients or his brothers could walk in any second. How it was the middle of the damn day, and the sun shone brightly through the unadorned windows, revealing every expression she had and putting her on display more than ever before. And those were before she even got to the lethal tongue doing very naughty things between her legs.

The combination of lust, trepidation over being discovered, and vulnerability at being so exposed caused a riot of sensations in her that worked together to make her tremble and be more turned on than she'd thought possible.

"Christ, you taste like fucking heaven," he mumbled against her before swirling his tongue through her wetness once again.

Brenna's head dangled down as she held herself up with weakening arms. Her eyes wanted to close so she could block out the world and absorb nothing but the feel of his mouth, but her brain didn't want to miss a second of the erotic show as he lay beneath her and ate her out like he'd never tasted anything better.

He squeezed her ass as he speared his tongue inside her, making her shout. Pleasure rippled out from her sex, fluttering through her body. She fought the urge to grind down on his face and ride his tongue like she owned him.

He must have sensed her restraint because he rolled his eyes her way.

“Do it,” was what he said.

She groaned and shook her head. It’d be too much. Too needy, too brazen, too damn filthy.

He squeezed her ass cheeks hard, then slapped the right one once. “Do it,” he growled again, this time with his lips against her pussy, sending an onslaught of vibrations through her most sensitive flesh.

She cried out, and the depraved part of her brain took over. She slammed down against his face, drawing a muffled grunt from him. When a flicker of concern over hurting him ran through her, he immediately chased it away by shoving his tongue back inside her. Brenna moaned and worked her hips, riding that wicked tongue with abandon.

It was the most remarkable thing she’d ever experienced, and she never wanted it to end. In fact, she wanted more.

More skin, more of his hands, and more of his mouth.

And she wanted to drive him as wild with pleasure as she was.

He slid his tongue out of her and up to her clit where he did some magical flick that had her lower belly clenching.

“Oh crap,” she murmured. “Do that aga... Jesus, that’s amazing.

Her fingers curled against the soft carpet as she tried to keep from rocketing off into the sky.

Suddenly, the need to return the pleasure hit her so hard it could not be ignored. Without warning, she practically threw herself off him.

“What’s wr—”

“Shh.” She turned and settled back over his face, looking toward his feet. With steady but eager fingers, she went to work on his jeans.

“Oh, fuck yes,” Lock said. He grabbed her ass again, squeezing, molding, and spreading her cheeks. She’d have felt embarrassed by the blatant perusal if she wasn’t so focused on her task.

Getting his pants off was impossible. She was too impatient to ask him to lift his hips and spend the time working them off his body. Instead, she unzipped him and shoved the jeans open before going straight for the slit in his boxers.

“Fuck me,” Lock shouted as her hands found his stiff cock. He was so hard she worried she’d hurt him while fumbling with the fabric to release him. After a few clumsy attempts, she had his cock out. This was the first time she got to see and feel him. Fluid glistened on the tip. His dick was hot and hard against her palm. It was long, thick, and veiny, precisely as she’d

have hoped.

Her mouth watered. It'd never been this way for her before. Sucking Lock became as much about her hunger as what he desired. She wanted that cock between her lips and against her tongue. Longed for it. She pressed her tongue against the roof of her mouth, already anticipating the feel of him.

He sucked her clit between his lips, and any lingering control snapped. Brenna dove onto his erection, taking him as deep as she could with strong suction and no preamble.

"Jesus, fuck!" Lock shouted. His hips jerked, jamming the back of her throat, and making her gag, but she didn't pull off. Instead, she dug her fingers into his thighs and hollowed her cheeks.

"Fuck, baby, that is the best thing..." His words drifted off as he resumed eating her with as much vigor as she sucked him.

Saliva leaked from the corner of her mouth, but she let it. Brenna felt like a starving animal hellbent on satisfying the emptiness inside her. She bobbed up and down on his dick over and over while grinding her pussy all over his face. It was dirty, it was decadent, it was hotter than anything she'd dreamed up.

And it felt so damn good.

This is what she'd been waiting for her entire adult life. This wild, unrestrained passion that wouldn't be denied. Nothing in the world could have stopped her. The entire club could have tromped through the door, and she wouldn't have cared. The pleasure was too good, too necessary. Nothing or no one would stop her from feeling him explode against her tongue before she drank him down.

Her arms shook, and her muscles protested how long she'd had her weight on her hands. Brenna ignored the discomfort without much effort, focusing instead on the hum of ecstasy in her blood. Every time Lock lashed her clit, her toes tingled, and she whimpered. Then he'd return to tongue-fucking her, and she'd rocked on him, moaning around his dick.

"That mouth," he said, breathless. "You suck me so fucking good."

She'd have preened at the praise if her mouth wasn't stuffed full of him. Instead, she hummed her agreement, and he cursed.

"Fuck me, I'm close," he warned before going back to work.

Yes.

She wanted it. Wanted the taste of his cum on her tongue. Wanted that feeling of triumphant power to join her pleasure. She doubled down, licking

his slit before sucking hard again. He shouted a string of foul curses, then went stiff beneath her. His cock twitched seconds before he erupted in her mouth. Brenna worked to swallow every drop, a feat made difficult by his ability to keep tonguing her clit through his orgasm.

The knowledge that she'd reduced him to a twitching mess went straight to her head, creating a high she'd chase forever. Once more, he massaged her ass as he sucked her clit, and she flew to the stars.

Tremors wracked her, making her arms give out. She face-planted into his thighs as her vision blanked, and nothing but intense pleasure registered in her mind. It seemed to go on for hours until she finally collapsed on top of him as though he were a five-star hotel mattress and she'd spent an entire night drinking.

As she floated down from the epic high, Lock said something completely muffled by her pelvis on his face. It took a monumental amount of effort, but Brenna pushed herself up and off him, flopping to the floor like a lazy seal sunning itself on a rock.

Chuckling, Lock shuffled around until he lay beside her on the carpet. She didn't bother to open her eyes when she felt his shoulder press against hers.

"Shit, that was unreal. You alive?"

A smile overtook her face. "I hope so. I'll be super bummed if I kicked it and don't get the chance to do that again."

"Sixty-nine for the win." He held up a fist, which had her laughing as she tapped her knuckles against his.

Giddiness ran through her. It was a feeling she hadn't experienced in years. Maybe since being a teen and having the boy she'd crushed on for two years glance her way a time or two.

Earth-shattering orgasms, playfulness, and laughter all from the same man. God, Lock was perfect for—

Nope. Not going there.

His mouth might be perfect. His tongue, hands, and lips certainly were. And the orgasm that had ripped through her with the force of a furious hurricane had been perfect. Laughing with him was fun as hell. Lock was the *perfect* fuck buddy. Nothing more, nothing less.

And if you believe that lie, I have a stretch of Gulf Beach to sell you.

After a few moments of laying side by side on the carpet, a blanket of awkwardness settled over them, or at least her. Did he feel it? Hell, maybe he

hooked up like this all the time. Perhaps she was the next in a long line of fuck buddies, and she was the only one who didn't know how to act or what to say next.

Should she talk? Get up? Search for her shorts?

Probably. Knowing her luck, Brooke or Liv would appear at any moment.

With a heavy sigh, she sat up and scanned the room for her shorts. A quick peek at Lock revealed a sated man sprawled with one hand resting on his stomach, the other resting on his forehead. His softened cock lay against his open jeans, shiny from her mouth. He looked like the picture of post-sex relaxation.

Brenna rolled her shoulders. Okay, she could do this. She could be chill and handle this like an adult accustomed to a healthy and varied sex life.

After locating her shorts and panties behind her, she stood to retrieve them. As she slipped the scrap of fabric up her thighs, the weight of Lock's gaze landed on her. Who knew why or how she felt it, but she did. She turned, finding him propped on his elbows with his appreciative stare, watching her every move.

His phone chirped, breaking the spell. "Goddammit," he muttered, pulling the device from his back pocket.

That couldn't have been comfortable to lie on. Not that he'd seemed to notice while she'd been blowing him.

A frown marred his handsome face.

"What's wrong?" Brenna asked. She pulled her shorts over her bottom and then fastened the closure.

"Just a job I'll have to pass on." He scratched his jaw. "Sucks because it'd be a lucrative one, but I'm supposed to meet Alison at the park to pick up Caleb in a half hour."

"I can get him." The words were out of her mouth before her brain had any say in the matter.

What are you doing? Fuck buddies don't offer to watch each other's children.

Or did they?

Maybe that was part of the buddy portion of the phrase.

He arched an eyebrow. "Really?"

She shrugged, hoping to impart a nonchalance she didn't feel. "Yeah, sure. It's no big deal. I'm done here anyway..." *she wasn't*, "... and I'm happy to do it. If you're comfortable with me watching him, of course," she

added. Did he worry she'd be a horrendous caregiver?

He snorted. "Of course, I'm fucking comfortable with that. My boy loves you."

My boy. He might have struggled with his role in Caleb's life initially, but Lock fully embraced fatherhood now.

"Okay, then it's settled. You take that job, and I'll grab Caleb and bring him to your house."

Lock stood. He zipped up and then invaded her personal space, cupping the back of her neck. "Thank you." The words matched the sincerity in his eyes.

"My pleasure," she rasped.

His hand didn't move from her neck, but he moved. He yanked her close and kissed her, hard but fast and so deep her head spun. He stepped back after releasing her as though he hadn't twisted her in knots. "They're at the park off Main Street. With the big playground."

"Uh, yeah. I know it."

Nodding, he shifted focus to his phone. "Lemme call them and confirm the details before I send you to the park."

Brenna took that moment of inattention to slip out the door and toward the exit. It was that or stand there and wonder why he'd kissed her. Lock spun her up in ways she had no experience with, and she'd screw up by catching feels if she wasn't cautious.

The ride to the park took under ten minutes. Alison recognized her from Lock's house, and since he'd texted the change in plans, she'd handed Caleb over without issue. What had been a problem was figuring out how to work the blasted car seat. If she'd been smart, she'd have had the young sitter clip it in the car and secure the baby. As it was, Brenna had to watch a YouTube video for guidance.

"No one finds out about this, ever. It's our secret," she said to the baby as she clicked the last buckle. "You know what a blabbermouth you can be." Caleb gurgled his agreement, making her chuckle.

Funny how she'd gone from never holding an infant to caring for one on her own in a matter of days. Granted, it was only a few hours, but Brenna was proud of her ability to help Lock in this way. She was also becoming smitten with the baby.

She straightened out of the car and then turned to walk around the vehicle, almost slamming into a tall body. "Sor—" She gasped and reared

back at the sight of Oliver.

Holy crap.

If she hadn't known the man intimately, she might not have recognized him. Dressed in slim designer jeans and a navy blue polo, he also wore a Tampa Bay Bucks baseball cap, and his shoulders were slumped. This was the most casual she'd ever seen him in public.

But what captured her attention and had her blinking to ensure her eyes weren't lying were purple bruises marring his face. She'd known the Handlers would go hard on him after she'd slapped him and walked out. She expected worse than bruising, but the up-close-and-personal marred face was still shocking.

And his presence was alarming. What the hell did he want?

"What are you doing here?" It was too hot to close the door and leave Caleb in the stuffy car for even a few moments, so she stepped in the open doorway to block Oliver's view. Lock's son was her priority—she'd protect him at all costs if necessary.

Oliver sneered in Brenna's direction, but the damage to his face negated any intimidating effect. Instead of a threatening glare, it looked like a pained grimace.

"What the fuck, Brenna?" he said in a near snarl that made up for the failed facial expression.

She jerked back at the venom in his voice. "Excuse me?"

"You're watching his fucking kid now?"

"What do you mean?" she asked, choosing her words carefully.

"I thought it was all for show... their way of making me pay. I thought they forced you to go along with it, and after getting the money and beating my ass, it'd be fucking done. But you're watching his brat. Are you fucking him too?"

"Hey!" She widened her stance as though she could protect Caleb by spreading her body wider.

"So, you're what? *With* him now?" Disgust marked each word. "You're his old woman or something?"

Shit. No one had thought further than meeting with Oliver the other morning and getting the money back. None of the Handlers had thought he'd have big-enough balls to approach her after getting his ass kicked by Spec and Lock. Hell, she also thought he'd hide away and lick his wounds.

She had no more backup or prospects tailing her every time she left the

house.

Today, she was on her own, winging it.

“It’s an ol’ lady, and what I am is none of your fucking business anymore.”

“This was not the plan, Brenna,” he spoke down to her as if she was a petulant child making them late for a party.

“The plan?” she shouted before glancing around. Thankfully, the outburst didn’t draw unwanted attention, though maybe she’d be better off with some extra eyes on her.

“Yes,” he hissed between clenched teeth. “You weren’t supposed to go slumming with the biker trash.”

“Oh, gosh, my bad,” she said in a syrupy tone. “What was the plan then? For me to be assaulted and harmed at the hands of criminals for a few days before you were able to scrape together enough money to pay off your debts?”

He had the audacity to look unashamed.

“Just go, Oliver. It’s over. We never have to see each other again. Hopefully, you won’t be stupid enough to borrow money from loan sharks again.”

He snorted. “Loan sharks you’re fucking.”

Brenna didn’t bother to correct him. She wasn’t fucking loan sharks—just one loan shark.

And it was more than fuck—

Nope. No, it’s not. It’s nothing more than that.

“Oliver. Go.”

“No.” He crowded her against the car. “I’m not going anywhere. You owe me.”

“Owe you?” she shrieked. “Have you lost your mind?”

He pointed to his face. “I’ve missed three days of work because of you. Because you couldn’t go along with the plan. You had to play the victim and get them on your side.”

“Oh my God.” She pressed a hand to her forehead. “You have. You’ve lost your freakin’ mind.”

Fine. Two could play dirty. “You know what, Oliver? I am his ol’ lady, and if you don’t get the hell out of my way, I’ll get Lock and Spec to pay you a little visit in the middle of the night. Trust me, you’ll be longing for days when all you had were bruises.”

She'd never, but the words had the desired effect. Fear flashed in his eyes. And when she rammed her knee upward for a swift shot to his balls, well, he doubled over, gagging and groaning. It allowed her to shove him away and turn to Caleb.

"Sorry about that, you little drooly monster. Let's get home to Daddy. Your Daddy. Not mine. Oh my God, never mind." The baby looked at her with a slobbery grin as he munched his biscuit. She slammed the door and hurried around to the driver's side.

Once in the car, she hit the lock just in time for Oliver to recover and grab the door handle.

"Open the fucking door!" he shouted. "This isn't the end. I'll make them pay. I'll make you all pay!"

She turned on the ignition and peeled out of the parking spot, leaving him hollering after her like a madman. "All right," she said to Caleb in a cheerful voice that concealed the racing of her heart and trembling hands. "Here we go!"

A final peek behind revealed Oliver still shouting from the curb. Pedestrians gave him a wide berth as he ranted like a madman.

Brenna focused on the road and getting her heart rate under control. It was over. Oliver was her past. He wouldn't be stupid enough to take this further and risk more harm.

Right?

Caleb babbled and giggled as she drove over a speed bump.

Could Caleb and Lock be part of her future?

You need to stop fantasizing.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

BRENNA WAS A lifesaver. Truly.

This emergency call came from a local motel owner whose beachfront property brought in a disgusting amount of money each tourist season. They'd recently let an employee go after more than one complaint of him stealing from guests. Upon his firing, he'd made substantial threats toward the owner and then walked out with a set of keys to the administrative office, including one for the safe. The manager was so desperate to have the locks rekeyed he'd offered an ass-load of cash for immediate service—five times Lock's advertised emergency rate.

Without Brenna's offer to watch Caleb, he'd have had to pass on the opportunity to make a quick and hefty buck. Nothing was better than a simple job that paid well. In and out in twenty minutes with a fat wallet.

On the way home, he popped by the clubhouse after getting a call from Ty. Hopefully, Brenna would forgive him for being gone a few minutes longer. She'd promised her afternoon was wide open, and she'd offered to stay with Caleb as long as he needed.

"Hey, brother," he said as he strode into the clubhouse.

Ty looked over his shoulder from his seat at the bar. "Hey, man. Thanks for coming back. Could use your expertise with something."

"Anything. What can I do for ya?"

He stood and walked around the bar, where he pulled out a metal box about ten by ten inches—a portable safe.

"What's this?"

"Found it in my spare room's closet. Shoved way deep in there." Tyler's expression didn't change from the severe one he often wore.

"It's not yours?" Lock walked over to it. The safe had a dial instead of the more modern digital style he'd become accustomed to working with lately.

"Pretty sure Margot left it."

“Ahh.” Ty’s ex-wife. Lock didn’t know the whole story, and he’d been warned not to ask, but he’d heard it was messy as hell. He’d been told she was the type of woman a man didn’t wish on his worst enemy.

“You want me to give a stab at opening it?” Prior to becoming Caleb’s guardian, he’d dabbled in safe cracking. Spare time was a rarity these days, so he hadn’t indulged in the hobby for months, but he’d love to give this one a go.

“If you don’t mind. I’m sure as fuck not giving it back to that bitch.”

Lock winced. “Yikes. Sounds like there’s a story there.”

His simple reaction made Ty laugh. “Oh, yeah. Not a pretty story, that’s for sure. I’ll fill you in someday. Maybe on a night you’re hoping to have nightmares.”

Lock chuckled. “Looking forward to it.” He studied the safe for a minute. “If you don’t mind me taking this baby home for a few days, I’ll give it a go. Promise I won’t look at what’s inside.”

Ty waved away his concern. “Knock yourself out. I don’t give a shit if you snoop. I trust you.”

The words were spoken in such a casual way Ty didn’t seem to realize their impact. But they hit Lock square in the chest. Since his stint in rehab, he couldn’t shake the constant feeling of being a huge fucking lead weight on his club brothers. Ty mirroring Curly’s words of trust and faith meant the world. If only he could convince himself he wasn’t a drain on his club.

You’re the only person holding a grudge against Lock. That’s where you need to focus your forgiveness and healing.

His therapist’s words, spoken repeatedly, made perfect sense for the first time.

He rolled his eyes. How many times had he told him he was crazy? But as usual, he’d been dead right. But how did he go about forgiving himself when he had to live day in and day out, knowing he’d caused immense pain to the only important people in his life?

Some days, it felt like an impossible task. Punishing himself was easier. More comfortable. It made sense.

He cleared his throat of budding emotion. “Great. I’ll let you know when I get it open.”

“No rush. I’m sure it’s just something that’ll make me hate her even more.”

Lock bit off the desire to ask for clarification. It wasn’t his business, and

he'd be wise to avoid the VP's messy relationship drama for all he was worth.

"Sorry," Ty said. "Guess I have some unresolved issues."

A laugh burst from Lock. "Don't we all, brother?"

They slapped hands, then Lock gathered up the safe and headed back outside to his bike. He strapped it to the rear seat.

Time to get home to his son.

And the woman he could still taste on his tongue.

God, she was fucking delicious.

During the trip home, he forced himself to think of the most revolting images he could conjure up. Anything to keep his mind off Brenna and his cock under control, so he didn't show up with a tent in his jeans.

Of course, when he opened the door and heard her singing a silly rhyme to his son, all that hard work went out the window. Jesus, all it took was the sound of her voice to make him hard. He pressed the heel of his hand over his cock as though he could force the over-eager organ into submission.

"Oh, hey." Brenna came walking down the hall with Caleb in her arms. "Daddy's home."

His son squealed and tried to launch himself from her arms, making Brenna laugh and Lock's chest ache again. Goddammit, he might have to see a cardiologist.

"Whoa, easy there, big guy. I'll hand you over." She stepped close enough that Lock caught Caleb as he practically dove from her arms.

"Hey, bud," he said to Caleb, who snuggled right in against his chest.

"I think he's sleepy. I was about to put him down for a nap." As she stepped back, he noticed a slight tremor in her hands, which she tried to hide by stuffing them in the pockets of her shorts.

He frowned. "What's wrong?"

"Hmm?"

Now that he took a second to focus on her, he saw the signs of strain. Anxiety, maybe. Her ear-to-ear grin was fake as fuck. He's seen her happy. Hell, he'd made her happy with his tongue and his fingers, but also, when they'd talked and joked, she'd radiated happiness.

And this wasn't it.

"I'm fine." She smiled, but he didn't buy it.

"Something happened." Not a question. He didn't need her to confirm what he knew, only to tell him what had her freaked out. With Caleb safe in

his arms, he wasn't worried something had happened to his son.

No, this distress was personal to Brenna.

Which led him in one direction.

Oliver.

"What did that motherfucker do?"

She gasped. "What? H-how did you know?"

He raised an eyebrow. "Guess I've gotten to know you pretty well."

Brenna blinked, and for a beat, they stared at each other. Then Caleb let out one of the adorable baby sighs he only made when in the first stages of sleep. Lock glanced down to find his son sound asleep in his arms.

"I'll tell you," Brenna said with a dejected huff. "Do you want to put him in his crib first?"

Did he? No. The baby's warm, soft weight grounded him in a way he'd never have expected. Settling him in the crib would mean a loss of that feeling.

Brenna grinned, and it was the first real one since he'd arrived home. "You don't want to let him go, do you?"

He shrugged. "Guess not. Who knew I'd be a fucking baby guy. Let's sit on the couch so I don't wake him." He grabbed her hand, threading their fingers together.

"I knew," Brenna said as she stared at their joined hands. "You love family. You're protective and possessive of your people. Doesn't surprise me at all that you'd be a baby guy, as you said."

"You're gonna kill my street cred." He settled on the couch, cradling Caleb. The baby's cheek was smushed against his chest, pooching his lips in the cutest little pout. Fuck, maybe he deserved to lose his street cred.

"No," Brenna said, shaking her head. "Not only is it sexy to see how you melt for your son, but knowing you'd go to any lengths for the people you love only strengthens your image. You have nothing to worry about."

Christ, this woman.

She had no idea how protective and possessive he could be. If she were his, he'd fucking own her, and the gleam in her eyes, the way she drifted toward him as she spoke, told him she'd love it.

Too bad he fucked up everything he touched. Maybe it showed growth that he wasn't willing to risk destroying her as he'd ruined everything else.

He cleared his throat. "So, enough stalling. Tell me what happened today."

“Ugh.” She blew out a breath and gnawed her lower lip. “Oliver approached me today when I was leaving the park with Caleb. But, Lock, I promise I didn’t let him near your son. I blocked him, and he had no idea what was happening. He didn’t even get upset once.”

She babbled so fast he could barely keep up with her runaway mouth.

“Whoa, babe, relax,” he said, holding up a hand. “Caleb is here, sleeping, perfectly fine. I’m not for one second worried about him. You’re the one who’s distraught. Stop worrying and tell me what happened.”

“Nothing happened. He didn’t touch me or anything.”

Thank fuck for that. Lock couldn’t keep the low rumble inside his chest.

“Seriously. I’m okay. He just yelled a bunch of stuff, like how I messed up his plans and how it’s not over. To be honest, I don’t even remember everything he said. I was so caught off guard and focused on shielding Caleb, not everything registered.”

Rage began to bubble up from deep within. How fucking stupid had they been to overlook the possibility of Oliver confronting Brenna? Of course, he wouldn’t fade away into the background. His ego was too big to believe he’d been beaten even after taking a literal beating.

And Brenna not caring about anything but his son? Fuck, that was the kind of woman he wanted—brave, selfless, and so fucking sexy that he could fuck her every day and never want her any less.

“I, uh, might have threatened him and kneed him in the balls.” She wore a sheepish grin as though embarrassed by her behavior when all he felt was immense pride.

“Fuck, you’re amazing.”

She chuckled. “And you’re insane. I’ve never threatened anyone in my life. I’m usually very boring.”

“Good thing you met us then, huh? Spice up your life.” He winked.

The smile fell off her face. “You know,” she whispered. “I’m starting to think it really was a good thing I met you.”

“C’mere.” He crooked a finger, beckoning her.

Her nose wrinkled, but she scooted closer until her knees bumped his thigh. “What? Is there something on my face?”

Fuck, she was too damn sweet and innocent for the likes of him. How could he not kiss her?

He caught her chin between his thumb and forefinger, using his other arm to hold Caleb close as he leaned toward her. He kissed her. Just a soft brush

of his lips. Then another. And another.

Brenna let out a breathy sigh.

He teased her lips with his tongue, tracing the upper one and then the lower until they parted, allowing him to slip inside.

He'd never kissed a woman like this before—sweet, slow, without an end goal of getting naked and making each other come. Nothing but savoring the way her tongue danced against his, her lips clung to him, and the tiny whimpers trapped in her throat.

It felt good. It felt right.

And it was easier than trying to explain how she made him feel with words that he was bound to screw up royally.

The kiss ended naturally, but neither drew back. They stayed nose to nose, with him holding her chin.

“What was that for?” she whispered.

“Just wanted to,” he answered.

“Oh, okay.” Thank God she accepted the simple non-answer because he was too fucking terrified to find a deeper one.

Brenna smiled. “I liked it. I don't think I've ever been kissed like that.”

Caleb wriggled and cried out once, making them both chuckle.

“Way to kill the moment, buddy.” Lock released Brenna. “Let me get him in his crib before he fully wakes up.”

She nodded. “I should probably get going anyway.”

As she started to rise, he placed a hand on her shoulder. “Not yet.”

Her eyes held the questions she didn't voice.

Why should I stay?

What does this mean?

Questions he didn't acknowledge or answer.

It only took a few minutes to settle Caleb in his crib. Once the little guy fell asleep, transferring him was an easy process. Lock tried to put him to bed awake—he'd read babies needed to learn to put themselves to sleep, but tonight, he had a beautiful woman waiting on him. It wasn't the night for sleep training.

God, the things he now thought about.

A wave of exhaustion washed over him as he left Caleb's room. Being a parent wiped him out. Tack on a daily battle with sobriety, and the fatigue hit epic levels.

As he returned to the den, Brenna watched him. “You looked tired.”

He chuckled. “I was just thinking about how exhausted I am. This parenting shit is as tiring as they say it will be.”

That had her laughing. “Parenting shit?”

He shrugged as he plopped down on the couch. “Yep.”

Brenna scooted over until their sides were pressed against each other. She rested her head on his shoulder. “Well, if it’s any consolation, you’re knocking this parenting shit out of the park.”

He rested his hand on her upper thigh. “Who knew you were such a good liar?” Her warmth and gentle weight pressed against him combined with the comfort of the couch, making his eyelids droop.

If she responded, he never heard her. Sleep snuck up and claimed him so fast he didn’t stand a chance at fighting it. One second, he was more comfortable than he ever remembered feeling, and the next—peaceful oblivion.

And no one would ever know if he dreamed of a future with long, hot nights and blissful days spent worshiping a brown-eyed woman.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

THUMP.

Thump.

Thump.

The solid rhythmic beat coaxed Brenna from a deep, nourishing sleep. She floated, warm and relaxed, while the sound lured her into a dreamlike state. She'd be happy to lay right there forever, half-awake on top of Lock's strong—

Her eyes flew open as the pleasant sensation evaporated in a flash.

Lock?

What the hell was Lock doing there? And why was she on top of him? A quick scan of the room revealed she wasn't in her home as she'd planned, but in Lock's den, on his couch.

The evening came back to her in a slow slideshow of memories. They chatted. She'd confessed the incident with Oliver, and Lock had listened with rapt attention while holding the cutest sleeping infant in the world.

Then, they shared a kiss that rattled her to the core. The combination of tenderness and erotic passion made her heart ache as much as her sex. She'd always dreamed of such a connection. One as powerfully emotional as it was physical. Could she have found that with Lock, or was she merely projecting a dream onto one kiss?

And if so, did it matter? Nothing would come of it. They'd agreed to a friendship with a side of sex. He didn't want more, and while she did, did she want it with a man like Lock? A man who lived outside the law? Who wrote his own rules and lived by an outlaw code?

If the closeness of his MC family and how they treated their women was any indication, maybe she did want a man like him. Her brain throbbed as she struggled to make sense of it all.

The longer she stayed sprawled out on top of Lock, the more aware she

became of one very prominent fact.

More like a prominent bulge—the one between Lock’s legs currently nudging into her stomach. She couldn’t stop herself from wriggling a little, just to see what happened.

Lock rewarded her with a sleepy groan and a twitch of his cock.

Morning sex never appealed to her in the past. She needed coffee and a toothbrush to feel human and couldn’t get in the mood without feeling human. But today, nothing mattered beyond Lock and how much she wanted to feel all of him inside her finally.

Brenna lifted her head, finding his half-lidded gaze on her. “Good morning,” she whispered.

He brushed a stray hair behind her ear. She leaned in to the touch, aching for anything he had to give.

“Morning,” he rasped. His gruff, early-morning voice made her shiver. “Give me those lips.” His tone suggested it wasn’t a request. She shivered again as she slithered up his body.

One of the things she hated about Oliver was how he got bossy during sex. He loved to tell her where to go and what to do. No matter how often she complained, he’d rolled his eyes and never changed.

With Lock, she wanted him to order her around. She wanted to follow his every command, knowing it’d please him and end in explosive pleasure for her.

What made the difference?

Chemistry? Pheromones? Something deeper?

She couldn’t explain it, but she was drawn to him by a powerful connection that felt magnetic. She could no further resist it than she could stop breathing.

When she reached his mouth, she pressed her lips to his. Lock opened for her immediately. Their tongues tangled as they sank into a kiss so passionate no one would believe she’d been asleep two minutes ago. Brenna hiked her knees up and settled astride his torso. He ran his hands down her back, settling them on her ass.

She kissed him as though she’d never get the chance—long, delicious kisses designed to make them both crave more. Within seconds, kissing wasn’t enough. Her body heated as though the room had been set ablaze. She ground her pelvis against him. The way his cock nestled between her legs in just the right spot had her gasping and pressing down harder.

“Fuck, Bren...” He groaned and arched up.

She already missed his lips but couldn't stand the feel of her clothing anymore. All she wanted was his skin on hers.

“Take this off,” she said, yanking at his T-shirt as she sat up. She tugged her shirt over her head and tossed it to the floor. The bra went next.

As soon as he finished wrestling off his shirt, Lock stared at her chest. “God, those tits are perfect.”

The reverence in his voice and the awe in his gaze made her feel like the sexiest woman alive. Was this how people like Liv, Brooke, and Harper felt when their men looked at them? How incredible would it be to have that every day for the rest of her life?

Those lucky bitches.

She wanted it, if only for one morning.

He cupped her breasts, thumbing her nipples until she whimpered. “I want you so much,” she whispered. “Please. I need to feel you inside me.” A frantic urgency came over her. As though if she didn't have him that second, he might disappear.

Brenna scrambled to remove her bottoms. Lock did the same. Within seconds, they were both completely naked, and she was clambering back on top of him. Her pussy was wet, soaked with the need for him as it always was when he touched her. He groaned as she ground against his thigh. The press of that thick limb to her center felt so incredible she paused to grind against him again.

“Christ, you're leaving a mess all over my leg. You need this fat cock bad, don't you?” he drawled as he stroked said cock with a firm grip.

“Yes.” Her pussy flexed. He had no idea how badly she needed him.

“Stretching you. Fucking you hard and deep.” He groaned, keeping his hot gaze on her. “You're gonna be so tight. I bet you'll squeeze the fuck outta my... holy shit.”

Brenna couldn't stand another second without feeling him. She smacked his hand out of the way, then positioned herself over him and dropped down in one greedy motion.

“Yes,” she hissed as her body adjusted and stretched to accommodate him. He was so deep, and she was so full all she could do was let her head fall back and absorb the pleasure.

“Oh fuck, you're strangling my dick. Goddammit, Brenna, it's so fucking good.”

It was. Almost too good. Her brain fuzzed until she couldn't formulate intelligent thoughts.

"For chrissake..." He shoved his hips off the couch, but then his eyes widened. "Oh fuck. Condom. Baby... Brenna, a condom!"

She gasped. How could she have forgotten? And how could she put a barrier between them now that she had felt every bare inch of him? "I don't want it," she said, making the reckless decision. "I'm clean. I got tested the day I broke up with Oliver because of the cheating. And I'm protected. Promise."

"Me too. Tested in rehab. There's been no one since." His fingers flexed against her soft flesh. "Christ, I get to fuck you raw!"

"Yes." She shivered. "Just like this. Nothing between us."

"Fuck, I might not survive."

She moved as though on autopilot, rolling her hips to increase the sensations. Her body knew what to do and what it wanted.

"That's right. Give me a show, baby."

She opened her eyes and stared down at Lock. His face was tight with tension and effort, probably fighting the urge to slam into her. There was so much dark and dangerous lust in his eyes that it made her want to give him exactly what he'd asked for—to give him the best goddamn show of his life. She wanted to be what he saw behind his closed eyelids when he was alone and going to sleep.

As Brenna rolled her hips, she coasted her hands up her body as slowly as she could. Lock followed the movement with his eyes. When she reached her breasts, he blew out a harsh breath. "That's it. Touch 'em. Play with those tits."

Who could resist such a sexy command? Brenna cupped her breasts, lifting them higher as she stroked her thumbs over her puckered nipples. A sharp shock of pleasure stabbed between her legs, disrupting her rhythm.

"Feed them to me."

She shivered at the hot command she wouldn't dream of denying. Brenna leaned forward until she had to catch herself with a hand on the couch next to his head. She held a breast in the other hand, guiding it toward his mouth.

He pulled the nipple into his mouth with a hungry suction that made her cry out. God, she loved the way it felt. He made a satisfied noise, devouring her with licks, hard sucks, and nips that would surely leave marks.

She tried to continue riding him, but every move of her pelvis jerked her

breast from his mouth. After he growled his disappointment, she held still and endured the erotic torture.

Just as her eyes drifted closed and she began to float along on a tingly cloud of sensation, Lock released her nipple. Her breasts were wet from his mouth and tender from the pressure of his lips but in the most delicious way. Every time she saw the marks beneath her shirt or bra, she'd be reminded of how he'd feasted on her.

Brenna grunted in protest but wasn't disappointed for more than two seconds.

"Fuck it." Lock wrapped his arms around her and flipped them on the small couch. Brenna yelped, but somehow, he managed to not only keep them from tumbling to the floor but to stay lodged deep inside her. Before she could register landing flat on her back, he grabbed her ankles and hiked them over his hips. She crossed them at the small of his back at the same time he surged inside her.

She'd loved being on top, but this is what she craved—his heavy weight crushing her and his powerful thighs controlling the strong thrusts that pushed her up the couch.

Bottom line—Lock in complete control of her pleasure.

She raised her hands over her head, bracing on the arm of the couch to give herself some leverage to fuck back on him.

They fell into the perfect rhythm that had sparks of pleasure dancing across her nerve endings every time he hammered into her. It went on for long minutes until Brenna thrashed on the couch and babbled nonsense combined with moans and whimpers. The need to come bordered on undeniable, but she also never wanted it to end.

Their gazes met and held.

Brenna felt herself transported to another plane of existence, where she and Lock were the only people, and nothing mattered but their pleasure. They were so close, so in tune with each other, that their connection frightened her momentarily. She'd never had sex like this, with her entire heart as well as her body. Lock's face reflected so much more than physical pleasure. Or maybe she was projecting what she felt.

And she felt so much.

Her throat clogged, and her chest felt heavy. In the most humiliating manner, her eyes filled. What the fuck was happening to her?

Lock buried his face against her neck, and she could have sworn she

heard him whisper, “I feel it too,” but was too terrified to ask. Instead, she took the reprieve he gave when he broke eye contact and focused on the physical. She squeezed her internal muscles around him as he drove as deep as possible.

Lock growled into her neck, and his thrusts picked up to a brutal pace. She pushed against the couch until her arms gave out.

The orgasm rushed upon her so fast she never had a warning. “Lock,” she shouted and arched her back as an indescribable pleasure consumed her. She wrapped her arms and legs around him and held him so tight he couldn’t move. It was the only way to ensure she didn’t fly off the planet, and she shook the couch. Her muscles twitched and trembled. Her pussy rippled around him again and again.

“Oh fuck, Brenna,” he said, moving his hips in tiny bursts. “Brenna…” He tensed, letting out a harsh shout against her skin. She clung to him through his climax, loving the way his fingers dug into her ass so hard she winced. She’d done that to him—driven him past the point of controlling his muscles.

And she couldn’t wait to do it again.

Eventually, he relaxed, and his fingers uncurled from her skin. He slumped, becoming a heavy weight, crushing her to the couch. “I know I have to move,” he mumbled into the crook of her neck. “But I think you fucked me to paralysis.”

Brenna giggled. “That’s okay. I love the way you feel on top of me.” She wound her arms around his neck to prove it, keeping him plastered against her.

“Me too, beautiful, but if I smother the life outta you, we won’t get to do that again.”

“Hmm.” She closed her eyes and floated on a post-orgasm afterglow. “You have a point.”

With a grunt, Lock rolled them so they were on their sides with her wedged between him and the back of the couch.

His cock was still partly inside her, though soft now. She was so happy and comfortable that the wetness leaking between her legs didn’t even bother her. All she wanted was to drift back to sleep and wake sometime later in this exact position.

A sharp cry from the hallway shot that fantasy out of the water. Brenna groaned.

“Hey, at least he didn’t do that five minutes ago,” Lock said with a chuckle.

“Good point.”

He untangled himself from her arms, laughing at her pout. “Damn, you’re cute. Stop looking at me like that. You go clean up. I’ll get the crib monster, then take you both to breakfast.”

She perked up. “Breakfast? That’s a great idea.”

He kissed her quickly. “Good.” He kissed a path to her ear. “Then, in a few hours, when Caleb takes a nap, I’ll take you to my bed and fuck you until you can’t move for the rest of the day.”

Liquid heat pooled in her lower belly. “Yes, please.”

“Good. It’s a date.” He kissed her a final time, then hopped off the couch to fetch his son.

A date? Were they dating now? Or was that merely a turn of phrase?

Brenna forced herself to stomp her questions into the ground. She’d take it as it came and enjoy every second of Lock, her fuck buddy, both clothed and naked.

My fuck buddy. Nothing more.

Ouch.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

LOCK KNOCKED TWICE before the door opened, and a smiling Brooke greeted him. Well, she greeted his son. Lock had practically become invisible since he started traveling with an adorable tiny human.

“There’s my favorite baby boy,” Brooke gushed as she beamed a radiant smile at Caleb. “I’ve missed you.”

His son squealed in delight and clapped his hands.

“Look what you can do.” Brooke clapped back, which made Caleb kick his arms and legs in sync. It was his signature move when excited. “Aren’t you such a smart boy?” She reached her arms out, and as had become custom, Caleb launched himself toward her, striking Lock in the gut in the process.

“Oof.” He rubbed his side. “A little warning next time, buddy. Those little feet are dangerous.”

Caleb shot him a gummy grin, and all was forgiven.

“Come in, come in.” Brooke settled Caleb on her hip and then waved Lock into her house. “Thank you for bringing him over. I was going through withdrawals.”

Shit. Guilt hit hard. Brooke had spent sixty days straight caring for his son while he’d been in a too-fucked-up state to do it himself. Of course, she missed the little guy. If he wasn’t such a selfish asshole, Lock would have thought of it on his own and brought Caleb by sooner.

“Don’t give me that look,” Brooke said, warning in her tone.

He flinched. “What look?”

“That guilty, I’m-screwing-up look. I won’t have it. I didn’t say that to make you feel bad. You don’t have anything to feel bad about. I’m just excited to hang with my favorite human. Okay?”

Yikes. Brooke could be fierce as fuck when she wanted. It made sense, considering she’d chosen an MC president as her partner. “How does Curly

get away with anything around you?”

“He doesn’t.” She beamed and bounced Caleb on her hip. “No, he doesn’t,” she added in a sing-song voice. “But I’d let you get away with anything you wanted because you are too cute to say no to, aren’t you?”

Caleb squealed with laughter.

“Is there anything better than the sound of baby giggles?” She blew a raspberry into Caleb’s neck, setting him off again.

If there was, Lock had yet to hear it.

“Come on in the kitchen. I made some fresh lemonade and sandwiches.”

He frowned but followed. “You didn’t have to do that. I hope you didn’t go to any trouble.”

She waved away his concern as she walked toward the kitchen with Caleb. “It was less than no trouble.”

His next client wasn’t for another two hours, so he strolled behind Brooke. He entered the kitchen expecting an empty room, only to draw up short at the shocking sight before him. Cold fear slithered down his spine. Five pairs of curious, no downright nosey, eyes stared at him from around Brooke’s center kitchen island.

“What is this?” he asked as he stepped back from the female firing squad.

“Told you this was sus,” Jo muttered as Liv’s grin went from welcoming to calculating.

“Whatever do you mean?” Liv asked in a tone dripping with honey.

Honey laced with arsenic.

“Yeah.” Harper blinked with an innocent grin. She was the only one he’d have believed if she pleaded ignorance. “We’re just here for a lady’s lunch.”

Too bad she sucked as an actor.

Traitor.

Though he deserved far more from her than a grilling, hell, he should probably let her haul off and smack him across the face a few times. Not that she ever would. Harper was too damn sweet.

“Lemonade?” Liv held out a full glass so icy condensation dripped onto the counter.

Lock eyed it as though it’d poison him. “Thanks...” He took the glass but didn’t sip. They all continued to stare at him with varying levels of poorly hidden curiosity. His gaze bounced from one to another before he finally sighed. “All right, fine.” He rolled his eyes. “Let’s get this over with. Who’s firs—”

“How’s Brenna?”

Liv, of course.

“I imagine you know how she is since you meet with her at the shelter almost daily.” Three weeks had passed since they’d slept together, and things were good. Crazy good. They woke up together most mornings, spent free days playing with Caleb on the beach, ate dinners together, and fell into bed together for long, hot, steamy Florida nights.

“You know what I mean. Don’t play dumb, mister.”

“Yeah,” Rachel, the youngest of the group, piped up. “We wanna know how she is... in bed.” Her giggles set off the others who, by the smell of it, had something a little more than lemonade in their glasses.

“Are you even old enough to know what sex is, Rach?”

She flipped him off. “I sure am. Old enough to know what it is and old enough to excel at it.” Her smug grin made him cringe.

Walked right into that one, dipshit.

“Get it, girl.” Jo held her hand for a high-five, which Rachel smacked with too much enthusiasm. “Oww,” Jo muttered.

“All right, all right.” Brooke sat Caleb in the little seat she’d bought him when he’d stayed there. It hooked onto the counter’s edge so he could be part of the group. She set a sippy cup of milk in front of him and then handed him a baby biscuit, which he immediately shoved into his mouth. “Lock isn’t one to kiss and tell, so let’s not harass the poor man.”

“Thank you, Brooke.” Even though she was the one who’d invited this gaggle of insane women to her house when she knew he’d be there. Finally, he relaxed enough to take a sip of his lemonade and actually taste it.

“But what are you guys?” she asked, tilting her head. “I mean, are you casual? Are you dating? Do you *love* her?”

He choked as the tart liquid flew down his trachea. “Love? Are you crazy?”

Brooke shrugged. “Just checking.”

Fucking love. No, he didn’t love her. They were friends, for Christ’s sake. Friends who fucked occasionally.

Or almost every night.

Whatever. There wasn’t any love.

“Neither of us is interested in anything more complicated than what we’ve got going, so you five hens can stop clucking about us.”

Jo frowned. “I’m pretty sure calling us hens is super sexist.”

Harper watched him in that sweet way that always flared his guilt. “I think you’re fooling yourselves.”

She did? “What do you mean?”

“I mean, I think you have it bad for each other, but you’re too afraid to reach out and grab what’s right in front of you.”

His frown felt deep enough to be visible from space. “And what’s right in front of me?”

She rolled her eyes as the rest of the women scoffed.

“What?” He glanced between them. This was way too damn cryptic for him. “What am I missing?”

“Uh... a remarkable relationship. A lifetime of happiness. A woman who was made for you.” Jo tsked.

Was she made for him? What did that even mean?

“Men are so dumb,” Liv muttered.

“Hey!” This was getting malicious.

“What?” She shrugged. “I speak the truth.”

“She does,” Jo confirmed with a nod.

“Y’all are a buncha bullies.” Lock rubbed the center of his forehead, where an ache bloomed. “Where the fuck are y’all’s ol’ men? They need to collect your tipsy asses and teach you how to mind your own damn business.”

“They’ll be back to collect us sooner or later.” Harper held her empty lemonade glass out. “More, please.”

“I need to get the fuck outta here,” Lock muttered. “Brooke, you sure you wanna keep Caleb overnight?”

“Do you have plans with Brenna?”

Trap. It’s a trap.

“Yes...”

“Then, of course, I want him. You two need a night alone. And while you’re enjoying yourselves, lean into it if you feel the urge to confess your love.” She smoothed a hand over Caleb’s head. The little guy was lost to a world that included only him and his snack.

“For chrissake.” Lock pinched the bridge of his nose. He needed to get the fuck out of there before he started considering their asinine ideas.

“Are you ladies torturing the poor man?” Curly’s voice came from the front of the house.

“No!” a chorus of giggling women shouted. At the same time, Lock

yelled, “Yes! They are. They’re all up in my goddamn business. Get in here and control your woman.”

Liv stuck her tongue out at him. “Tattletale.”

“It’s cute you think I can,” Curly said as he strode into the room, casual in charcoal sweatpants and a black tee.

“That’s right. No man controls me,” Liv announced before she hiccupped. “Oops.” Her hand flew to her mouth. “I might have had too much.”

Lock snorted. “Ya think?” He’d reached his limit of nosiness for one day. “Okay, I’m outta here while I still have my balls.” He turned to Brooke. “You sure you don’t need anything for him? I didn’t bring a thing.”

“Nope.” She accepted a kiss on her cheek from Curly. “We have everything, including clothes. Go. Have fun.”

“Take her out on the bike,” Curly suggested. He scooped Caleb out of his chair and nuzzled his nose against the baby’s soft cheek. Caleb giggled and grabbed a fistful of the president’s curly hair as he did every time.

“That’s a good idea, Prez.” Toting Caleb around cut his bike time down to a depressing level. A car seat didn’t exactly work on a motorcycle. “You be good, buddy.”

Caleb gurgled and turned toward Lock when he heard his voice. There was something magical about the simple pleasure of his son being able to pick out his voice among all the others.

He kissed Caleb’s forehead and then went on his way after accepting hugs and more unsolicited advice from all the women. They meant well even though they drove him crazy. He loved each of them not only for his brothers but for their unconditional support. Even when he flat-out didn’t deserve it.

Brenna wouldn’t be done working for a few more hours, which was fine. He had a quick appointment in the afternoon at a small business in town, but then they were free to have a child-free night of fun.

Hell yes.

After leaving Brooke and Curly’s, he drove straight to his house to switch out the car for his bike.

Two seconds after he pulled into his driveway, a non-descript sedan rolled to a stop at the curb in front of his house.

“You lost, man?” he asked as a short man with a stocky build and a thick head of graying hair climbed out.

“You Jake Renlow?”

Lock frowned. “Who wants to know?”

The guy walked toward him carrying a thick manilla envelope. “I have some official court documents for you if you’re him.”

“I am. Court documents?” He accepted the package with a frown.

“No idea what it’s about, man. I deliver the papers. No one tells me shit.”

“Yeah. Okay, thanks,” he said. His mind already dismissed the man as he carefully worked the packet open.

“From the law offices of Madison and Cooper,” he muttered. Cooper? Why did that name sound familiar?

He read on and sank to his knees on the lawn after three lines. Pain like he’d never experienced twisted his insides until he was doubled over, panting.

No.

This couldn’t be real.

His vision blurred, and everything he’d worked his ass off for over the past few months evaporated into thin air. Nothing mattered anymore. Not the work he’d put in, not the sobriety he’d achieved, not the happiness he’d found with Brenna since the first time he touched her.

A primal wail tore through the quiet afternoon air, sounding like a wounded animal in horrific pain. The ground crumbled beneath him, sending him tumbling into endless darkness. He lost himself as he careened toward nothingness, swallowed by despair and failure.

Oliver was suing to have his parental rights taken away.

The anguish eclipsed anything he’d felt prior. It took over every cell in his body until he couldn’t think, couldn’t feel anything beyond pain.

Nothing mattered anymore. The pain had won, and he’d sell his soul for relief.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

BRENNA FROWNED AT her phone as it sent her straight to Lock's voicemail for the third time. It didn't make sense. If he'd gotten stuck at work, wouldn't the phone ring a few times first? Maybe he'd forgotten to charge it, but he didn't typically make that mistake when someone else had Caleb. He made sure the sitter could always reach him.

They'd made plans for four in the afternoon. Lock had promised to swing by her place and pick her up. She'd held out until four thirty before sending a text. A simple, *everything okay* that went unanswered. At five, the unease in her gut had her calling him, even if it made her appear needy. That was the first time she'd heard his voicemail. Now, at five thirty and three calls in, she'd reached the point of genuine worry.

"I can't believe I'm doing this," she muttered as she called Brooke. It seemed like such an insecure girlfriend move to call a friend and ask if they'd heard from him. Not to mention, it'd be humiliating if he'd merely decided to ghost her.

Could he have? Was he finished and too chickenshit to face her?

What an asshole.

No.

Lock wasn't like that. Sure, she'd heard all about the messiness of his recent past, but since she'd met him, Lock had been nothing but responsible and genuine. If he wanted to end their *whatever*, she had no doubt he'd be bold enough to tell her.

Her stomach clenched as she realized how crushed she'd be in that scenario.

Dammit, she really had gone and done it. Despite all her confidence in her powers of resistance, she'd caught feelings. The sick sensation in her chest at the thought of him dumping her obliterated any chance she'd had of continuing to live in denial.

“Hey, girl, aren’t you supposed to be on a hot date with a hot biker right now?” Brooke said by way of greeting.

“Uh, yeah.” Brenna grimaced at her own awkward chuckle and squeezed her eyes shut tight. “This is a little embarrassing, but Lock was supposed to pick me up an hour and a half ago, and, um... he never showed.” *Kill me now.* “I was wondering if you’ve spoken to him?”

“Oh.” Brooke’s confusion could be heard through the phone. “Um, let me think. He dropped Caleb off here around noon, and I know he had a work appointment at two, but he said it wouldn’t take long. Have you tried calling him? Maybe the job ended up more involved than he’d anticipated.”

“Yeah, I did.” Brenna pinched the bridge of her nose as she paced across her living room. Humiliation warred with worry. “I texted a few times with no response, and his phone goes straight to voice mail.”

The unsaid *maybe he’s avoiding me* hung heavy in the air.

Mortifying.

“Really?” Brook made a hum of surprise. “That’s not like him. He is always super careful to ensure we can reach him while watching Caleb. Hold on, let me check with Curly.”

The line went quiet for about thirty torturous seconds.

“He hasn’t heard anything either.”

A lump lodged itself in Brenna’s throat.

“No!” Brooke’s sharp voice cut through her pity party. “I know what you’re thinking, and you better stop it right now. He did not ditch you.”

“I don’t know. We’re not official or—”

“It doesn’t matter if you have defined anything or that you’ve both buried your heads in the sand regarding your feelings.”

Ouch. Way to lay a truth bomb on me.

“Lock cares about you, Brenna. I see it clear as day every time you are together. He can’t keep his eyes off you. He gravitates toward you like Curly does to me. Like I do to him. And don’t even try to lie about your feelings for him. You’re smitten, and it’s more than obvious.”

Brenna sighed. “Fine. I won’t deny it. I’m... oh, for fuck’s sake, I’m crazy about him. If it turns out he’s ghosting me, I’ll be crushed.”

“He’s not ghosting you,” Brooke said slowly as though talking to a stubborn child. “Why don’t you drive over to his house? Hell, maybe he fell asleep. It’s exhausting raising an infant.”

That made sense. Caleb had woken him up during the night a few times

this week. “Yeah. You don’t think that’s too stalkerish?”

“No, I don’t. Because if he’s not over there sleeping and we can’t reach him, then I’m a little worried.”

Shit.

“Me too,” Brenna whispered. “I was super worried at first, but then I kinda talked myself into believing he’s just avoiding me. Now you have me anxious again.”

“He’s not avoiding you, but there isn’t any reason to freak out yet. Drive over and check on him. Then call me back.”

“Crap.” Her heart rate sped up. “Now I am freaking out a bit.” She shoved her feet into the closest flip-flops as she talked and grabbed her purse. “I’ll call you as soon as I know anything.”

“Bye, hon. Good luck.” Brooke ended the call.

Brenna ran out of her house. As she jogged toward the car, her sandal caught on a crack in the driveway, causing her to stumble forward and nearly eat the ground. “Shit!” Somehow, she managed to stay on her feet, but she scraped the skin off her big toe. It hurt like hell, but she shoved the discomfort away.

Due to her lead foot, the drive to Lock’s took five minutes less than usual. As soon as she saw his car in the driveway, she felt a massive wave of relief, but it lasted two seconds. The garage sat wide open without his motorcycle anywhere in sight. He’d taken the bike as was the plan.

Oh God, did he get in an accident on the way to her house?

She sprinted out of the car and up to the front door. “Lock!” she screamed as she pounded the door with the force of an entire SWAT team while also ringing the bell repeatedly. “You in there?” If he’d fallen asleep, this would wake him for sure. The man slept lightly, a gift of fatherhood he’d told her. “Lock!” She continued to beat the side of her fist against the wooden door while hitting the bell.

Nothing.

Seconds ticked by like hours. The silence had her straining her ear for any sound she could pick up. Noises registered from all around.

A cicada.

The hum of an HVAC.

A bird calling from somewhere down the block.

But not so much as a peep from inside Lock’s house. “Forgive me for this,” she muttered as she tried the handle. It didn’t budge.

The garage. It had been open. She raced down the porch steps and into the garage, where she grabbed the doorknob leading into the house.

Locked.

“Dammit!” she shouted as she shook the doorknob so hard she worried it’d fall off the hinges. Maybe she should break it down. Was that going too far?

Brooke. She should call Brooke.

Her breathing bordered on hyperventilation as she fumbled with the phone, pressing on the last name called. Brooke answered before the phone even rang in her ear. “Find him?”

“No. His bike isn’t here. But the garage is open, which isn’t like him. God, Brooke, do you think something happened?”

“Don’t panic. I’m getting Curly to call the guys and have them search places he likes to go.”

“Places,” she said as her heart sank. “Like bars or... drug dens?” Was that even a thing? Where did someone hang out when they had a drug problem? And what the hell could have happened to send him back there?

“Let’s not jump to conclusions, Brenna. He was doing great. The only reason he’d gotten in trouble was because of the massive amount of shit life dumped on him at once. He’s not in that place anymore.”

She pressed a hand to her stomach as she stared out of the garage and across the lawn.

Where are you?

Her vision blurred as she gazed into the distance. She swiped at a leaky eye with an annoyed huff. Crying wouldn’t help anything, but she couldn’t stem the rush of fear and despair.

“You still there, Bren?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay,” Brooke said. “Curly is mobilizing the troops.”

“Wait.” She jogged to the edge of the lawn, squinting to see farther. Far down the block, a figure walked on the sidewalk toward her. Something about the way they moved rang familiar. Her heart went into overdrive. “Oh, my God, Brooke, I think I see him. He’s-he’s walking. Why is he walking? Where’s his bike?”

“Are you sure it’s him?”

“No.” She squinted again and raised a hand to shield her eyes from the harsh Florida sun. “I think... yes! Yes, that’s him. I see him.” She started in

Lock's direction, walking so fast she was nearly running.

"Okay. Go. I'll keep Curly on standby. Call me back."

"Thank you, Brooke."

"Forget that nonsense. We're family."

Brenna shoved the phone in her pocket and sped up to a flat-out run. Lock didn't change his pace even as she ran closer. Something was wrong, for sure. He didn't appear hurt—she didn't see a limp—but his gait was weighed down with a heaviness that had her senses on full alert.

"Lock!" she shouted, waving her arms as she ran toward him. If any of his neighbors happened to glance out their windows, they'd see a frantic woman racing down the sidewalk, waving her arms like a lunatic.

But she didn't care.

All she could think about was getting to Lock.

The second she reached him, she flung herself forward, slamming into him in a full-body hug. "Jesus, you scared me," she whispered near his ear as she embraced him. "Oh my God, I'm so glad you're okay." She panted, struggling to catch her breath. "Give me a minute. I need to do more cardio."

A little part of her brain registered his nonreaction as she clung to him, huffing and puffing. He hadn't wrapped his arms around her, relieved her fears, or even spoken.

Dread filled her.

"Lock?" she asked as she drew back. The blank look in his eyes had an icy wave washing over her. "What's wrong?" she whispered. It wasn't a question of if something was wrong, but what. Everything about him spoke to devastation—the slumped shoulders, the empty stare, the downturned mouth.

"I need you to do something for me. Right now," he said, staring down at the cracked sidewalk.

She cupped his face, forcing him to meet her gaze. "Of course. Anything."

"Reach into my right pocket."

Brenna frowned as she shook her head in confusion. "Um, okay. Front or back?"

"Front." His monotone voice had her terrified.

Any other time, she'd have thought this was a sexy, playful game, but today, the notion didn't cross her mind. He didn't move a muscle as she reached into his pocket. Her fingers encountered something that felt like a small bag. As she pulled it out and lifted it, her eyes widened, and she

couldn't stop the gasp that tore from deep inside.

Her gaze flew to his.

"Keep it away from me."

"O-okay." She knew less than nothing about drugs, but the white powder in a small baggie needed no explanation.

"Promise me." He swallowed. "I can't be trusted." The admission made him hate himself. She could see it plain as day across his face.

"Of course, I promise." She shoved the baggie into her pocket and then held his face again. "I'll do anything you need." Then she pressed a kiss to his lips. The fact that he didn't respond nearly brought her to tears.

Brenna straightened and shoved down a hundred questions, shouting inside her head. She pushed aside her fear and heartache. Lock needed her help. It didn't matter why or what he'd done. Those explanations would come later. For now, she needed to take care of him and get him through this night.

"Come on." She grasped his limp hand. "Let's go home. I'll make you some coffee, and we can talk or lie down. Whatever you need." She gave a gentle tug, and he dutifully followed but might as well have been a million miles away.

When they reached his house, she fished his keys out of his back pocket and let them into his home. "Go into the kitchen," she suggested in a tender but firm tone. "Sit at the table. I'll be right in."

He looked at her before nodding once and walking off toward the kitchen.

Brenna darted into the bathroom. She closed the door behind her and locked it before sagging against the wood. "Okay, okay," she whispered. "You found him. He's okay." She didn't think he'd taken anything but didn't know for sure. Her hands shook as she dug the baggie out of her pocket. She stared at it for a moment. What drove him to the brink tonight? What made him eager to throw away months of hard work and enormous effort?

Brenna walked the short distance to the toilet. It took a few tries to get her trembling fingers to cooperate, but she wrestled the baggie open and dumped the contents into the bowl. One quick flush later, it disappeared into the septic system.

She closed her eyes, breathed, and pulled out her phone.

Brenna: *I have him at his house. Call off the troops. He's not hurt, but something is terribly wrong. Be in touch soon.*

Brooke's response came one second later.

Brooke: *Take care of your man. We're here when you need us. Caleb is*

perfect, so don't worry about him.

Thank God for that woman.

Brenna hurried back to the kitchen, finding Lock sitting at the table with his thousand-yard stare. Should she mention she'd spoken to Brooke and Caleb was doing well? Maybe in a few minutes. She wasn't sure her voice would even be heard at this point. Instead of going straight to him, she set about making a pot of coffee. Once brewing, she dragged a chair and placed it perpendicular to his so her knees bumped his thighs when she sat.

"Lock?"

A manila envelope lay on the table in front of him. He slid it to her. "I feel like I can't breathe," he said.

Brenna's brow furrowed. "Want me to open this?"

He nodded. "Read it. Please tell me I misunderstood."

She opened the envelope with a heavy sense of dread and drew out a thick stack of papers. The familiar logo at the top had her frowning. What was Oliver—

Oh, no.

She read as fast as her brain would allow. With each word, her heart sank deeper and deeper through her body. No wonder Lock was a freaking mess.

It's not over, Brenna.

Oliver's words. She'd taken them as bluster, but he hadn't been lying. Her ex might not be as strong or physically capable as the MC members, but he had a powerful weapon at his disposal. He knew how to manipulate the law, and he was doing so by suing Lock to remove Caleb's custody.

"Jesus," she whispered. "Can he do this? Is this even real? Or legal?" Even as she spoke the questions, she knew the answers. Oliver was a hotshot attorney at a prestigious firm. Of course he knew what he could get away with.

"I called the club's lawyer," Lock said in a voice that sounded like someone had gone six rounds with his vocal cords.

"Good. Okay, that's smart." She set the papers down, unable to stomach another word.

He shook his head. "She told me there was a good chance Oliver could use my drug history, my undisclosed stint in rehab, and the club against me. She's worried he might have a judge in his pocket. She didn't say it outright, but I could tell she thinks I'm fucked."

"No!" Rage replaced the fear and concern she'd been battling all night.

There was no fucking way she'd allow Oliver to do this.

Brenna stood, shoving her chair away. She climbed onto Lock's lap, straddling him as she captured his face and forced him to look at her. "We are not allowing this to happen, Lock. You haven't come this far and fought this hard for a piece of shit like Oliver to ruin your life. Do you hear me? You have the power of your entire club at your back. And you have me. We will fight this, and we will win. I will die before I let anyone take Caleb from you."

He didn't twitch, blink, or react in any way.

"C'mon, Lock." She'd beg, borrow, and steal if needed, but this would never pass. "You need to snap out of this. You can have tonight, but tomorrow we fight like hell."

"I can't," he whispered. "I'm paralyzed with so much goddamn pain. I can't move, I can't get angry, I can barely think. And I'm afraid once I do, I'll lose control."

"Oh, Lock." Her poor heart might never be the same.

He needed something to shock him back to life. Something to yank him from the pit of grief and despair.

And Brenna knew precisely how to do that.

"So, do it," she said.

His brow wrinkled.

"Lose control. With me." She climbed off his lap to stand before him, arms spread wide. "I'm right here, Lock. Take me. Let it all out. Let yourself go." As she spoke, she whipped her shirt over her head and tossed it aside. Since her original plan was a hot date, she'd come prepared with a new bra and panty set.

Lock's eyes flared at the sight of her in a sinful, bright red bra that barely contained her.

"I don't want to hurt you," he whispered. "I can't trust myself."

It was the second time he'd said that tonight, and the words broke her heart.

"It's okay. I trust you enough for both of us."

"Brenna..." Though he claimed uncertainty, his eyes heated to two pools of want. He needed this.

And she couldn't wait to give it to him.

"Use me, Lock."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

USE ME, LOCK.

Nothing could have cut through the blanket of hopelessness suffocating him better than those three words. From the moment he'd read Oliver's letter, he'd felt nothing but terror and desperation. He spent the afternoon drowning, and Brenna threw him a life preserver.

Use me, Lock.

There she stood, offering him her body, and gifting him the most trust a woman could, all while prepared to go to battle for him and his son in the morning. This was what he wanted. Someone who could read him and give herself to him. Tonight, he would take, but he'd make sure she was handsomely rewarded for her efforts. She would love every second and beg for more.

His cock hardened so fast he grew lightheaded.

What made her offer infinitely hotter was how Brenna wanted it as much as he did.

She stood before him, chest heaving and nipples pebbled beneath the thin lace of her sexy-as-fuck bra. But those eyes, those goddamn eyes told him all he needed to know. They blazed with heat and need for him.

He couldn't do anything to fix his problems tonight. His head was too fucked to think straight. Even the club's attorney told him to take the night to process and breathe. Caleb was safe and sound with Curly and Brooke. He was free of immediate responsibilities until morning.

And there Brenna stood.

He rose, wincing as his jeans mashed his needy cock, then closed the distance to Brenna. She stood with her ass propped against his kitchen table.

Lock rested a hand against her warm, soft stomach, then slowly trailed his fingers upward between her tits to her throat. He wrapped his hand around her slender neck, not squeezing, but they both knew how easy it'd be to

inflict pain.

He never would.

Her eyes flared with lust. Her lips parted as she exhaled. Sweet, warm air wafted over his face. Beneath his thumb, her pulse jumped and fluttered.

They shared breaths so close their lips could touch, but he held back, building the anticipation.

“Go into my room. Lay on the bed, naked. Feet on the floor. Legs spread.”

Brenna swallowed. Her throat rippled against his fingers. He couldn't resist gripping a little harder to feel her shudder.

A naughty grin curled her lips. The look was so damn seductive his dick fucking leaked. There would be a wet spot on his damn boxers.

“Don't you wanna take me right here?”

“Yes.” He fought the urge to do just that. “I do. I want to bend you over this table and fuck you until you're screaming so loud the neighbors come running. But, trust me, with the way I need you right now, you're not going to want a hard plank of wood beneath you.”

“Holy shit,” she whispered.

“Go.” He gave her neck a gentle squeeze before releasing her.

The second he released her, Brenna hurried out of the kitchen. The way her ass swayed in those tiny shorts had him biting off a tortured groan. This woman would be the death of him.

Or maybe she'd be the very reason he kept on living.

He planted one palm on the table and pressed the heel of his other hand over his furious erection. His head bowed as he tried to slow his racing heart. “One... two... three...” he murmured until he got to fifty—hopefully enough time to gain control over his hunger so he wouldn't pounce on Brenna like a starving animal.

After a final breath, he straightened and walked toward his bedroom. Each step destroyed any sedating effect from the counting. The hottest woman he knew waited for him to spend the night doing filthy things to her. Staying calm would not be possible.

The sight that greeted him when he reached his door had him grabbing the doorframe to remain upright.

“Fuck,” he whispered as he drank her in.

Brenna had followed his directions word for word. She lay on the bed, pink-tipped feet flat on the floor with her legs spread wide. Her pussy was on

full display, glistening with evidence of her desire.

Propped on her elbows, she ran her ravenous gaze all over him. “Let me know if you’re just planning to watch all night. I’m happy to give you a show and get myself off, though I’d prefer your hands on me and your cock in me.”

Sassy vixen.

The snark in her tone snapped the final vestiges of his control. He kicked out of his shoes and then stalked across the room, shedding his cut, his tee, and finally his pants and boxers.

“Your body makes me crazy... all those muscles and tattoos. I love seeing you without your clothes,” Brenna whispered with a reverence he didn’t deserve.

“That’s my line.” He stepped between her legs, grabbed under her thigh, and yanked her flush against his thighs.

Her yelp of surprise made him grin.

“I’ll never get tired of seeing you like this. So fucking pretty.”

He walked his fingers down the back of her thigh, making her squirm on the bed. When he reached her pussy, he played and teased, dipping the tip of a finger inside her before pulling back out and circling her entrance.

After a minute, Brenna arched her hips off the bed and growled.

“Lock...”

“I want you desperate.” He wanted her to think of nothing but him, strung out on what he could give her.

He fingered her with the shallow tips of his fingers. As her frustration mounted, her head thrashed, and she slammed her fist on the comforter. “I am desperate. Please! This is torture.”

He didn’t give in, keeping her begging and pleading as he had his fun.

Her face flushed a pretty pink, as did her chest. Those mouth-watering tits with their pointed nipples begged for his mouth, and he delivered, sucking one between his lips. The feel of her nipple against his tongue made his cock twitch.

So he sucked harder and circled his thumb over her clit.

Brenna choked out a sob. “Please, Lock. Please fuck me. Please. I want you. I need you inside me. Please, please, please. Fill me.” Her head whipped back and forth. Her knuckles turned white as she gripped the comforter and mumbled pleas.

There it was—complete desperation. Triumph surged through him.

“You want this cock?” He canted his hips and rubbed his dick against her.

“Yes. More than I’ve ever wanted anything. I’m dying.”

“Dying for a deep, hard fuck?” As he spoke, he pinched her clit between his thumb and forefinger, drawing another sob of desperation from her. His cock leaked precum all over her damn thigh.

“Fuck until I’m boneless.”

“Fuck yes.” He withdrew his hand and slammed into her so fast she shrieked and scrambled to grab for him. The bite of her nails as her fingers found purchase in his sides had him setting a brutal pace.

Lock held one of her legs draped over his arm. He planted his other hand next to her head. The position allowed him to drive into her with fast, powerful thrusts.

She felt fucking out of this world around his cock. Hot as Satan’s lair, tighter than any vise, and so fucking wet. Over and over, he dragged his cock from the punishing clasp of her pussy, only to hammer back in.

The disaster of his life disappeared. Tension bled away. It wasn’t possible to hold onto anything but pleasure and greed for more in this euphoric state. “C’mon, baby,” he said with a growl. “Tell me this is what you wanted.”

“Yes.” She was breathless, damp with sweat, and flushed from head to toe.

So fucking sexy.

He could do this all night.

Every damn night.

He dropped her leg and pulled out of her.

“No!” she shouted, digging her nails deep into his flesh. “What are you —”

He grabbed her hips and flipped her onto her stomach, then yanked her back onto his slick shaft.

“Yes. Don’t take your cock away from me. I need it so bad.”

Damn, this woman was good for his ego. She was just good for him.

He fucked her as hard as he had moments ago. Brenna scrambled to hold herself up on her knees and elbows. She endured his brutal pace until the shaking caused her arms to give out, and she fell to the bed.

Cheek on the mattress, her ass tilted up, looking even better than before, Lock couldn’t resist giving it a hard slap.

Brenna moaned.

“Like that?” He slapped her ass again.

“Y-yes.”

He stared at the red handprint he'd left behind on her perfect, creamy ass. Then he squeezed it, and Brenna moaned again.

"I'm gonna come, Lock. It's too good. You feel too good."

"Give it to me." He reached beneath her and scraped his blunt nail over her clit. It sure as fuck wouldn't be her only one of the night.

Brenna buried her face into the comforter and let out a muffled scream as she clamped down so hard on his cock his knees wobbled. Her fists clenched and unclenched in time with the pulsing of her inner walls.

"Holy shit," she whispered after long seconds of coming. He'd slowed his pace to see her through the climax but never stopped fucking her.

Lock grunted. "We're not done, baby." He worked an arm under her chest and lifted her until her back hit his front. Then he grabbed her throat with one hand and pressed the other thumb to her clit.

"I can't," she whined, sagging in his arms. "Too much."

"You can." He bit her earlobe, and she shuddered.

This position didn't allow him to get as deep and move as fast, but she nearly strangled his cock. With her sated in his arms and still twitching from aftershocks, even as he worked her back up again, he could die a happy man.

Her head fell back on his shoulder as he strummed her clit, held her throat, and rocked into her. "Still too much?" he asked before grazing his teeth over her neck's sensitive skin.

"Yes, but don't you dare stop."

His dark chuckle made her shiver in his arms. Or maybe it was the way he dragged his callused thumb in a light circle over her clit.

He sucked her neck hard enough to leave a mark.

Brenna panted as she absorbed the onslaught of sensations. He came at her from all angles, soaking up every whimper and mewl. She'd demanded he use her, and he was doing just that. If he had his way, she'd never be the same again after tonight.

He sure as hell wouldn't be.

"Please," she moaned.

"Please, what, baby?"

"I don't know."

He knew.

His balls were heavy and full to the point of bursting. No one got him worked up like Brenna did. He tried to stave off the orgasm, but she was too hot, her pussy too tight, and the way she responded was too addicting for him

to hold off any longer.

After a few more thrusts, he snarled like a fucking rabid beast, then roared his release into her neck as the orgasm exploded through him. It stole his breath and destroyed his ability to think. Pulse after pulse of cum flooded into her pussy. The feral side of him wanted it there forever.

Marking her from the inside out for the rest of her days.

He wanted her pregnant with his baby.

A sibling for Caleb, a permanent brand on his woman.

Damn. He'd lost his mind.

“Oh my God,” she cried in a tired voice. “Lock, I’m coming again.”

“Let it happen, baby, I’ve got you,” he whispered in her ear, even as aftershocks still racked his body.

Brenna’s nails dug into his thighs like she was trying to become a part of him.

Little did she know she already was, but she’d attached herself to a much more terrifying part of him—his heart.

“Lock...” Her cry was a half shout, half sob. Once again, she lost herself in pleasure, but this time, her body undulated as though the climax came in waves of ecstasy. As devastating as her first orgasm had been, this one seemed to take everything from her.

She sagged, going completely limp in his arms. With as much care as possible, he lowered her to her stomach on the bed and then came down next to her. She made an adorably disgruntled noise as he slipped out of her.

They needed to clean up. Her especially, but him as well, though he couldn’t make himself move.

Brenna rolled until she faced him. “That was...” She shook her head. “I’ve never... like that. It was so intense it was almost scary.”

Though terrifying might be the correct word, he knew exactly what she meant.

“Thank you,” he said as an unfamiliar wave of powerful emotion washed over him. “You knew what I needed.”

“I meant everything I said. I’ll fight with you, Lock. Caleb belongs with you. We won’t let Oliver win.”

He could think now that she hauled him out of his pit of shock. Of course, they wouldn’t let Oliver win. His club was a force no one wanted to fuck with. Spec alone would destroy the man’s life before anyone stepped in Caleb’s direction.

And with Brenna at his side and in his bed, he wouldn't have to worry about backsliding. He'd come close tonight.

Too close.

"Did I scare you?" he asked as he ran a hand over the curve of her silky hip. He couldn't stop touching her—he didn't want to break the physical connection. She also seemed to feel it, playing her fingers in the ridges of his abs.

"Scare me? No, of course not. I'm not afraid of you."

He watched his hand trail up and over her hip, then back again. "No. I mean what you found in my pocket."

"Oh." She fell silent, mulling the question. "You didn't scare me. I was scared for you. But also, so freakin' proud."

He laughed, but it came out harsh and ugly. "Pretty sure I didn't do anything anyone should be proud of tonight."

"Yes," she said with firm finality. "You did. You didn't use whatever it was in your pocket, Lock. You gave it to me, and I destroyed it. You were stronger than you think. Stronger than the pain inside you. That's something to be proud of."

He let her words sink in. The therapist in rehab had given him a similar speech. Recovery didn't mean perfection. That didn't mean he wouldn't occasionally backslide, have a bad day, or need help. The key, he'd said, was to use the resources around him, including people, to do whatever he needed to avoid using drugs.

And he'd done that.

Thanks to Brenna.

He cupped her tits, stoking his thumbs over her pretty nipples. They perked back up beneath his touch. The way her body responded to his hands was a rush more potent than any drug. "I don't know what I did in a previous life to deserve someone as fucking spectacular as you. I'm not sure I can let you go, Brenna."

Her eyes widened, and she arched into his touch, biting her lower lip on a whimper. "So don't," she whispered. "Keep me as long as you can."

What if I want to keep you forever?

The unspoken question hovered between them, but instead of voicing it, he kissed her. Brenna melted against him. Every time he had her, he wanted her more. Soon, it'd be impossible to deny his feelings.

He'd fallen for this woman in every way.

“You’re mine, Brenna,” he said as he rolled her to her back and settled between her thighs. His cock rallied as soon as it encountered the sticky evidence of their recent sex.

She pressed her hips into him. “Yes, Lock. I’m yours. Show me again. Make me feel it again.”

He kissed her as he slid back inside her welcoming body.

Yes, he’d show her again and again. Whatever it took to make her stay.

Forever, if you’ll have me.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

SUNDAY MORNING, BRENNA found herself seated at a long table in the clubhouse with mountains of food piled from end to end. Once she finally remembered to text Brooke the previous night, she'd been immediately instructed to meet everyone at the clubhouse at eight the following morning for "family breakfast." Well, Brooke had only extended the invitation after chewing Brenna out for leaving her hanging. With all the mind-blowing sex, Brenna had completely forgotten to call her back. *Whoops*. Thankfully, Brooke had a hot man of her own and guessed the exact reason for the delay.

Well, maybe not the exact reason. She hadn't said anything about knowing Lock fucked Brenna in a way she'd only dreamed of, with fierce possession and an almost ferocious need. But she had assumed they'd fallen into bed once Brenna got him home.

"Yo, Bren, pass that bacon this way. I gotta get some protein in me to keep up with my ol' lady, if you know what I mean." Jinx winked at her.

Harper rolled her eyes. "Pretty sure the bacon knows what you mean. You're not exactly subtle."

He smacked a loud kiss on Harper's cheek. "Sorry, baby, can't help it. I need meat to power my meat. You demand a lot of my body."

"Oh my God," Harper muttered as she turned bright pink. "You're such an animal."

Jinx snarled. "Damn straight." Then he barked a few times before playfully attacking Harper's neck. His woman squealed and pretended to swat him away but didn't protest the deep and not-for-public kiss he laid on her.

"You're both fucking animals. Knock that shit off," Spec shouted. "Jinx, you look like you're trying to eat her goddamn face."

A biscuit flew across the table and hit Jinx smack in the side of the head.

"Hey!" He stopped kissing Harper to flip Spec off.

Everyone laughed, even Lock, which had to be a good sign, right? It was the first time since they'd woken up hours ago that his mouth did something besides scowl. He hadn't taken a bite of food, though he did down three cups of coffee. If he had any more caffeine on an empty stomach, he might levitate off his chair.

She squeezed his hand, and he turned her way. "Thank you," he mouthed. The moment they got out of his car, he'd threaded his fingers through hers and hadn't let go once. She'd be a lying fool if she said she didn't love how he reached for her in times of crisis.

Next to him, Caleb sat in a highchair, munching on small pieces of biscuit and strawberry without a care in the world. Sometimes, it'd be nice to be oblivious to the chaos.

"Okay, guys, here's the last of it." Brooke trailed Curly out of the kitchen, toting a few syrup bottles. The prez carried an enormous platter piled high with thick pancakes. Brenna's mouth watered at both the sight and smell. This group certainly knew good food.

Curly set the platter down in the center of the table. "Eat up, fam."

The next ten minutes were full of loud chatter, arguing, and laughter as everyone loaded their plates with food from the delicious spread. Had Brenna known Brooke was planning this elaborate breakfast when they'd talked, she would have offered to help. As it was, she'd been clueless and pleasantly surprised.

A loud whistle sliced through the air after everyone had filled plates and refilled coffee mugs. The shrill noise cut through the boisterous crowd and garnered everyone's attention immediately.

Curly smiled at the group. "Thanks to all of you for being here on such short notice. I know Brooke invited—"

"Ordered," Jinx called.

Curly smirked. "Ordered you to family breakfast this morning, but it's not just to eat. There's been a complication, and we need all hands on deck."

The playful mood evaporated in an instant. The sudden transformation from busting each other's balls to dead silence and rapt attention had Brenna's jaw dropping. This group was fun, but they knew when the occasion called for serious focus.

"What happened, Prez?" Ty asked. It probably wasn't often the prez called a meeting without informing his VP of the reason.

Curly tilted his head and shifted his attention to Lock as though asking if

he wanted to be the one to reveal the news. Lock nodded once, then tightened his hold on her hand.

“I was served legal papers last night. Oliver has petitioned the courts to remove Caleb from my custody due to my former drug use and affiliation with the club.”

All hell broke loose as soon as the words left his mouth. Jinx shouted a vile string of curses as Spec threatened Oliver’s life in no less than seven gruesome ways.

Even Ty, who sat to Brenna’s left, cracked his knuckles and added a loud slew of threats to the mix.

Curly whistled again, but this time, the response was slower. It took a solid few minutes for everyone to settle.

Brenna watched Lock, who blinked and swallowed, seeming to be dealing with a barrage of emotions. For some reason, he had the ridiculous notion he hadn’t earned love and loyalty from his club due to his past mistakes.

Aside from helping him retain custody of Caleb, her mission from then forward would be to make Lock see how much he deserved the love of his club family.

He cleared his throat. “Um, I spoke with the club’s lawyer last night, who said Oliver actually has a good chance of success with this lawsuit.”

“So we kill him,” Spec said as though it was the simplest solution.

Brenna gawked at him. She’d never been around someone who threatened violence and wouldn’t lose a wink of sleep carrying out that threat.

“Seriously?” Liv rolled her eyes as she backhanded her man’s chest. “You don’t think your club is the first place the cops will look if that jackass turns up dead?”

Spec scoffed with mock indignation. “Babe, I’m hurt. It’s like you don’t know me at all. I can make it look like an accident.”

“Oh yeah.” Tracker snorted. “You’re about as subtle as a neon billboard.”

“Hey! That’s rude.” Spec threw another biscuit.

Beside him, Liv shook her head and shrugged. “I tried.”

The way none of them balked at the idea of killing a man, only the intelligence of killing Oliver at this specific time, left Brenna’s head spinning. With as much time as she’d spent around Lock and his club family, this was a stark reminder of how new she was to their occasionally violent world.

What she didn't admit out loud and never would was how she fully supported Spec's idea. Oliver had gone from a thorn in her side to a significant threat to Lock's future. His death wouldn't cause her any tears.

"It wouldn't matter anyway," Curly said, speaking over the chaos. "The lawsuit was filed in the name of Oliver's law firm. His partners would carry on with or without Oliver."

Spec shrugged. "So we kill them too."

"Oh Lord," Liv muttered, smacking a palm to her forehead.

"Let's save that for Plan B," Curly said before sipping his coffee. "Any other ideas for a Plan A?"

Ty scratched his chin as he leaned forward. "Way I see it, we either need to discredit the judge once it goes to trial or fuck with Oliver's law firm. Do we have a way to bankrupt them or reveal a scandal that'll put their rulings in question?"

"That's a good idea," Jinx said as he pointed to Ty. "What did Ollie-boy borrow money from us for? Wasn't it a gambling debt?"

Spec nodded.

"Can we leak that? Would it be enough to shift the pressure to him?" Jinx asked.

"I don't know," Tracker piped in. "I think he'd have thought of that. I bet Ollie has a contingency plan for that."

"Hmm, you might be right." Jinx nodded. "God, I hate this fucker."

Brenna's gaze ping-ponged around the table as everyone shared plausible and absurd ideas. Lock mostly stayed quiet, taking it all in, but he held her hand the entire time.

The idea of these men and women putting themselves on the line or even in danger terrified her. Of course, they'd do anything to help Lock and Caleb, and so would she, but what if there were an easier, safer way?

"What if I tried talking to him first?"

"Fuck no!" Lock whipped his head in her direction, gaping at her as though she'd sprouted wings from her forehead. "Are you out of your mind?"

She placed a hand on his chest. "Just listen before you freak out."

"Too late," Jinx muttered with a smirk, which earned him a finger from Lock.

"Hear me out, please?"

LOCK GESTURED FOR her to continue even though he'd have preferred to

drag her out of the clubhouse and back to his home, where he'd tie her to the bed so she couldn't do something stupid like confront Oliver. Over his dead body would she be within a hundred yards of that psychotic douche.

"Maybe I could scare him." She faced him, speaking as though the rest of the room didn't exist. "I can go to him under the guise of being worried for him. Then I can let it slip that you are planning something that'll destroy his business or his life. All we need is for him to believe and withdraw the lawsuit, right?" She glanced around, looking for someone to agree with her.

"It could work," Spec said, though he sounded skeptical.

Lock tried to castrate him with his gaze, earning a chuckle.

Spec lifted his hands in surrender. "I'm not saying she should do it. There's no way I'd let Liv do that shit. I'm just saying it could work."

"Let me. Listen to you." Liv snorted with a shake of her head. "Keep dreaming, buddy."

Lock cupped Brenna's face between his hands. He refused to allow her pleading gaze to sway him. "Spec's right. It could work, but please don't do it. Our way will work too."

"But it's so risky. What if you guys get in trouble?"

"We won't. As a club, we know what we're doing. Oliver has already proven he's not above hurting you, which means I don't trust him within a mile of your beautiful face."

She opened her mouth to speak, but he placed a finger over her lips.

"Yes, I know he didn't physically hurt you, but he had no problem allowing you to be hurt. He set you up for it. Please, don't go near him." There'd be no climbing out of the deep hole he'd fall into if something happened to her.

"I need to do something," she whispered. "The idea of you suffering makes me want to crawl out of my skin. He can't take Caleb from you."

"He won't. Like you told me last night, we'll fight with everything we have. Caleb isn't going anywhere. Say it." In the light of day, the tables turned, and he'd taken on the role of bolstering her up. It felt good to be strong, confident, and the one reassuring Brenna. This was how it should be—functioning as one and stepping up for each other when necessary.

"Caleb isn't going anywhere," she repeated, tears glistening.

"And, baby, you are doing something. You're holding me together. You're the only reason I haven't lost my shit, and that's fucking everything. Okay?"

One of those tears escaped, rolling down her cheek. It hit his thumb, and he brushed it aside.

“Okay,” she said with a sad smile.

He kissed her, and when he would have pulled back, she clung to him for a minute longer as though the thought of breaking the connection was unfathomable.

When they finally separated, a powerful realization struck him in the gut with the force of a championship boxer.

He loved her.

I love her.

Holy shit, he fucking loved her.

As soon as this disaster with Oliver concluded, he'd tell her and hope to fucking God she felt the same or could one day return the sentiment because he was never letting her go.

“Okay, I get it now, Spec.” He made a barfing noise. “If you two are done making the rest of us vomit, do you think we could brainstorm some ways to turn Ollie-boy’s life upside down?” Jinx asked as he laughed.

“Jinx!” Harper elbowed him. “Leave them alone. They’re cute.”

Brenna cleared her throat and then swiped a thumb across her bottom lip. Her face turned a light crimson as though she'd forgotten they had an audience. Lock winked, making her smile. They linked hands again, and then he faced the group with a renewed fire in his belly.

Oliver wasn't getting anywhere near the two people he loved most.

“Let's think fast,” he instructed his family. “I'm sick of this fucker. Time to get rid of him for good.”

The hollers of approval and support had him grinning despite the serious topic. Caleb giggled and slapped his hands on his tray, making everyone laugh. Brenna leaned her head on his shoulder, still holding his hand.

For the first time since his twin sister died, Lock understood and felt what he'd been told a thousand times deep in his soul. He wasn't alone, and he didn't have to go through life on his own. He had a loyal family to prop him up when his strength failed, as he'd do for them.

And now he had the perfect woman at his side.

CHAPTER TWENTTY

BRENNA CHEWED HER thumbnail as she stared at the massive building from the back corner of the parking lot.

Lock was going to kill her. Hands down, no questions about it, she'd be a dead woman when he found out she'd gone behind everyone's back to confront Oliver. But she *had* to. If there was even the slightest chance she could get him to drop the lawsuit without the club putting themselves at risk, she needed to take that chance.

Since the court papers arrived and she'd seen Lock's severe reaction, guilt had been a constant companion, sitting on her shoulders and wreaking havoc on her psyche. If she hadn't antagonized Oliver a few weeks ago, maybe he wouldn't have responded with such a devastating blow.

Which was how she found herself sitting outside a swanky, members-only club. One her ex-fiancé never took her to, but where he attended a hush-hush monthly high-stakes poker night with the who's who of Tampa. Now that she knew he had a mountain of gambling debt, she assumed this venture was the source of the financial woes that drove him to borrow money from the Handlers. He'd always led her to believe he kicked ass and made bank at poker night.

What a liar.

A few months ago, she'd heard Oliver whispering to someone on the phone. At first, she'd assumed he was cheating on her—again—which drove her to press her ear to the closed bathroom door and spy on the conversation. Turns out he'd been discussing the stupid poker game. At the time, she'd rolled her eyes and left him to his conversation, but she'd found out where the games took place.

Stray was a high-end nightclub on the outskirts of Tampa. If the busy parking lot was any indication, the place drew quite a crowd. They probably served a packed house of snooty Oliver-types every night. She rolled her

eyes. Not her vibe. Thank God Oliver hadn't thought her classy enough to join him here.

The club didn't appeal to her in the least. A loud laugh bubbled out of her. Could this place be any more different than the Handlers' clubhouse?

She planned to wait until Oliver left and confront him. It was not the smartest idea she'd ever had, but not the worst either, though she had a feeling Lock—who was busy with club duties tonight—would disagree. Hopefully, he'd be comforted that she carried pepper spray in her pocket and had no qualms about using it.

She sighed, glancing at the clock for the third time since she'd parked. The minutes passed with painful slowness. The anticipation of a miserable conversation only made the time drag on.

After three hours of sitting on her ass and singing random songs to stay awake, Brenna decided she'd had enough. Maybe the poker game had been canceled, or Oliver hadn't attended. It was a few minutes past midnight, and typically, Oliver had returned from his game around eleven.

A rush of disappointment and failure plagued her as she put her car in drive. No point in wasting any more time tonight. Just as she took her foot off the brake, a side door opened, and a man walked out.

He stood too far away to make out all his features, but the uptick in her pulse told her the newcomer was Oliver.

Finally.

Brenna shoved the car back into park and threw open the door. She jogged across the parking lot toward Oliver. If she could catch him while he was still on the side of the building, they'd make less of a scene for anyone entering or leaving the club.

Music from the club thumped along with the pumping of blood in her veins. It only took a few seconds to sprint over to Oliver, who focused on the ground as he walked.

"Hey!" she called as she slowed her approach.

Oliver's head whipped up, and his eyes widened at the sight of her. He glanced left, right, then over his shoulder.

"We need to talk," she said as she marched the rest of the way to him. "Hey, what the hell are you doing?"

He grabbed her upper arm and spun her toward the building. Her back hit the cinderblock wall with a rough thump. "What the fuck are you doing here?" he whisper-yelled in her face.

“Ow.” She struggled against him. “Get your hands off me.”

He grabbed her other arm and shook her so hard her head hit the wall with a painful smack.

“Dammit, Oliver—”

He shook her again, getting right up in her face this time. “You need to leave right fucking now, Brenna.” Never had she heard that tone from him. Part fury—that part she recognized—and part abject terror.

“Hell, no.” She continued to struggle against his firm hold. “I’m not leaving until—”

“Brenna, listen to me,” he almost shouted, shaking her again.

Her neck flopped like a ragdoll’s. “Seriously, fucking stop it!”

“Brenna. Shut the fuck up and listen.” He lined his face with hers. “Leave. Now. Go home. Don’t be stupid.” Spit hit her face as he spoke so fast his words almost slurred.

“Get your hands off me.” She seethed. Fuck him for overpowering her so easily. Tomorrow, she’d start those damn self-defense lessons, but at least she had one weapon at her disposal.

The second he slackened his grip, she jammed a hand in her pocket and yanked out the pepper spray. She aimed it at his face the way she’d practiced in the mirror earlier and pressed the nozzle, shooting fiery liquid at Oliver’s face.

“Oh, fuck,” he screamed, immediately coughing. Back spray hit her face, inflaming her airway and stinging the hell out of her eyes. Oliver released her, clawing at her face.

The door opened, and a huge, bald man with deeply tanned skin stepped out. “Need help with that one, man?”

Oliver doubled over and shouted, “She fucking pepper sprayed me. Grab her, Bolt!” A coughing fit stole anything else he might have ordered.

“What the fuck?” The big guy sprinted in her direction.

Blistering tears rolled from her scorched eyes, but Brenna turned and ran for all she was worth. Her lungs burned. Every breath felt like knives in her airway. She didn’t make it ten steps before she could feel the giant right behind her.

Run faster.

She pumped her arms and legs, cursing the days she’d skipped her workouts.

Three steps later, the giant seized her arm and started to haul her toward

the building. “Hey! Get your freakin’ hands off me.”

What was with men grabbing her tonight? And there was no way in hell she’d be going anywhere with this behemoth.

“Look,” she said, wrenching her arm back and forth, trying to break free. Her eyes still poured with tears, but the hot sensation was lessening. Oliver didn’t seem to fare as well since he’d gotten a straight shot to the face. He stood, bent and cradling his face as he shouted curses her way.

“Let me go. This is between Oliver and me. Just go back inside. Trust me when I tell you that you don’t want to be involved here.”

The colossal man laughed. Through her blurry eyes, she made out a large spiderweb tattoo on his scalp above his left ear. Didn’t that mean he’d killed someone in prison or something? Where had she heard that?

Either way, it sent a chill down her spine, as did his amused laugh.

“L-let me go,” she said with less force as fear began to steal her voice.

He laughed again, and the fear morphed into fury.

Fuck this. She kicked out hard, nailing him right in the sensitive ankle bone. The guy cursed and dropped her arm. Brenna wasted no time sticking around. She turned and ran for all she was worth, only to collide with Oliver ten steps in.

“Shoulda listened,” he said, shaking his head. He turned her to face the man she’d kicked.

The guy was furious. Red-faced and sweating, he stormed toward her.

“Look, I won’t say anything about your poker game,” she spoke fast. “I don’t even know anything. Just let me leave, and you’ll never see me again.” He might get a visit from Lock and Spec, but he didn’t need to know that.

“Shut your fucking mouth,” he said with a growl. He wound up and slapped her across the face so fast she never saw it coming.

Fiery pain engulfed her cheek as her head whipped to the side with so much force her neck spasmed. Brenna cried out and cradled her face. She barely had time to process the strike before being lifted into the air and tossed over a broad shoulder. The world flip-flopped. She could barely make sense of it or think of anything beyond how much her face hurt. The man was strong as hell and had used much of his power to hit her. Something wet ran over her forehead and down her cheek before dripping to the ground.

She pressed a hand to her mouth.

Blood. Her lip must have split when he slapped her.

The fog began to clear, and Brenna realized she was in trouble. She

screamed for him to release her. With all her might, she pounded his back and kicked her legs wildly, but it did no good. He carried her into the building and down a dark hallway, ignoring her screams the entire time.

Her voice cracked, and her throat ached, but she didn't stop shouting for anyone to help her.

Blood rushed to her head, making it hard to focus on her surroundings. Toes passed through her limited field of vision, so she knew other people were around, but no one seemed to care about the upside-down woman hollering her head off.

She reached out, trying to grasp onto someone or something that could help, but she only managed to scrape her knuckles bloody on the wall.

The terrain changed. It took a moment for her muddled brain to realize they were walking down a long, dark staircase. With each step, the world grew gloomier and more rustic. Where the hell were they going? A goddamn cave?

After only a few steps, Brenna couldn't see anything. She stopped thrashing and breathed, trying to conserve energy and let her vision adjust. Struggling proved useless, so she needed to be smart and think of a different strategy. Save the fight for when it had a chance of success.

The brute, Bolt, Oliver had called him, stopped walking.

Brenna held her breath as the sound of jangling keys broke the silence. Her captor stepped through a door and tossed her on the floor. She hit it hard, crying out as her bones crunched and bruises formed. Pain shot through her hip and back, but she scrambled as far into the space as she could. When she hit a wall, she plastered herself to it and prepared to fight if necessary. Everything hurt, but she forced herself to concentrate on her surroundings, not her battered body.

Bolt shook his head, laughing. "You're gonna be a fun one to break," he said in the most ominous threat possible. Her insides quivered, and her stomach roiled from fear and dangling upside down for so long.

The door slammed shut with the distinct click of a deadbolt ringing louder than a gunshot.

Brenna's breath came so fast she had to be hyperventilating, yet she couldn't control it. Fear clawed at her like an undead creature trying to pull her down to hell.

Lock wouldn't get the chance to kill her for going behind his back. She had a terrifying feeling someone might take care of that for him.

Only they'd do it for real.

Her fingers and toes began to tingle. The sensation spread along her arms and legs. Her rapid breaths became strained and wheezy. Tears streaked down her cheeks, and she gagged, choking on air.

"Shh. Hey, breathe with me." The soft woman's voice made her jump and scoot along the wall away from the speaker.

"W-who's there?"

Movement from the opposite corner of the small, dark room had her straining to see. A woman crawled into view and sat directly under the dim lightbulb hanging from the rocky ceiling. She didn't attempt to stand but stayed low on the ground at Brenna's eye level.

"We'll get to that. Just concentrate on slowing your breathing."

She did, following the young woman's drawn-out inhaled and exhaled. After a few moments, the pins and needles subsided, and she began to breathe at a normal rate. "T-thank you."

"My name's Kelsie."

"I'm Brenna. Um..." Brenna shook her head. It felt like her brain cells wouldn't line up to function properly, and she needed to jostle them back into place. "I'm sorry, it's hard to think right now."

"Did they drug you?"

She frowned. "No. No, I don't think so. I'm just overwhelmed and terrified." She didn't recall a prick to her skin as she'd been hauled there like a sack of flour, and she certainly hadn't had anything to eat or drink. "You?"

The woman nodded. "Yeah. The last thing I remember was meeting a date at Stray. He ordered me a drink from the bar, and I woke up here."

"A date?" Bile rose in her throat until she had to press a hand to her lips to keep from hurling.

"Yeah. This guy I met at the gym." Kelsie's huff of laughter held a sad bitterness. "He seemed so sweet and just... normal," she whispered as her voice broke.

"W-what was his name?"

Please don't say it. Please don't say it.

"Oliver."

"Oh God." Brenna drew up her knees and buried her face against them. Hot tears flowed from her eyes. The club had mentioned something about human trafficking, but she'd brushed it off, assuming Oliver could never be involved in something so heinous. "He's my ex-fiancé and the reason I'm

here too.”

Kelsie stayed quiet. What could she say? Words wouldn't make this any better.

“How long have you been here?” she eventually choked out.

“Uh...” Kelsie picked at a hole in her ratty sweatpants. “It's a little hard to tell. It's always dark in here. Somewhere around a week, I think.”

“A week?” Brenna gawked at her in utter horror. Seven whole days. What the hell?

Kelsie shrugged.

Now that a few minutes had passed, Brenna's eyes adjusted to the low lighting. She glanced around their small space, but there was nothing to see. The walls and ceiling were made of rock, giving the impression they were in some underground cave. A bucket sat in one corner of the primitive room. She guessed what it was for but didn't want to think about it too closely. No cot, no pillow, no blanket, no nothing. Just a barren room with a solemn cellmate.

She took a moment to study her companion and immediately wished she hadn't. Kelsie's blue eyes were bleak, almost desolate. Her light hair seemed cleanish, as though she'd been able to wash it a time or two in the week she'd been there, but that didn't make sense considering their meager accommodations.

The younger woman wore a matching olive-green sweatshirt and sweatpants, her only barrier against the damp chill of the underground prison.

What had Brenna's stomach turning was the deep purple bruise on Kelsie's cheek, her swollen lower lip, and the blatant finger marks on her neck. The way she sat, curling herself into as small a ball as possible, also set off the worst kind of alarm bells. Someone had hurt her recently, and Brenna had a sickening feeling she knew what kind of torture Kelsie had endured. If this were indeed a human trafficking situation, the poor woman would have profound trauma to recover from. Was this whole club a front for moving kidnapped women in and out of Florida? Would they be moved out of Florida?

How stupid could she have been to confront Oliver on her own?

No one knew where she'd gone tonight. She hadn't told a single soul she'd decided to meet Oliver herself like an absolute idiot. She'd known Lock wouldn't allow it, and now she understood why. Now, she'd pay for her foolish naivety. But what would they do to her? Would she be sold off to

serve at the will and pleasure of some rich psychopath? Or was her mind spiraling out of control? She was terrified to ask questions but had to know before she drove herself mad with worry.

Her chest tightened again as she looked into Kelsie's bleak eyes. "Kelsie, where are we? What is this place?" she whispered.

If it was possible, Kelsie's face grew even more grim.

"Hell, Brenna. We're in Hell."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

NO ONE HAD seen or heard from Brenna in seventeen hours, and Lock was out of his fucking mind with terror. He'd imagined every scenario, from her leaving him of her own free will to some sociopath snatching her off the street to reenact scenes from *Saw*.

He grabbed a glass off the bar and whipped it across the clubhouse with the speed of a bullet. It hit a wall, shattering in an eruption of sharp shards. He'd like to gather those shards and carve them into Oliver's skin because that motherfucker had something to do with this.

Lock knew this with every fiber of his being.

Oliver hadn't shown up for work, nor had he been at his house all day.

Coincidence?

I think fucking not.

He braced his hands on the bar and bowed his head as he fought to rein in his fury.

"Prospect!" Jinx shouted. "Clean that mess up." He turned toward Lock. "Third one in twenty minutes, brother. Might wanna give the guy a break."

Lock speared him with a lethal look that had him lifting his hands.

Jinx snorted. "Sorry. I'll keep my mouth shut."

"I'm losing my mind, Jinx," he said. It felt as though a thousand fire ants marched across his skin, ripping and tearing at his flesh, and that was a fraction of the internal pain Brenna's disappearance caused. The racing thoughts wouldn't quiet. Had she crashed her car? Was she lying on the road, bleeding and wishing someone would stop to help? Did a fucking alien ship land in her yard and ship her off to another planet?

Had fucking Oliver messed with her?

Bingo.

"I know. Here." Jinx slid a tumbler his way. "Drink it... don't throw it."

"I can't." Even if he hadn't been steering clear of alcohol, he needed a

clear mind to think. He needed to feel the pain and let it fuel him.

“It’s water. You haven’t had anything to eat or drink since we realized Bren was missing. Fucking drink it before you pass out. Or murder someone.”

“If we find Oliver, you better let me kill him.”

Jinx grunted. “Oh, I’ll hold him down as you tear out his heart, brother.”

Nodding, Lock lifted the glass to his lips. He chugged the icy water. It tasted delicious and felt even better. He must have been more parched than he’d realized.

He set the glass down and then watched a drip of condensation slide from the rim to the small puddle forming around the tumbler’s base. His insides were a tumultuous storm of pain, fear, and anxiety. Christ, he hated the waiting. The club was doing everything in its power to locate Brenna or Oliver, or fucking anyone who could toss them a morsel of information. So far, they’d come up empty. Hence, the feral beast inside him was fighting to be let free.

This was the reason he’d turned to drugs after Deanna’s death. He couldn’t stand the emotions running through him. It felt as though he was literally going out of his mind with worry and grief. If they didn’t hear something soon, he might ask Jinx to tie him to a fucking chair so he didn’t run to his dealer and beg for numbness. Floating on a cloud of fuzzy sensations beat this shit any day.

But the aftermath would bring a new shitstorm of trouble.

“Hey,” Jinx said, concern thick in his voice. “You gonna be able to hold your shit together?”

Lock shook his head. “I don’t think so. I’m hanging on by the thinnest fucking thread, and it’s fraying fast.”

Nodding, Jinx glanced at Curly’s office and then back to Lock. “Hasn’t snapped yet?”

“No. But it’s damn close.”

“She’ll need you,” Jinx said with a frown, reaching for his glass of whiskey. He set it down, then shoved it out of reach as though realizing it might not be a wise choice with Lock so damn fragile. “We don’t know what the fuck is going on with her, but there’s a good chance she’ll need you when we find her. You won’t be able to do shit for her if you’re blitzed.”

Yep. “It’s the only thing keeping me sober.”

“Good. Hold on to that.” Jinx reached across the bar and slapped his

shoulder. “Cling to it. All you need is one reason to stay away from that shit, and being there for your woman seems like a damn good reason to me.”

Lock nodded. He couldn't speak, only fight the ramping need for oblivion.

“But if you decide you need to check out, I'm sure Pulse or Ty would be happy to take over when we find her.”

What the fuck? Lock narrowed his eyes.

“Pretty sure I caught Pulse staring at her tits the other day. And you know Ty. He's a big fan of brown-haired beauties.” He clapped Lock on the shoulder again, then strode away from the bar, calling, “I'll get an update from Curly.”

Lock stared at his retreating form, his blood boiling for an entirely different reason. Did Pulse want Brenna? Did Ty? Brother or not, he'd end any man who tried to comfort her when it was his job.

He watched Jinx's retreating form with a scowl. Just as the big guy reached Curly's office, he turned and winked.

Lock scoffed.

That motherfucker.

Jinx knew precisely what he was saying and that it would be the jolt Lock needed to screw his head straight.

Shaking his head, Lock raised both middle fingers at the lug.

Jinx's laughter rang out as he disappeared into Curly's office.

Though he'd never admit it to the chronic prankster, he'd given Lock the reality check he needed to pull his head out of his ass. No matter how bad the cravings got, no matter how much he'd rather anesthetize his mind with drugs than suffer, he wouldn't cave. He'd hold strong for his woman.

When they found Brenna, he would be ready and present to give her whatever she needed. Whether that be as simple as a hug or a shoulder to cry on, as satisfying as murdering whoever fucked with her, or as heartbreaking as holding her as she processed a more profound trauma, he'd be the one there for her. Something he wouldn't be able to do if he indulged in his mind-numbing agent of choice.

He wouldn't let Brenna down, no matter how bad things got or what went on in his head and body.

He'd kill any man who tried to take her.

She was his, and he fucking loved her.

EVERYTHING ACHED.

Her back, her legs, her face, her heart.

Sitting on a concrete floor for what had to be more than a dozen hours sucked. But Brenna would do it a million times over if it could be done without fearing what was to come.

“Tell me again,” she said to Kelsie.

They sat side by side, backs against the impossibly uncomfortable wall. A rock jutted out, gouging into the left side of her back where it'd been for the past few hours, but she hadn't bothered to move. No position ended the discomfort, so she endured the misery. The pain kept her alert and thinking.

Kelsie sighed. “Why?”

“I want to be ready. I want to know exactly what to expect so I can be prepared. Maybe I'll be able to use what you tell me to find a way out, or to get help, or, I don't know, do *something*.”

“I don't think there is anything to be done. They have their system down to a science. It's hopeless.”

The sadness in Kelsie's voice had alarm bells ringing in Brenna's ears. “No,” she said, moving for the first time in hours. She crawled in front of Kelsie and gripped her shoulders. Now that they'd talked for most of the day, her youth was apparent and even more heartbreaking. “We're not saying that word. We're together, we're alive, and we're able to fight. The H word is not allowed, okay?”

“You'll see,” Kelsie said with a defeated shrug that sent a dagger into Brenna's heart.

“How old are you?”

“Twenty-two.” She snorted. “I'm not a young, stupid kid if that's what you think. I've seen and done shit. I had to grow up young. Always thought I was tough, but this...”

Twenty-two. Jesus.

“Listen to me, Kelsie. Look at me.” The young woman's gaze met Brenna's. “I want you to do something for me, okay?”

She nodded.

“Don't give up yet. I know you've been here longer and have been through unspeakable things.” She swallowed and tried to push the fear of those very things out of her mind. They'd take over if she let them in, and she'd be as dejected as Kelsie. At the very least, one of them needed to keep their spirits up somewhat. “But I need you to stay positive with me for a little

bit, okay? I won't lie to you. If I truly think it's hopeless, I'll tell you. But I'm not there yet, so please, give me some time, okay?"

As Kelsie stared at her, Brenna could see the doubt weighing on her and the tiny spark of hope. She wanted to cling to the idea of rescue or escape, but the fear of such a devastating disappointment had an unbreakable grip on her.

"Have you heard of the Hell's Handlers?" She asked in a low whisper. If there was a camera or listening device somewhere in the room, she didn't want to give anyone a heads-up of what lay in store. And she knew the Handlers were coming and would rain hell down on these bastards.

Kelsie gasped. "I have. Are they part of this?"

"No!" Brenna shook her head. "Not just no, but hell fucking no. They will burn this place to the ground when they discover what's happening. Trust me when I say retribution will be epic."

"But how..."

"I'm..." What was she? Dating? Seeing? Fucking? "... in love with one of them. He will tear the world apart until he finds me. And the entire club will back him. I believe that with my whole heart."

"Holy shit," Kelsie whispered on a breath. "They're so badass."

Despite their grim circumstances, Brenna chuckled. "That they are. So don't give up yet, okay? They're coming, and I will not leave here without you. I promise."

"O-okay," Kelsie said, nodding. The information seemed to breathe life into her. She straightened and scrubbed a hand over her face. "They've come for me twice since I've been here. It's hard to know when or how much time between, but I think it was night both times."

"Okay, keep going." She scooted back to her spot on the wall next to Kelsie, taking her hand to provide at least a modicum of support.

"Um, we made a left out of here and walked down a long, dark hallway. We passed some other doors like ours, so maybe we aren't the only ones here." She shrugged. "I don't know. Um, they led me to a shower." She chuckled, but it was sad and heavy. "I was excited at first. You get dirty after a few days on this floor and using that damn bucket."

"So you showered, and then what?" She didn't want to rush the younger woman, but Brenna had no idea when they'd come for *her* and wanted to be as prepared as possible.

"Um, they made me dry my hair, put on makeup and a dress. All the stuff

was there for me to use. No one watched me, but this huge guy stood outside the door and made it clear I was supposed to move fast. I was so scared, I did exactly what he said.”

“What did they have you wear?”

Kelsie’s face screwed up. “Not much... lingerie basically. This frilly pink thing. I threw up when I saw it. That’s when I knew what was happening, or at least that it would be bad. Really bad.”

Brenna closed her eyes and swallowed. “W-what happened next?” The fear stayed ever-present, but she focused on Kelsie to keep it from eating her alive from the inside out.

“We went upstairs. I think we were somewhere in the club. In Stray, I mean. A private area or something. I was by myself, but I don’t think I was the only one, um, for sale. I don’t know.” She shrugged. “Anyway, there was a big mirror. I think the men were behind it, staring at me. I felt so exposed. I tried to cover myself, but the big guard smacked me.”

Wincing, Brenna lifted a hand to her cheek. “I know firsthand how that feels.”

“Yeah. Someone spoke through overhead speakers, and then men started bidding on me. I burst into tears and got another hit from the guard. That one made me fall, which seemed to... excite a lot of the men. The bidding went crazy.”

“Shit.” She’d left that part out of the story the first time she’d told it. “I’m sorry, Kelsie.”

“Eventually, someone won. Me. They won me.” Her voice had become robotic, monotone, as though she was reading from a bland script instead of recalling a horrifying experience. “The guard dragged me to a room. I kicked and screamed the whole way, but he was strong. Really strong.”

Yes. Bolt had carried Brenna as though she weighed no more than a stuffed animal.

“The man...” She shook her head. “The monster who won me was in there. The guard left me with him, locking the door from the outside. Next —” Her voice cracked, and tears fell from her eyes. She pressed a hand to her lips and shook her head, rocking back and forth. “I can’t. No more.”

“Shh.” Brenna wrapped her arms around Kelsie. “You don’t have to.” She swayed with her as Kelsie’s tears turned to gut-wrenching sobs.

“Don’t fight, Brenna. You’ll want to fight when they take you but don’t. It makes it so much worse.”

The warning sent tendrils of icy fear crawling down her spine. “Y-you’re going to be okay. Maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow, but you will be okay. I will make sure of it.”

The words were meant to reassure herself as much as Kelsie, but poised to suffer the same fate as the hysterical young woman, Brenna felt the first chink of doubt in her armor.

Would anything be the same again?

Would she be able to sit on the beach and enjoy the warm sun on her skin?

Would the taste of chocolate make her close her eyes and smile in delight?

Would she crave the touch of the man she loved?

Or would the bastards take that all from her?

As she cradled Kelsie in her arms, she closed her eyes. The rocks digging into her ass no longer registered, neither did the clammy chill of the room. All she could think about was the violation waiting for her.

She tried to push away the terror and allow visions of her new friends to dance behind her eyelids. Of little Caleb and his four-toothed baby grin. Of Lock, the man she loved but never had the chance to tell. The smile he wore when looking at her. The way he touched her without seeming to give it thought, even in his sleep. How he gave her pleasure she’d only dreamed of.

That’s where her mind needed to stay. Those were the thoughts she’d rely on to keep her sane when this nightmare dragged her deeper.

There wasn’t a doubt in her mind that Lock and the Handlers were searching for her and would find her. No matter what horrors awaited, she’d survive to get back to Lock and his adorable son.

She just hoped she wasn’t broken when she made it home.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

TWENTY HOURS AND counting.

And they had nothing.

Not one goddamn thing.

Copper, the president of the club's mother chapter in Tennessee, had a connection with a guy named Acer who could make computers sing, dance, and blow him on command. He'd done some magic to triangulate Brenna's phone. For a solid half hour, Lock had been convinced they'd found her. The whole damn club raced to the coordinates Acer provided, only to find the phone sitting on a soup display in a grocery store. Whoever took her was smart enough to lead them astray.

"God fucking dammit!" Lock shouted. Even standing in a huge grocery store, he felt the walls closing in. He struck out, catching the artful display with his foot as he cursed again—cans scattered in all directions, denting as they rolled across the floor.

A woman yelped, and customers cowered in fear as they watched a furious biker lose his damn mind.

"Get him the fuck outta here," Spec ordered as he gave Lock a shove in Jinx's direction.

"Sorry," he mumbled, allowing Jinx to herd him outside. But he wasn't remorseful. He didn't give one single shit about the store or the cans or whatever Spec had to do to smooth things over. "I lost my shit."

"Ain't a thing," Jinx said with a shrug. "Pretty sure I caused worse chaos purely for fun when I was a teenager."

Lock grunted. Usually, he'd have a quip about being called a teenager, but he didn't have the energy to think of anything but Brenna.

Where was she?

Was she hurt? Cold? Scared?

Was she thinking of him?

He climbed into Jinx's truck and slammed the passenger door. No one had been willing to let him ride alone, so they'd force him into a cage with a babysitter.

"Fuck," he said as Jinx slid behind the wheel. "Fuck, fuck, *fuck*," he screamed the last one long and loud, slamming the heel of his hand on the dash repeatedly. "Christ, Jinx, what do I do if we find her and she's—"

"Don't say it. Chrissake, man, don't even think it. It's not going to happen."

Blowing out a breath, he nodded. "You're right. Okay. What the fuck do we do now?"

"We push on. Search for the next lead and jump on it. And the one after that, if we have to, until we find her and bring her home to you."

"Yeah. Thanks, brother. Keep doing that, okay?" Lock asked as he stared at the passing scenery. Sunset was coming. Soon, it'd be dark. Maybe Oliver would finally come out of hiding, feeling safe in the cover of night.

They'd grab the fucker then.

"Keep doing what?" Jinx turned onto the long dirt road leading to the clubhouse.

"Pushing me back on the path when I stray."

"Of fucking course, brother. Why the hell do you think I'm here? Not that you need me. You've been to rehab. You've been rocking sobriety. You got the tools."

He snorted, turning to Jinx. "Yeah, well, I bought a nice bump of heroin the night I got the court papers."

Jinx didn't react with the shock or disgust Lock had expected. "You use it?"

"No. Gave it to Bren. She flushed it."

"Well then, I would call that a win, not the failure you seem to be looking at it as. You had a shitty thing happen, you came close to using, but instead you used your tools. Stop with all this fucking guilt shit. You gave that garbage to a woman who you love and who wouldn't let you hurt yourself."

His heart stuttered. "Why the hell do you think I love her?"

That had Jinx laughing the over-the-top laugh he only did when thoroughly amused. "Cuz I got eyes in my goddamn head, you idiot. You only gotta be around you two for five seconds to see it. You stare at her like you can't decide if you want to eat her out or feed her grapes and fan her with fig leaves while she sips wine on a chariot carried by angels."

Lock raised an eyebrow. “You’re fucking weird, man.”

Shrugging, Jinx pulled the car to a stop outside the clubhouse. “Doesn’t mean it’s not true.”

He did love Brenna, but he hadn’t realized everyone else knew it.

“C’mon, let’s see if anything new is popping here.”

He followed Jinx into the clubhouse. Every step felt like walking through quicksand, battling to move his legs and progress forward. Harper met them at the door, holding Caleb, who took one look at him, reached his arms out, and said, “Dadada.”

Lock stopped dead in his tracks. He didn’t breathe or blink, terrified to miss it if it happened again.

“Yo, did the little dude just talk?” Jinx asked, making Harper roll her eyes.

“I’m pretty sure the little dude just said his first word. Do you want your dada?” she asked as she held him out to Lock.

“Dadada,” he said again.

“Holy shit,” Lock whispered as he pulled his son close. “I probably shouldn’t curse around you if you’re saying shi... stuff now. You know I’m your dada?”

Caleb grabbed his nose and giggled.

The ache that had occupied Lock’s chest twenty hours ago intensified. Brenna would love this. She’d be over the moon, gushing about what an intelligent boy Caleb was and what a proud dada Lock was.

God, he missed his woman more than he thought himself capable. She’d make a fantastic mother. Would she want that? More than sex? A relationship? Being Caleb’s mom?

“I’m gonna bring her home, buddy,” he whispered to the baby.

Jinx and Harper slipped away, giving him space to bond with his son alone.

“Dadada.”

“Yeah. I’m your dada, and I’m gonna bring Brenna home. Make her mine. And one day, I’ll make her your mama.”

Caleb smiled as though he understood the words. Lock pressed a scratchy kiss to his soft cheek, making him squeal in delight. He hugged the baby close, letting his warm softness ease the storm inside.

The clubhouse door slammed open with so much force the walls rattled. Caleb jumped and began to cry.

“Got the motherfucker!” Jo shouted as she raced inside, waving a piece of paper.

“Oliver?” Lock croaked as his throat dried up. Could this be it?

Jo looked him in the eye. “Damn straight. I found Oliver.”

“Here, I’ll take Caleb. You go see what Jo has,” Harper said as she rushed over and grabbed Caleb from him. The little guy was so good and social that he went straight to Harper without a problem. She immediately began rocking and singing to him to quiet his whimpers after the fright Jo gave him.

With his son in capable hands, he turned back to Jo. “What’d you find?”

Before she could answer, Tracker strode out of Curly’s office straight for his ol’ lady. “Babe, what did you do?” he asked, scowling down at her.

She waved away his concern. “I still have a few friends in the police department. Trustworthy friends. And one owed me a favor,” she explained to her frowning ol’ man. None of the Handlers had love for the cops, but Jo had been one for a time, and Lock would take any help he could get at this point. Hell, he’d jump into bed with the devil himself if it returned his woman safe and sound.

“We reviewed CCTV footage from local places he frequented based on repeat credit card charges.” Jo handed him the paper. “Turns out Ollie is a bougie bastard who hits up the spa for a facial every Friday afternoon like clockwork. Got a pic of his car leaving the lot.”

Christ, she was a skilled investigator. Lock glanced down at the paper in his hands. Sure enough, there was a printout of a sporty Porsche with a Florida plate, number JK3 LEQ4—a match for Oliver’s car.

Fire pumped through his veins. Their first fucking lead. “Where did he go?” He glanced up, holding the paper so tight it crinkled in his fist. “Do you know? Were you able to follow him?”

A victorious grin spread across Jo’s face. “Fuck yeah, we know exactly where he is. We followed him on city cameras to a house in a fancy-schmancy gated neighborhood on the water.”

“Not his?”

“Nope. Belongs to his parents. He got there an hour ago and hasn’t moved since.”

“Let’s go.” Lock hopped to his feet. “Now.”

Spec, who’d arrived seconds after Jo, held up a hand. “We need a plan.”

“Screw that.” Lock got in his face, aware he might walk away with a black eye or bloodied lip. “My woman has been missing almost an entire day,

and we finally have a lead,” he shouted, waving the crumpled paper in Spec’s face. “The plan is to bust down the door and put a bullet in one body part at a time until he tells me where she is.”

Spec tilted his head and pursed his lips briefly before he shrugged. “Works for me.” He held out a fist, which Lock bumped with his own. “Let’s go get your woman back.”

“Hell yeah, let’s do this shit,” Jinx shouted with a whoop.

After Spec made sure they were all armed to the fucking teeth, they made their way outside to their bikes.

Sitting astride his motorcycle, Tracker grabbed Jo and planted a hard kiss on her lips.

“Be careful,” she whispered, grabbing his cut and shaking him. “I won’t be happy if you come home messed up.”

“Always. Love you, too, baby.” He kissed her again. Longer this time and with so much passion, Lock had to look away.

He’d wanted that—the intense connection they had. And he found it with Brenna. Nothing would stop him from getting her back. As he yanked his helmet on his head, he shoved all the other bullshit aside—guilt, worry, stress, his mountain of responsibilities. His son was safe in Harper’s arms. No one gave a shit that he’d struggled with drugs in the past. Continued grief over his sister’s death could wait a few hours. Everything took a back seat to the mission at hand.

The most crucial mission of his life.

Find and rescue Brenna.

Then bind her to him so fucking tight they were no longer two separate people.

“Let’s kick some motherfucking ass!” Jinx revved his engine loud enough to rumble the earth.

“Let’s ride!” Spec shouted.

Lock narrowed his eyes, let the fear and fury fire up his blood, and then joined the thunderous roar of his brothers on the road.

With each passing mile, his anticipation ramped until the sound of the wind whipping by battled the rush of blood in his ears. He’d never killed a man before and didn’t have the same bloodlust Spec did, but there was a first time for everything. If Oliver was responsible for giving Brenna one second of fear or pain, the bastard had seen his last sunset. Spec wouldn’t get the chance to kill him because Lock would be there first.

Forty long-assed minutes later, they parked their bikes in a public beach lot less than half a mile from Oliver's parents' house.

"You good?" Spec asked. "Head on straight?"

"No. My head's totally fucked."

Spec's grin was borderline evil as he squeezed Lock's shoulder. "Perfect. That's what you need tonight. You're taking the lead unless you'd rather me do it."

He met Spec's gaze. He didn't often step back and let others fill his enforcer role, but the man knew how vital this moment was to Lock. How much he needed it.

"Thanks, brother."

Spec scoffed. "Trust me when I say I'm looking forward to it."

"You're a sick fuck, you know that?"

"Damn straight," Spec said with a laugh. "Let's move."

For a group of such large, pissed-off bikers, they moved with a surprisingly quiet stealth. Hopping the gated fence was as easy as climbing in and out of bed. It turned out that being hopped up on gallons of adrenaline made most physical feats simpler. They arrived at the end of a stone driveway leading to a monster-size house within minutes.

"Jesus, two people live in this monstrosity?" Jinx muttered, craning his neck to see the top of the house. "Fuckin' why?"

"Because they can," Tracker answered with a shrug. "Rich people do most shit just because they can."

"Think she's in there?" Lock asked.

Spec stepped in front of him and clasped the sides of Lock's head. "In there or not, we'll fucking find her, brother. This fucker knows where she is. Make him bleed."

Lock gave a single nod.

Spec cuffed the side of his head and then grinned that same maniacal grin he'd had at the clubhouse. "Keep moving, boys."

A television flickered from a first-floor window facing the front of the house—a dead giveaway to exactly where Oliver was.

"Like taking candy from a baby," Jinx muttered. "Except your baby. He's too smart to give up his candy."

"You're fucking nuts," Tracker said with a laugh.

At any other time, Lock would have joined in. Tonight, he focused on the house as they stormed up the driveway.

He reached the giant black door with its gaudy brass knocker before his brothers. It was locked, of course, and too big to stomp open with his boot as he'd have loved to do. But thanks to his job, he always had a way in. He pulled his lock pick kit from his back pocket. He could do this shit in his sleep. Most people had no idea how easy it was for someone as skilled as him to open their locks. With a few fiddles of his tools, he had the door open in seconds flat. No cameras, no alarms, nothing sounded to alert Oliver to their presence.

Hell yes.

“Rich morons,” Jinx mumbled.

Always with the snark, that one.

Once in the house, he no longer gave a shit about being quiet. With his brothers at his back, he slammed the door open and thundered left toward the flickering television.

Oliver sat, feet up in a plush beige recliner. The second he saw six furious bikers descending on him, his eyes widened, and he scrambled backward. The recliner tipped, dumping him onto the floor. He didn't miss a beat, clambering across the floor until Spec hopped onto the recliner like a kid on the playground.

“Don't fucking move,” he barked, gun mere feet from Oliver's stunned face. “He's all yours, brother.”

Lock had his gun out and ready to fire. Just because he hadn't used one in a real-life scenario didn't mean he couldn't or wouldn't.

He strode to Oliver, planted a boot on the man's chest, and flattened him to the floor. “Where the fuck is she?” he said with a deadly snarl as he felt the man's ribs depress beneath his boot.

“C-can't b-breathe.” Oliver gasped and clawed at Lock's boot.

It'd be so easy to lean into that leg a little more and crush the man's ribcage with a satisfying crunch.

After he tells you where Brenna is.

He counted to ten, letting the asshole feel the full effect of suffocation before he let up on the pressure a fraction.

“You better answer,” Spec said. “My finger's getting tired over here.”

“I don't know. I don't fucking know. I swear it.”

Boom.

The gunshot rang out half a second before Oliver jerked. His agonized scream had Jinx chuckling.

“Pussy,” he said.

Blood bloomed across the man’s right shoulder, soaking his white polo shirt.

“So much for letting me lead.” Lock glanced at Spec, who shrugged with a sheepish grin.

“Oops. My bad. You know how I get.”

Jinx barked a laugh.

Lock increased the pressure on the man’s chest again. This time, he swore he heard a crack. Another scream from Oliver confirmed it. There went a rib. Sweat broke out on the man’s forehead, and his skin had turned an ashen gray. Great and all, but they still didn’t know where Brenna was.

Lock bent closer to Oliver, who cried and moaned. Spittle dripped from the corner of his mouth. “Where the fuck is she?”

“I didn’t do it,” he wailed. “She wasn’t supposed to be there.” He sounded near delirious from the pain.

“Where?” He slapped the side of Oliver’s face hard. “Where wasn’t she supposed to be?”

“T-they’ll kill me.”

“The fuck you think we’re gonna do?” Spec asked a second before another shot rang out. This time, the bullet lodged itself in Oliver’s hip.

He screamed again. “Stop! Stop! No more,” he sobbed. “I’ll tell you. No more.”

Fucking finally.

Lock removed his boot from the man’s chest. Oliver sucked in a huge breath, then moaned and cried harder as his ribs expanded.

“Talk or you get another,” Spec ordered, not an ounce of sympathy present.

Not that Lock had any, either.

“This one might hit your tiny dick.”

“I owed money,” Oliver whispered.

Jinx snorted. “Yeah, we know, Ollie. That’s how all this shit started.”

“No. More. A lot of money.”

Lock tilted his head. “How much?”

“Quarter million. They said they’d erase my debt if I helped them.”

Fuck. This wasn’t going to be good. “Helped with what?”

Oliver’s pained gaze met his. “Getting the women.”

His blood ran cold, and he staggered back.

Spec leaped off the recliner. “Explain fucking faster,” he shouted, placing the barrel of the gun in the center of Oliver’s forehead.

“Okay, okay. Um, they have an auction beneath the club. They get the women there. Drug their drinks and take them downstairs. Buyers come and pay a fuckton of money for a few hours with them. No rules. They can do whatever they want as long as the women don’t die.”

Lock gagged.

“You fucking piece of shit,” Ty spoke up for the first time.

“I owed so much money,” Oliver whispered as though that could justify participating in human trafficking.

“How’d you get Brenna?” Lock asked in a voice he barely recognized.

“She came by the club. It’s the same place I played poker. I never told her where it was, but she overheard me once and showed up all pissed off. I’m guessing she wanted to talk about the lawsuit.

Lock doubled over, planting his hands on his knees as bile rose in his throat.

Fuck.

“What club?” Spec asked in a voice so deadly Lock shivered.

“Stray.”

“Hmm, swanky. Let’s go, boys,” Spec announced, but he didn’t move away from Oliver.

Lock knew exactly where that club was. They could be there in ten minutes. He turned and ran toward the door.

Before he made it out of the house, he heard Spec’s voice once again.

“How many women did you get for them?”

“S-seven,” Oliver said, shame thick in his voice.

Christ.

As his boots hit the driveway, a shot rang out. Seconds later, Spec appeared in the doorway, phone to his ear.

“Hey, prez, gonna need a clean-up on aisle three.”

Lock grinned. Good fucking riddance.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

THE SCREECH OF the heavy door dragging along the concrete floor exploded through Brenna's semiconscious state like a bomb going off. She jolted awake so hard her head cracked against the rock wall.

Her heart raced, and her breaths came in harsh pants. Beside her, Kelsie whimpered and began to shake so hard her teeth rattled. Sitting shoulder to shoulder to combat the cold and provide some physical comfort, they'd drifted into a fitful nap some time ago.

Bolt, the giant of a man who'd carried her down the stairs, filled the entire doorway, wearing black denim, a black T-shirt, and a bored expression. "Let's go," he barked.

Kelsie trembled hard, bouncing against the uneven wall behind them. Silent tears tracked down her cheeks as she stared at their guard with abject horror in her expression.

"Shh," Brenna whispered. She gripped the younger woman's hand between hers. "Try to breathe."

"Get the fuck up." As he shouted orders, he stared at Kelsie.

There was no way the other woman could stand and walk out the door. Whatever had happened the last two times they took her, it traumatized her to the point she couldn't function. She clung to Brenna's hand as she wept.

"Get her up." He shifted his attention to Brenna.

When neither of them moved, he rolled his eyes.

"Don't have time for this shit," he muttered as he strode into the room. It'd be no problem for him to grab Kelsie and toss her over his shoulder as he'd done to Brenna.

Without giving it more than one second of thought because if she did, she'd have a heart attack, Brenna shouted. "Stop!" She climbed to her feet. "Leave her. I'll go with you."

"N-no... no." Kelsie yanked on her arm, trying to get her to sit, but in her

weakened state, she could barely maintain her grasp on Brenna's hand.

She straightened to her full height and stared the asshole right in the eyes, even though inside, she was quaking as hard as Kelsie. "I'll go. Leave her the fuck alone."

"They didn't ask for you, but what the fuck do I care. Start walking."

"No... B-b-bren... don't..." Kelsie tried to stand, but her legs gave out. She was forced to release Brenna's hand to catch her fall.

Brenna turned and cupped her co-captive's face between her hands. "It's okay. I'll be okay."

Rivers of tears poured from Kelsie's face as she shook her head.

"I will." She leaned closer and whispered. "Remember what I said. They're coming for me. For us. Hold on to that. I promise we will be free."

"No..." Kelsie wailed. Her breathing changed to a short, choppy fight for air.

"Enough of this bullshit. Move." A large hand grabbed the back of her shirt and shoved her away from Kelsie. She fell forward, landing on hands and knees as she struggled to breathe.

The idea of leaving Kelsie alone in this state was a knife to the gut, but she had no choice. Kelsie might not survive another assault, or at least her psyche couldn't, and Brenna couldn't live with herself if she allowed that to happen.

"All right! I'm going. Get your fucking hands off me," she said, wrenching away as he reached for her again with far more confidence than she felt inside. She climbed to her feet and started forward on unsteady legs. She had no doubt that the MC would come for her, but who knew what state she'd be in when they finally found her?

Would she be like Kelsie, traumatized and broken? Would Lock be able to glue the pieces of her back together?

Would he even want to? And could she let him if he did want her?

The man had been through enough in the last year. Latching onto him after all this didn't seem fair.

The guard shoved her to the left as she exited the room. "I said get your hands off me."

Behind her, he laughed so loud it drowned out the sound of Kelsie's sobs. "Let's see how long that sass lasts. Actually, keep it. It'll be more fun for our customers if you're spitting and hissing like a little pussy cat. *Meow.*" He laughed again. "They love you feisty ones. So much fun to subdue."

His words had her steps faltering, but she recovered quickly. She swallowed a lump of fear lodged in her throat.

They were words, just words meant to scare her.

And they did their job damn well.

“Keep walking.” He nudged her again.

This time, she bit the inside of her cheek to keep from mouthing off.

“End of the hall. Door on the left.”

Each step took her closer to hell. She might as well have been walking a plank, watching the distance to her doom shorten. A bottomless ocean of churning dark water might not await her, but she was screwed, nonetheless.

They reached the end of the hallway way too fast. Bolt opened another heavy door.

“Shower. Dry. Change. You have fifteen minutes. Leave the hair wet. Makes you look... younger.” He smirked, and her blood ran cold.

Younger?

She must have hesitated too long because the next thing she knew, he pushed her into the room with all his strength. Brenna cried out as she staggered forward. Her shoe caught a crack, and she went down hard, wincing as her palms met the hard floor.

Bolt laughed and shut the door.

Fifteen minutes wasn't much, but she gave herself one of those minutes to breathe and take in her surroundings. The room wasn't too different from where she and Kelsie were being held. A cave-like structure, only this one had a showerhead coming from the wall straight ahead and a drain in the center of the floor. Generic bottles of what she assumed were shampoo, conditioner, and body wash sat in a small puddle. To her right, a wooden bench held a thin towel and clothing. A cracked mirror hung from the wall above the bench.

“Fifteen fucking minutes. Turn on the water,” Bolt shouted. “Unless you want a hand?”

That was all the motivation she needed. “No. I got it.”

She turned on the water and backed away from the spray. What were the chances this place had warm water instead of an icy shower? Countless hours of sitting on the floor had her feeling grimy and smelly. Cold water would still get her clean.

Sure enough, as she stuck her hand in the stream, nothing but icy drops hit her hand.

After a glance toward the flimsy door, she quickly undressed. Even though she knew her privacy and body were about to be violated, she still couldn't stand the idea of Bolt watching her shower. At least give her a few more minutes of dignity before they stole everything from her.

Shivers racked her the instant she stepped under the frigid spray. Few things sucked more than a cold shower, though she had a feeling it would end up being the best part of her day when all was said and done. Maybe the discomfort was for the best. If she'd stepped into a warm, comforting cascade of water, she would likely break down sobbing in a hysterical heap on the floor. As it was, she rushed through cleaning herself with efficient movements to end the torment.

After the world's fastest cleanup, she killed the water and grabbed the towel. It didn't amount to much more than a large hand towel and did a terrible job drying her off. Shivering with violent jerks, she grabbed the first piece of clothing from the pile only to drop it as though it were a slimy reptile.

"No," she whispered, shaking her head.

Hell no.

She forced herself to pick it up and examine the garment. They'd provided a frilly white dress like a little girl might wear, complete with pink bows and puffy sleeves. Beside the dress waited a pair of black patent leather Mary Janes. Next to the shoes was a bag. Brenna pressed a hand over her mouth as she peeked in the bag. Her eyes fell, and her heart sank to the floor.

The bag contained a giant rainbow lollipop and a fluffy brown teddy bear. They wanted her to dress like a freaking toddler.

What. The. Fuck.

"Two minutes left," Bolt called out.

Liar.

She had at least seven. "I'm not wearing this, you sick fuck," she shouted back as she threw the dress back on the bench.

"You put it on, or I put it on you."

The thought of him touching her to dress her made her skin crawl.

Brenna closed her eyes and took a cleansing breath. It didn't work. Dread still clung to her. In the next few minutes, she'd be trotted out in front of a group of deranged men. They'd bid on her while she stood there dressed like a child. Then, one would *win* her.

She swallowed a painful lump. Kelsie's trauma had been an abstract

concept until this moment. Now, she understood the young woman's violent, visceral reaction to the guard showing up at the door.

"One minute!"

Shit.

Brenna inhaled again as she stared at the dress.

Lock will come for you.

Her only option was to cling to that hope. With unsteady hands, she dressed in the outfit provided. Once finished, she glanced in the cracked mirror. A terrified woman who looked like an oversized child stared back at her. The flouncy dress wasn't long enough to cover her whole ass. Luckily for her, they'd provided a lacy thong to match. She wanted to rip the pink bows off and shove them down Bolt's throat. That thought brought the first hint of a smile since she'd been abducted.

As she stared at a horrifying version of herself, tears sprang free. She dashed them away with a huff. There wasn't time for that. The second she got home, she was burning anything she owned made of lace. And she'd never buy white clothes again. Or pink, for that matter.

Be strong.

The door slid open without warning. Bolt barged in, coming to a complete stop when he saw her.

"Damn." He leered with a disgusting glint in his eye. "The tears are a nice touch. Helps set the scene," he said with a chuckle before he made a show of adjusting his cock.

Fucking pig.

Nothing could have gotten her to stop crying faster. Brenna clenched her teeth and straightened her shoulders. Then and there, she vowed not another one of these monsters would see her upset. And it didn't matter what Kelsie said or what she'd warned. Brenna would fight with every ounce of strength she had left. The only way one of these repulsive pieces of shit would have their sick fucking way with her was if they killed her first, and she'd make sure to inflict as much damage as possible on the way out.

Grabbing the damn props, she marched out of the room in those patent leather shoes. Bolt laughed as he trailed behind her. She clenched her fists around the lollipop stick and imagined jamming it into his eye. She had trouble killing bugs because the squish or crunch wigged her out, but she'd revel in the squelch of his eyeball rupturing.

"Up the stairs," he ordered.

With no other choice, Brenna did as ordered. As she reached the top of the dark staircase, she could hear the loud boom of male laughter.

“Go right.”

She complied.

“Stop,” he said when she arrived near the end of another hallway—this one much shorter.

Bolt reached around her for the door handle, making sure to plaster his body against her. His erection nudged her back, making her gag.

He chuckled. “Have fun,” he whispered in her ear before opening the door and shoving her inside.

Bright light assaulted her from every angle. After spending countless hours underground in the dim, dank prison, the light was blinding. She shielded her eyes with a hand, blinking as she tried to orient to her surroundings.

“Next, we have Cindy,” a loud voice announced overhead, making her jump. “Isn’t she adorable? She never goes anywhere without that teddy bear.”

As her eyes adjusted, she realized she was in a large room with stark white flooring and three white walls. Straight across from her, the entire wall was floor-to-ceiling mirrors. She had a feeling a panel of vile, rich bastards watched her through those mirrors.

“Give this little one a lollipop, and she’ll do whatever you want. Cindy will be such a good girl for you, and if she’s not, she responds to a firm hand.”

She froze, except for her stomach, which lurched violently. Would they let her go if she vomited on the floor? No one would want her then, right?

“Please start the bidding. Cindy, honey, please turn slowly in a full circle for us like a good girl.”

Her legs trembled. Though she couldn’t see the bidders, she felt every eye scoring her skin like knives. The tiny hairs all over her body rose to attention. Never had she felt so exposed, wearing this goddamn dress while a bunch of pedophiles gawked at her bare ass cheeks. The lollipop stick bent in the force of her grip. She felt like she was a character in the plot of a horror movie as she turned around.

A buzzing in her ear blocked out anything else the emcee said. She fought to keep her promise to herself and not cry. These cretins would only get off on it, but with each passing second, maintaining control of her emotions became more difficult. Her breathing became choppy, and dizziness made it

difficult to remain standing.

Then, the announcer said something that trickled into her consciousness and made her heart seize. “Thank you, gentlemen, we have a winner. Your prize will be delivered to you shortly.”

The door she’d entered through opened, and Bolt appeared. He grabbed her arm and towed her out of the room. She stumbled along, barely able to process her surroundings. He ushered her to another room, where he knocked.

The door opened to reveal a slightly overweight man with a bushy mustache and thinning hair. He wore a partially open shirt, showcasing his gray chest hair and two gold chains like a seventies porn director.

“Congratulations, sir,” Bolt said.

The man didn’t acknowledge Bolt at all. He stared wide-eyed at Brenna, who automatically took a step back.

“Hello, sweetheart, what a pretty girl you are. My name is Ron Wilson, but you may call me Mr. Wilson.”

Her knees wobbled.

Bolt shoved her forward and then pulled the door shut behind her.

The man caught her upper arms with a bruising grip. Thick rings on his fingers bit into her skin. The blatant hunger in his eyes made her sick to her stomach. Instant revulsion had her struggling to free herself from his grasp.

He frowned. “Now, Cindy, I was promised you’d be a good girl. I’d hate to have to punish you so early.”

“Let me go, you perverted piece of shit. My name isn’t Cindy.”

His shoulders sagged as he heaved a sigh as though genuinely disappointed in her. The next thing she knew, the back of his hand, gaudy rings and all, smashed into the side of her face so hard she crumpled to the floor. The bear flew out of her hands as the lollipop clattered on the tile floor, breaking into pieces.

Brenna screamed and cradled her face. It felt as though her eye had exploded out of the socket.

The man tsked. “You must be one of the new girls,” he said, sounding like he was speaking to a child. “That’s okay. I’m the perfect man to teach you how things work around here and make sure you obey the rules. Now look,” he said as he bent down toward her.

Brenna scrambled as far away from him as she could.

He tutted and picked up the lollipop. “You ruined your treat. That’s a

shame.”

She gaped at him. Either she had a brain injury or was stuck in a nightmare. This grown-ass man was legitimately speaking to her as though she was a child.

“Don’t worry, little one,” he said, crouching beside her. “I have something else you can suck.”

It was then that Brenna realized that no matter how strong she thought she was, she might not make it until the Handlers found her.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

BY THE TIME they reached the posh club Lock would never step foot in under any other circumstances, he was vibrating as much as his bike.

Midnight had passed a few hours ago, and the parking lot only had about ten cars, all worth more than all the vehicles he'd ever owned combined. String lights twinkled from palm trees scattered through the parking lot. The club's entrance shone bright with a white neon sign over a revolving door that glittered as though made of diamonds. It spoke of money, superiority, and exclusivity.

Fucking rich people and the shit they valued.

"How are we doing this?" Tracker asked. "Just busting on in?"

"Fuck yes." Lock started to charge toward the door, only to be stopped by a giant hand landing on his chest.

"Hold up, Rambo," Jinx said. "Give it a hot second."

Scowling, Lock tried to bat his brother's hand away, but the man was too damn big. "Fucking move, Jinx. Every second we waste, Brenna is in there suffering through Christ knows what."

"I know," Jinx said with none of his usual snark, only steadfast determination. It bolstered Lock, knowing how seriously his club brothers took this, especially Jinx, who had every reason to hate him. "That's why we need to be smart. We have one chance to get her out, and we'll blow it if we charge in there like a bunch of hot-headed idiots.

"Okay. You're right. I know you're right." He rolled his shoulders, trying to shake off some of the antsy tension.

"Good man," Jinx said, clapping Lock on the back. "So what's the plan, Spec?"

Lock shifted his attention to Pulse, who assessed their surroundings in a more subdued manner, as usual. He wore a large backpack stocked with medical supplies. The man was a walking emergency room. Most of what he

carried he'd pinched from the hospital where he worked, but his expertise had come in handy more than once. Hopefully, they wouldn't need his skills tonight, but Lock was grateful to have him there in case. Ty stood beside him, also taking in the area with a shrewd gaze.

"Ollie... rest in hell, motherfucker... said there's a back entrance." Spec cleared his throat. He cast a wary glance at Lock as though he didn't want to reveal the next plot point. "Once inside the back, you can go downstairs to where they keep the women or stay up to where they do the auctions and have the rooms for the winners to collect their prize."

"Jesus fuck," Lock stalked ten feet away, gripped his hair and growled. "We gotta get the fuck in there. Now."

Spec nodded. "I'll take out the guard at the back door. Lock, you and Jinx will take the upstairs. Tracker, you're out here on watch. Ty and I will head down to search the basement. You all have flexi cuffs. Incapacitate and hogtie whoever you come across. No exceptions. Pulse, I want you to come downstairs too. I have no idea who or what we're gonna find. We might need medical attention."

"I'm ready." He nodded once.

"Lock?" Spec asked.

"Ready." So fucking ready.

He glanced around at the men in his club, armed to the hilt and ready to do battle on his behalf, no matter what he'd done in the past.

Why?

Because it's what family did.

It was all true. Everything Brenna said. Everything his therapist tried to pound into his head for months. This club was family, not just in lip service but in cold, hard reality. They'd loved him, and they'd fight for him, but they'd also call him on his bullshit when needed, as he'd do for them. And if one of them fucked up as he had after Deanna's death, he wouldn't cast them out. He'd help them as they helped him. It'd taken this extreme event to drive the point home, but he got it now.

His arms tingled with the anticipation of holding Brenna again. Whatever had happened, whatever she'd endured, he was prepared to help her heal. A calm clarity settled over his mind, chasing away the usual doubt that lived there. For the first time since Deanna died, Lock felt strong and capable. He had the tools to give Brenna what she needed. He could do anything with the growth he'd made and his family by his side.

“Ready your weapons,” Spec ordered as though commanding troops.
Lock killed the safety on his pistol.

“Let’s go get Lock’s woman.”

Fuck yes.

As a unit, they marched toward the club, ready to fuck shit up.

“GET ON THE bed.”

The queen-size bed in the center of the room with its stark white sheets and disturbing restraint rings on the headboard.

This was it. The moment Kelsie warned her about where she’d cautioned Brenna not to fight. She’d claimed it’d turn out so much worse.

But she couldn’t do that. She wasn’t in the same headspace as Kelsie yet. She had to fight. Even if it made the torture a hundred times crueler. Maybe she’d regret it later, but at least she’d know she didn’t accept her fate lying down.

“Fuck you,” she said, still on the floor.

Wilson—she’d rather die than add the mister—laughed. He bent over and grabbed her chin in an unforgiving hold. It felt as though he was trying to crush her jaw in his fist. “Pretty little girls shouldn’t say such ugly words.”

She spit right between his eyes.

Punishment was swift and harsh. He kicked her side with the pointy tip of his shiny dress shoe. The force of the kick wrenched her chin from his hands and sent her flying into the wall. He came at her again, grabbing a fistful of her damp hair and yanking her to her feet.

Brenna screamed and grabbed his hands. Her nails sunk into his flesh. She raked them across his skin, tearing into him. The feel of his skin gathering under her nails sent satisfaction soaring through her. He cursed and dropped her. She hit the ground hard and scrambled away as fast as she could, pushing to her feet when she had some distance between them.

Relief didn’t last long. Wilson wasn’t a huge man, but he had at least six inches and seventy pounds on her. He pounced, grabbing the front of her dress and slamming her into the wall. Her head hit with a hard smack that made the room spin. Wilson took advantage of her disorientation, hitting the side of her face with a closed fist.

The pain was extraordinary. Something split. Her cheek, her lip, she couldn’t tell because the pain encompassed every part of her head, but blood ran down onto her white dress.

Wilson tsked. The asshole loved making those disappointed sounds, as though she really was a child. “Now look what you did,” he said, staring at the blood on her ruined dress.

“Good.”

He reached for her, and she tried to swat him away, but her head swam, and her vision wasn't right. He grabbed the front of the dress again. Brenna lashed out. She must have gotten lucky and hit something because he cursed and grabbed for his nose.

She tried to run, but he caught her with a fist to the stomach that had her doubling over with a breathless scream.

Wilson grabbed her arms and flung her toward the bed. She landed face down with a bounce.

Move, move, move.

She crawled forward, grabbing the bedding for leverage. If he got on top of her, she was screwed.

A hand circled her ankle and dragged her back.

“No!” she whimpered as her feet hit the floor, and her upper body was shoved flat on the bed with a firm hand on the back of her neck.

“You asked for this. I told you what happens to bad little girls.”

“Let me go!” she screamed, struggling as much as she could.

Wilson shoved the dress up, revealing her thong and bare ass cheeks.

Her mind screamed at her to continue fighting. But pinned beneath a monster, she couldn't move her body away. She kicked back like an angry horse, fighting for freedom.

Wilson grunted in pain but was able to use his knees to spread her legs wide and pin them to the sides of the bed.

“No,” she whispered. Tears flowed, mixing with the blood and creating a mess on the sheets. “I'm sorry, Lock.”

If only she'd just gone along with the plan. If only she hadn't tried to confront Oliver.

So many if-onlys and regrets. She closed her eyes and thought of Lock's strong arms around her, holding her tight and shielding her from the world.

The sound of Wilson's zipper being lowered ran up her spine like a spur.

In a final burst of defiant energy, Brenna thrashed and screamed. She'd promised herself she'd fight, and goddammit, she wouldn't let herself down.

LOCK DIDN'T HAVE any formal military or tactical training, but Spec put

them through the paces every few months to ensure they could handle themselves in such situations.

He trailed Jinx down the hallway, keeping his back to the wall as he kept an eye on the door they'd come through while Jinx focused ahead. So far, aside from the giant guard Spec took out in under two seconds, they hadn't encountered anyone else. The hallway was dim, with only a few sporadic lights, but even he could see the place was high-class.

"It's too quiet," Jinx whispered so low Lock had to strain to hear. "Why's it so fucking quiet? Shouldn't sex offenders be running around with neon lights over their heads? Make our life easier."

Lock snorted. His heart pounded so loud it shocked him. He was surprised Jinx couldn't hear it like a gong sounding.

"Maybe the others are having more luck." Part of him wanted to say fuck it and run back to the steps leading downstairs. If they kept Brenna down there, he wanted to be there when they found her. But there was a chance she was up there, and he couldn't leave Jinx alone.

He stumbled a step as a horrible thought entered his mind. "Think Oliver was fucking with us?" Christ, what if they had it completely wrong?

"Nah," Jinx said with a shake of his head. "I think he was too stupid to try and play Spec. He really thought he'd stay alive if he spilled his guts."

Please let that be true.

"You're probably right. This whole thing is just fucking with my head."

"I hear tha—"

A blood-curdling scream broke through the silence and sent a spear of ice straight to Lock's heart.

"Holy fuck, that's Brenna." Fuck protocol. Lock took off down the hallway, running past Jinx at full speed.

"Shit," his brother spat out. "Hold the fuck up."

"No." He was done waiting. Lock sprinted down the hall. When he came to a locked door, he booted it in with a savage kick. The door flew open, slamming against the wall with a loud smack. An overweight man stood with his cock out, about to ram it in some crying woman's mouth.

The guy shrieked and fell on his naked ass as he tried to step back.

"You're free," Lock called to the woman. He didn't have time to stop. She wasn't Brenna.

"Shit," Jinx said again. "Brother get the fuck up here, we've hit the jackpot," he shouted into his phone.

Lock didn't wait around to hear how Spec responded. His muscles screamed as he ran to the next door and gave it the same biker boot treatment—only this room was empty.

Another scream had him shouting, “Brenna!” at the top of his lungs. It was closer. So close. The next room, maybe.

As he made it to the next door, Jinx ran up behind him. “Kick it in,” the big guy yelled, weapon ready for whoever was on the other side.

He bashed the door in and let out a primal roar as he saw a man on top of a screaming, crying, and fighting like hell, Brenna.

Instinct took over. At that moment, he was no longer human but an animal whose bonded mate suffered.

Kill, kill, kill.

He charged forward, lowering a shoulder like a linebacker going to the tackle. It happened so fast that the bastard barely had time to process it before Lock flew into him at full speed.

They hit the floor hard, but Lock didn't feel a thing as he landed on the man who'd touched Brenna.

Jinx was less than one second behind. As Lock was about to start beating the life out of the man, Jinx shouted. “I've got him. See to your woman.”

Brenna.

Lock jumped up and spun around. Brenna had scrambled off the bed and sat huddled in a tiny ball in the corner. His heart cracked as he saw her, terrified, bloodied, and shaking like a palm tree in a hurricane.

“Baby,” he said, crouching beside her but not touching yet.

“L-lock?”

The thumps of fists hitting flesh played in the background, but Lock paid them no mind. “Yeah, baby, it's me.” She was a disaster. Hair stuck to the blood, and tears were all over her face. Whatever sick fucking dress they'd made her wear needed to be burned. It used to be white but was covered in blood and torn in a few places.

“I knew,” she whispered. “I knew you'd come.”

“Fuck yes, Brenna. I'll always come.” He wanted to haul her into his arms but was terrified to touch her.

“I fought hard,” she mumbled a second before launching into his arms. He caught her, landing on his ass with his arms full of a hysterical Brenna.

“I know you did, baby. You're so fucking brave. So strong.” She shuddered and choked a sob. “I've got you, Brenna. You're safe.” He held

her as tight as he dared, without knowing the extent of her injuries, rocking back and forth to soothe himself as much as her. She felt fucking incredible, safe in his arms. “It’s over. No one will hurt you ever again.”

He prayed it hadn’t gotten as far as he feared, but that was a conversation for later.

“You came,” she said again, as though needing to remind herself this was real.

“Always.”

He had no idea how much time they sat on the floor in that damn room or what was happening with his brothers in the rest of the club, but they gave him and Brenna privacy. He needed to check her for physical injuries, but for now, their emotional state was more important.

Eventually, Brenna lifted her matted head off his chest and gazed at him. He brushed hair off her face and winced when he found the primary source of the blood—a nasty gash near her left eye. It would require stitches and had made a fucking mess of her face and clothes. As soon as Pulse found them, he’d make sure that wound was his top priority.

“Always?” Brenna asked in a tiny voice that broke his heart all over again.

By the time this nightmare of a day ended, she’d never doubt how he felt about her. He’d tell her every goddamn chance he got. “Always,” he said with firm conviction. “Forever, Brenna. Every second from now until I take my last breath, you are mine. I love you. Christ, I love you so fucking much.”

Her breath hitched, and finally, his beautiful woman smiled. “I love you too, Lock,” she whispered. “The way I’ve always dreamed of. It’s intense, powerful, and a little scary, but I lov—”

He kissed her, blood be damned, cradling her face between his hands. Brenna half laughed, half cried, but kissed him back with so much fucking sweetness. Finally, after hours and hours of anguish, he was whole again.

“Yo, we got captives down here,” Ty hollered from down the hallway.

Brenna gasped as she pulled back. “Kelsie,” she whispered as her eyes widened. “I need to help her.” She tried to scramble to her feet but cried out in pain, clutching her side.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa.” Lock steadied her and then eased her back to the ground. “Stay still. You’re hurt. I want Pulse to check you over before we move you.”

Her head shook back and forth with near-violent jerks. “No, you don’t

understand. I was held with another woman. Younger than me. She..." Brenna swallowed as she shook her head. "She's been *hurt*. More than once. She might not respond well to a man coming for her." She grabbed his cut and shook with weak desperation. "Please, Lock. I'm okay, but I need to help her."

"Shit," he spat. "Okay, fine, but you let me help you up." Of course, she'd taken another under her wing. His woman was too damn good to do anything else. "But then you are going to the hospital."

"I don't need—"

He cut her off with a severe look, but instead of agreeing, she chuckled.

"I love you too," she said as though she fully understood his growling came from a place of deep love and concern.

He helped her up, clenching his jaw every time she winced or gasped in pain. Jinx had taken the man who'd assaulted her out of the room and did God knew what with him. Lucky for that fucker because Lock wouldn't have been able to keep himself from stabbing the guy through the heart with the closest sharp object.

"Okay," Brenna said, panting. She leaned heavily on him, making him want to wrap her in his arms and toss her in the back of a damn ambulance before she could do anything else. "I'm up." She glanced at him and rolled her eyes. "Don't look at me like that. I'm okay."

He grunted. Pulse would be the judge of that.

"What's going to happen to all the... men here?" she asked as he helped her hobble into the hallway.

He kept an arm around her waist, unable to let go even though she seemed able to walk well enough. Touching her was imperative. Without it, he'd worry too much and wouldn't be able to focus on the tasks at hand.

"They'll get what they deserve, baby," he answered.

Brenna met his gaze. Further explanation wasn't necessary. She understood his meaning. The men here would suffer at the club's hand and never be allowed to hurt another woman.

"Good," she said with a nod. "Now let's find Kelsie so we can get the fuck out of his horror show. I have a baby boy to hug, and then I want to spend the next week locked in your house with only you and Caleb."

Christ, this woman was so goddamn perfect. She'd even thought of his son. His throat thickened as he gave her a gentle squeeze. "That sounds perfect."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

HIDING EXCRUCIATING PAIN from her man's hawk-eyed stare was no easy feat. He was on her with a severe scowl and a mountain of concern whenever she flinched or huffed. She loved it but wished it would wait until she saw Kelsie. Then he could take her to be examined by Pulse and fuss all he wanted.

However, part of her feared what would happen once they were alone. She'd let out a river of tears as soon as his arms had closed around her but had a feeling there were plenty more to come. Once the dust settled and she had time to process it, she assumed she'd fall apart in an epic burst of emotion. Knowing Lock would be there, that he loved her and didn't seem afraid of her meltdown, helped ease some of that worry.

Even though she claimed to be all right and able to maneuver independently, his hands on her brought immeasurable comfort. She couldn't wait to be alone in his house, in his bed, where he could hold her properly.

And, oh, how she longed to see Caleb and hear his gleeful laugh. The happy, blissfully unaware baby would be wonderful medicine.

But first, she had to see to Kelsie.

"Two more," Lock said as he assisted her down the never-ending staircase.

The familiar dark hall threatened to unravel her thinly held composure. "This was much easier when I was hanging over the shoulder of the big brute who grabbed me outside," she quipped as her ribs protested yet another step.

Lock didn't laugh, but he did tense, and his breathing hitched.

"Sorry," she whispered, stopping to face his narrowed gaze. "Bad joke."

He kissed her quickly. God, how she wished they had time for more.

"Until ten minutes ago, I didn't know if you were alive or what these animals had done to you. Maybe give me a day before you start with the gallows humor, eh?"

She smiled. "I love you," she said, feeling those words in the depths of her soul. "I love your son too."

He pressed his forehead to hers. "Fuck, I don't deserve you, but I love you, Brenna. To an insane degree."

A frightened shriek had her straightening. "Kelsie!"

She darted down the final two steps and hurried through the dark hall as quickly as her tender body could.

"Brenna, dammit," Lock muttered as he ran after her.

"I'm okay. I... oh my God." She skidded to a stop as she came across Bolt's body, lying prone on the dirty ground.

"He can't hurt you," Ty called from an open door on the left. "Spec made sure of that."

The air she hadn't been aware of holding whooshed out of her lungs. Lock's hand landed on her back, making her jump. Then she realized she still wore the ridiculous dress that barely covered her. Her face burned, and she stared at the man at her feet.

"Here."

She glanced up to find Ty readying his arm to toss something her way.

"I got it." Lock grabbed the object out of the air.

A blanket. Tears sprung to her eyes. How these men could be brutal one second, then so kind to her would forever be a mystery, but one she'd always be grateful for.

"Thank you," she whispered as Lock wrapped the long, soft fabric around her shoulders like a cloak.

"Thank Pulse. He had it in his med kit."

Another terrified shriek ran out.

"I think we need some help in here." Ty inclined his head toward the open door. He had a lethal expression she'd never seen on the often-alooof man. "Do you know her?"

"Yes. That's Kelsie. She... suffered."

A low rumble came from Ty's throat.

With Lock holding her hand, she stepped over Bolt's body. Her heart hammered in her ears, certain he'd wake and grab her, but he didn't. The pool of blood she noticed beneath his torso verified Tracker's words that he might never wake again.

Good.

"Stay out here," she said to Lock and Ty as she reached the door.

“Bren...”

She faced Lock. “No matter how nonthreatening you try to be, you’ll scare her. Trust me.”

“She’ll be all right, brother. Spec is in there,” Ty said as he touched Lock’s shoulder.

Her man sighed, then nodded.

“I will be careful,” she said with a slight smile before he could issue the warning.

“That’s all I ask.”

She lifted to her toes and pressed a soft kiss to his cheek. He turned what she meant to be a brief brush of her lips into a deep taste as he turned his head and caught her lips, cupping the back of her head to hold her in place. Any other time, the passionate kiss would have had her squirming and ready to strip. Tonight, it provided comfort, safety, and love.

Exactly what she needed.

Only when Ty cleared his throat did she pull back, pressing her lips together to capture the feel of him.

“I’ll wait for you here,” Lock said with a wink.

Unaccustomed to overt displays of affection, Brenna avoided Ty’s amused gaze as she hurried into the room that had been her cell only hours before.

Spec stood in the center of the room, his hands up in surrender. As Brenna walked into the space that would star in many of her nightmares, he glanced over his shoulder. “Bren, it’s not safe.”

Beyond him, plastered against the wall, stood Kelsie. Her eyes were wide as saucers and filled with a near-crazed fear that made Brenna wonder if she was aware of her surroundings. She clutched a wicked-looking knife between both hands and thrust forward to ward off Spec. His knife, most likely. The fact that the slight, trembling woman managed to get the weapon off Spec was a testament to his kind, compassionate treatment of her.

“It’s okay.” She slowed her steps as she reached his side. “She won’t hurt me.”

“Bren.” Spec reached for her as she moved past him.

“Don’t touch her!” Kelsie screamed, jutting the knife forward as though she stood a chance against a seasoned special operations soldier. Spec could have disarmed and subdued her in seconds, but to his credit, he didn’t lay a hand on the panicked woman.

“Spec, I’m okay,” Brenna said. She also lifted her arms. “This is Kelsie. We were kept in this room together. Kelsie, this is my friend, Spec. I promise you he isn’t here to hurt you. He won’t even touch you.”

“Brenna,” he muttered in a low growl.

Sure, it was a promise she couldn’t make him keep, but she’d do her best to calm Kelsie and get the knife without traumatizing her more.

She took two slow steps toward Kelsie. “Kels, remember I told you about my boyfriend? How he was in a motorcycle club, and I knew they’d come for me? Spec is part of his club. He’s here to rescue us. To take you home.”

The younger woman blinked and turned her head a fraction of an inch in Brenna’s direction but didn’t fully take her attention off Spec.

“Brenna?” she asked, only now realizing who spoke to her. The poor girl was so emotionally wounded it would take a lot of patience, love, and therapy to help her heal.

“Yeah, honey. It’s me.”

Kelsie began to cry. “You’re okay? I was so scared for you.”

Aww, this poor, sweet woman. Smiling, she nodded. “I am. We’re free now.”

“Y-you look awful.”

That had Spec and her chuckling, making Kelsie straighten and readjust the knife.

“Hey,” Brenna said to capture Kelsie’s attention again. When the woman looked at her, she took another step closer. “I do look awful. I’m banged up and in a lot of pain, but I don’t think it’s anything serious.”

“Did—” Her breath caught. “Did they…”

“No,” Brenna interrupted before Kelsie had to say it. “No, they didn’t.” It came bone-chillingly close, but she didn’t need to know that yet.

“Oh. Good.” Her fellow prisoner’s shoulders slumped. “You’re lucky.”

Swallowing around a thick throat, Brenna nodded. “I am.” Tears rolled down her face as she imagined the horror the other woman suffered. Now, with first-hand knowledge of the fear and disgust the unwanted touch brought, her heart cracked in half. Kelsie had been through what Brenna had and so many more horrors.

“You took my place,” Kelsie whispered. “Why did you do that? You shouldn’t have done that.”

Lock would be flipping his shit if he heard that. “You suffered enough, honey. I couldn’t let you go through more.”

“You shouldn’t have done that,” she whispered again.

This was a conversation for another time. “Kels, can I hug you?”

The woman stared at her for a long moment before nodding once.

Victory. “I’ll need you to put the knife down first.”

She flicked her gaze to Spec.

“He won’t touch you at all.” Brenna walked into Kelsie’s line of sight, blocking Spec, who growled in frustration. “I promise. No one will touch you but me. These men here are good. They’ve gotten rid of everyone who hurt you. They’re all gone, and you are safe.”

She had no idea how true that was, but the Handlers would keep them safe and eliminate any threat they might encounter.

“We need to move soon,” Spec whispered behind her so low Kelsie wouldn’t hear. “We’ve been here too long.”

“Mm.” She made the noise in agreement before taking another step toward Kelsie.

“Brenna...” Lock’s worried voice came from the door.

“That’s my boyfriend,” she said with a smile for Kelsie. “He’s a little overprotective, and he’s worried I’ll get cut by your knife.”

“Oh.” Kelsie’s eyes dropped to the blade, then widened as though she’d forgotten she held it. Then she let her arms fall limp at her sides. The blade slipped from her fingers, clattering on the floor a split-second before Kelsie crumpled in a heap of sobs.

Brenna dove forward, wrapping her arms around her before she could hit the floor while Spec darted forward to grab the knife. She held Kelsie as she cried. “It’s o—” She almost said it was okay, but it wasn’t. It wouldn’t ever be okay. “It’s over,” she said instead. “I’ve got you. No one will hurt you.”

A gentle hand landed on her back, stroking upward with a touch she’d recognize anywhere.

Lock.

She looked at him over Kelsie’s head.

“You’re fucking incredible,” he mouthed, making her smile.

Pulse appeared on her other side. “Do you think she’ll let me check her over?”

“No. Not yet, but maybe if we take her back to the clubhouse, I can talk her into it on the way over.”

“Bren,” Lock said with a frown. “You need to go to a hospital. Both of you do.”

“I will,” she said, pleading with her eyes. “If Pulse thinks I need to go.”

“For fuck’s sake,” Lock muttered but nodded. “That’s what I get for falling for a badass.”

“I will not bullshit, brother. If she needs to go, I’ll tell you,” Pulse said in solemn promise.

“Let’s get the fuck out of here,” Lock said.

Sweeter words had never been spoken. “Yes. Let’s.”

Kelsie tried to stand, but her trembling knees kept buckling. With her ribs screaming, Brenna wouldn’t be able to help hold her up.

“Fuck this.” Ty strode across the room with a fierce scowl, moving straight toward Kelsie.

“No, Ty—” Brenna started, but he ignored her, crouching in front of Kelsie.

“I’m going to carry you,” he said in a voice that brokered no argument. “You won’t be able to make it up the stairs. Swear on my fucking life I won’t hurt a hair on your head. I’ll also let you point out who hurt you so I can kill them if you want.”

“Ty...” This was a terrible idea. Kelsie would freak out if he tried to pick her up.

But the young woman stared at Ty with something akin to awe. “Okay,” she said.

“Good.” He scooped her up like a damsel and strode from the room without another word.

Brenna stared after them in wonder. “What the hell?” she whispered.

“Don’t question it,” Lock said at her ear. “Ty’s a damn good man. She’ll be safe.” Lock gripped the back of her neck and gave a gentle squeeze. “Let’s get the fuck outta here.”

The warmth of Lock’s palm steadied her and provided strength beyond what she possessed herself. Within minutes, he had her bundled in the back seat of someone’s SUV. Lock sat beside her with his arm around her while Kelsie curled up in a ball on Ty’s lap in the front seat. Hopefully, she’d find some much-needed rest, but the way Ty frowned and kept glancing down at her killed that notion. She seemed to be gazing at nothing with the same vacant stare Brenna had come to recognize.

“Rest,” Lock whispered before kissing the side of her head.

The simple command unlocked something in her, releasing a wave of intense fatigue she couldn’t ignore. With a sigh for the comfort of sitting on

something other than the unforgiving floor, she rested her head on Lock's shoulder.

Within seconds, she faded to sleep, confident in her safety and protection in Lock's arms.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

“IF YOU DON’T stop hovering and growling at me like you’re plotting my death, I’m going to kick your sorry ass out of the room,” Pulse muttered as he probed Brenna’s sore ribs where he crouched next to the bunk.

She winced, making Lock clench his fists to keep from smacking Pulse’s hands away from her.

“Fuck off,” he grumbled, glaring at his brother, who might not survive what little remained of the night.

Brenna reached for his hand from her spot lying on a bed in the bunkroom. “Lock,” she said, chuckling slightly. “Let the man do his job.”

“He’s hurting you.”

She rolled her eyes. “Not really. He’s checking for injuries.”

He grunted, making her laugh again. Hell, if jokes at his expense got her grinning and happy, she could laugh at him all fucking day.

“All right.” Pulse rocked back on his heels. He glanced between Brenna and Lock. “I’m pretty sure nothing is broken, but the only way to be positive is an x-ray. But, like I said, I’m not overly worried about broken ribs. I’m pretty sure it’s just bruising, which is no joke. It runs all up and down your side, which will make it difficult to do much physical activity. You’ll be hurting for a week or two.”

“Fun,” Brenna muttered.

Lock squeezed her hand harder.

“I’ll get you some painkillers. Ice packs will help too. That gash near your eye is nasty. I can stitch it up for you here. I have lidocaine to numb it and a suture kit to close it up, but it’ll scar. If you go to the ER, you can request a surgeon stitch it closed for you, and you’ll have a much lower risk of scarring.”

“I’m not going to the hospital. Besides, I think a scar will be pretty kickass.”

Lock rolled his eyes. "Of course you do."

That had Brenna frowning. "Would it bother you?"

"Huh?" He blinked.

Her face flushed, and she avoided his gaze.

Lock cupped her chin, forcing her to look at him. "You mean, would a scar bother me?"

She nodded, pink-cheeked.

This woman.

"No, it wouldn't fucking bother me. Christ, baby, I don't give two shits about a scar. Hell, you could have a million scars on your face, and I'd love you just the same. Like you said, it's badass."

A grin spread across her face Lock couldn't resist kissing.

"Ahem."

Brenna drew back, red-faced again. "Sorry, Pulse."

"I'm not," Lock said. He kissed the back of Brenna's hand. "Finish up so we can do more of that."

"You're all fucking coupled up," Pulse muttered, shaking his head.

"Aww, don't be jealous, brother." He winked at Brenna just to see her face turn pink. The first thing they'd done, even before Pulse came in to check her out, was give her something to wear that wasn't a child-like dress. As soon as the offending garment came off, she shuddered in relief. Then he'd wiped the blood off her face. Now clean, she looked much better, except for the whopper of a gash near her eye.

And the bruises.

She bore a significant number of facial bruises. Hell, she had bruises all over her damn body.

"Let me get serious for one minute," Pulse said. He leaned in and gave Brenna a grave look. "I can take care of your injuries here. That's fine. But if there is more, you need to go to the hospital?"

"More?" Brenna frowned.

"I'll be blunt. If you need a rape kit, you need to go to the hospital."

"Oh." Her heavy sigh punched Lock in the chest. "No. It was close, but Lock got there in time," she whispered, eyes glassy.

"Okay, good." Pulse rose to his feet.

"But Kelsie..."

Their club's nurse nodded. "I assumed as much by her reaction to men. Harper and Jo are in with her now as well as Ty." He grinned and shook his

head. “That motherfucker won’t leave her side, and he’s the only man she allows within five feet of her.”

With Jo’s background in law enforcement and with Harper’s career as a social worker, they’d be the best choice to help the woman. Her reaction to Ty was interesting, to say the least, but Brenna wouldn’t question it. Whoever made Kelsie feel safe was fine by her.

“I want to see her.” Brenna winced and gasped as she tried to sit.

“Nuh-uh.” With a gentle hand, Lock guided her back down. “The ol’ ladies will take good care of her. Ty will too. I promise you.”

Huffing, Brenna sagged back against the bed. “Fine.”

Thank fuck.

He’d have sat on her if it came to that, but she must have sensed how close to the edge he was.

“I’m going to go check on Kelsie,” Pulse announced. “If she’ll let me check her over, I will. If not, I will have Harper and Jo take her to the hospital.”

“Make sure—”

“They will,” Pulse said. “They know to make sure she is only treated by female providers. Remember, Bren, this is what they want to do. These are the women they are creating a shelter for.”

“Thanks, brother.” Lock pulled Pulse in for a quick hug. Of all the Handlers, he was the one who kept to himself the most. When they first formed this chapter of the club, he’d wondered if Pulse would even join. For a while, he’d assumed he wouldn’t, but he’d surprised them all by committing.

As soon as Pulse left the bunkroom, Brenna patted the edge of the bunk. He strode over and sat, bracing a hand on either side of her body. Then he just stared at her. Every bruise, every cut, every mark pierced his soul and ignited a rage he didn’t know how to deal with. When his twin sister died, he’d spiraled down a long, dark tunnel of grief he had only recently broken free of. If Brenna had been taken, that tunnel would never end.

Jinx and Spec were taking care of the men who’d participated in the auctions, planned them, and the man who’d laid his hands on Brenna. Lock wasn’t a violent man by nature. Usually, he’d be happy to let the club’s enforcer handle the gruesome details of dealing with their enemies. But tonight, he wondered if he’d be satisfied not getting his hands bloody.

“Hey.” Brenna’s softly spoken word drew him from his haze. She gazed

up at him with so much adoration he almost had to look away. He didn't deserve that level of love, but goddamn, he'd take it. "I'm okay. I'm right here, and I'm okay. Feel me," she said as she pulled his hands from the bed to place them on her sides.

Lock bent forward, resting his head on her chest as he breathed her in. There, beneath his ear, beat the most beautiful heart he knew. The strong, steady thud sounded repeatedly, confirming her vitality and life.

"I was scared," she said as she stroked his hair. "Kelsie told me some of what happened to her to prepare me, and I was so s-scared."

He lifted his head so he could see her. Silent tears ran down her face. "You were brave," he said as he thumbed one away.

She shook her head. "I wasn't—"

"You were." He tried to convey with his tone how deeply he believed the words. "You were brave. You were strong. You were smart. And you were fierce."

"But I was scared."

"You were supposed to be scared." He kissed the underside of her chin. "When I was in rehab, one of the things that finally got me to accept my sister's death was when the counselor told me I was supposed to feel horrible after her death. I fought it. I thought I was supposed to fight it, and it led me down a dark path. Once I accepted it was okay to feel like shit, I was able to begin healing."

"I'm so proud of how far you've come," she whispered.

Easy for her to say since she hadn't seen him in those days, but he was learning minute by minute to forgive himself for those days.

"You were supposed to be scared. They designed it that way. And now you're supposed to feel fucked-up over it all. So be kind to yourself. I'm going to make sure to be very kind to you..." He let his voice take on a seductive tone, which had her huffing a laugh. "But I want you to be just as kind to yourself."

"I love you," she whispered through her tears.

"Same, baby, same." He kissed her gently, feeling the wetness of her tears on his face. "Christ, I love you." Just as he dove in again, harder this time, slipping his tongue past her lips, a knock on the door had him scowling.

The door opened, and Brooke stuck her head in. "Sorry to interrupt," she said with a sheepish grin. "But someone woke up for a diaper change, heard you were back, and couldn't wait another second to see you."

“Caleb!” Seeing the baby had Brenna crying harder.

Lock froze. “Is it too much? Should we wait?”

“No. No. I’m just so happy to see him. Come here, baby,” she said to Caleb.

His son seemed half asleep, but his face lit at the sight of Brenna. Lock held his arms out as Brooke walked into the room. Instead of coming to him, Caleb reached for Brenna.

“Hi, baby,” she whispered.

As Brooke placed him on the side of the bed, he immediately snuggled into Brenna’s side and fell back asleep. Pleasure glowed on Brenna’s face as she cradled the baby. Thankfully, Brooke didn’t linger. She snuck out of the room without another word, leaving Lock and what he hoped would become his little family alone to process while they waited for Pulse’s return.

The moment was one of those rare few that stuck with a person for their entire life. Caleb at Brenna’s side, his woman gazing at him with a serene smile and him watching over them, prepared to protect them with his life.

“This is nice,” Brenna said. Her words slurred slightly, pointing to her fatigue. “The three of us. Like this. Don’t you think?”

He stroked a hand over Caleb’s fuzzy head. “I think it’s perfect.”

EPILOGUE

“BABE, YOU’VE GOT to find some chill.”

“I’m almost done.” Brenna smoothed imaginary wrinkles from the pale blue comforter on the full-size bed. The color had been chosen for its calming effect and soothing undertones. She straightened the pillows for the fifteenth time that hour as two strong arms circled her waist, drawing her against her favorite torso.

“She doesn’t care if the bed is perfect,” Lock whispered against her ear before kissing the side of her neck. “Which it is, by the way.”

Brenna sagged as she sighed. “I’m obsessing, aren’t I?”

She could feel Lock’s lips curl into a smile against her neck. “Just a little bit.”

“I just want her to be comfortable here. I want her to stay as long as she needs,” she said as she spun in her ol’ man’s embrace. Her arms went around his neck, and she received a sweet peck on the lips. “I’ve been so worried about her.”

One of the things she loved most about Lock was his willingness to listen to her. He never once belittled her or made her feel as though her thoughts and feelings were wrong. Even the many times she’d spiraled in the direct aftermath of being kidnapped, he’d validated her feelings, held her through the worst of the breakdowns, and built her back up again. So many times she’d woken in the night sweaty, with tears on her face and muscular arms holding her while Lock whispered words of love and comfort in her ear.

She couldn’t have gotten through it without him there to prop her up when she crumbled.

Kelsie didn’t have that. She was scared, traumatized, and alone.

“It doesn’t seem fair,” she said, playing with the hair at the base of his neck.

“What’s that?” He held her close with those large hands splayed across

her back.

The sense of safety and security she found in his arms meant the world to her. He'd never hurt her and would rain hell down on anyone else who tried. And with the backing of the Handlers, she never had to worry about herself or any of the women she now considered family.

Two months following the most traumatic events of her life, she'd healed physically. The bruises faded, the stitched wound closed nicely, leaving a scar she hid beneath makeup, and the pain disappeared. Seventy-five percent of the time, she didn't have any lingering emotional upset either, but when she did?

Lock was there.

Always.

Who did Kelsie have?

"I'm happy." She shrugged. "So happy. It's a bit of a ridiculous amount of happiness, really. I have so much support and love. It's what's gotten me through and helped me heal. Kelsie doesn't have that. It doesn't seem fair."

"She has you," Lock answered simply. "You and the ol' ladies."

"Yeah. Now, but she's been alone for the past two months."

"That wasn't your choice," Lock said. He cupped her face, ensuring she saw how serious he was. "She chose to leave, baby."

"I know, but..." She shrugged.

Three days after being admitted to the hospital, Kelsie vanished. According to the physician, she'd checked out against medical advice and left no indication of where she'd gone.

The news devastated Brenna. All she'd wanted was to help the woman she'd been held captive with, even going so far as to prepare the guest room in her house for Kelsie to stay when released.

But no one had heard a peep from her until five days ago when she was readmitted to the hospital with a belly full of pills, barely clinging to life.

"If only I'd—"

"No." Lock kissed the sentence right off her lips. "There is no if-only. You did everything you could. She wasn't ready then, baby, but she had the hospital call you, so she is now."

"But it was almost too late."

"Almost doesn't matter. She's alive, getting help, and will be here in a few hours so you can mother-hen the crap out of her."

The shelter's interior wasn't entirely finished, but Kelsie would be their

first client. Brenna worked her ass off to design the perfect room customized to the younger woman. She'd obsessed from the moment the hospital called until this very moment. Kelsie requested no visitors, so Brenna hadn't been able to see her in the hospital but had agreed to pick her up at noon. When asked, the physician said it would be fine for her to bring Lock along, which hopefully meant Kelsie wasn't as reactive around men. Still, Harper and Brooke would accompany her instead of Lock to be safe.

Of course, he'd been nothing but understanding even while he tended to be on the overprotective side these days and hated when she went anywhere alone. That was getting better with time as well. They both began therapy, him to make sure he didn't fall back into destructive patterns and her to process the trauma. They even attended together at times to keep them strong and communicating properly.

God, she was one lucky woman.

"Have I thanked you recently?"

"Hmm." Lock cocked his head with a playful smile on his lips. "For what? I do so many amazing things."

Brenna didn't take the humorous bait. "You do. Every day. I'm so damn lucky to be loved by you," she said, her expression as serious as she'd ever been. "And I love you so much, Lock. Sometimes, it feels like I'll never be able to tell you how much. Like it's exploding out of me. Like—"

He kissed her hard. As happened every single time, she melted beneath the onslaught.

"You thank me all the goddamn time. And like I tell you every time, stop doing it. I love you, and you deserve to feel it every fucking second of every fucking day. Okay?"

Her throat thickened, and tears threatened. It didn't take much to make her tear up these days, but that was getting better too. "Okay," she whispered.

"Now..." Lock kissed her neck, her jaw, her lips. "What do you say we make sure this bed was constructed properly? You know, we can't have our guest getting hurt." He walked her back until her calves hit the mattress.

Brenna burst out laughing. "No!" She playfully swatted him away even though she'd love to get horizontal for the next few hours. "We can't do that here. Kelsie has to sleep here tonight."

"We can wash the sheets." He slid his hands up the front of her shirt, making her nipples pebble in anticipation. She knew better than anyone what those fingers were capable of, and her body never failed to respond with

enthusiasm. Her knees weakened, and her resolve nearly did as well.

“Lock,” she said with a groan as she mentally calculated whether or not she had time to wash the sheets. She tilted her head, allowing him access to her neck, which he took full advantage of, nipping and sucking exactly how she liked.

Maybe she could pull it off.

“LOCK, MORE,” BRENNA finally said, and Lock’s blood surged in hot victory. Thank God. Her scent and flavor invaded his senses, making it nearly impossible to stop.

“Dada!” Caleb’s shriek hit him like a bucket of ice water.

Unless, of course, his son toddled into the room. Then he could stop.

He groaned against her neck as Brenna giggled.

“Hold up, you little monster,” Harper said as she chased after the surprisingly speedy one-year-old. “Whoops. Looks like our timing was not good, buddy.”

It took Herculean effort, but Lock peeled himself away from Brenna’s warm, welcoming body. “It’s all right. Come here, little man.” He crouched and held his arms out for his son. Three days after they rescued Brenna, a scandal had rocked the local judicial system. A city judge had been sleeping with a partner at Oliver’s firm. They hadn’t disclosed the relationship, and the attorney continued to try cases in that judge’s court. Aside from the shocking conflict of interest, both parties had spouses. Many cases involving that judge and attorney were dropped, including the custody suit against Lock.

Karma worked in mysterious ways, especially when someone crossed the MC.

“I’m out, guys. Bren, I’ll see you later when we pick up Kelsie.”

“You’re the best, Harp,” Brenna replied.

“Dada!” The boy threw himself in Lock’s open arms.

“Oof,” he said with an exaggerated struggle as he picked up Caleb.

“You’re getting so heavy. Can you stop growing?” He blew a wet raspberry into Caleb’s neck.

As expected, he burst into a fit of baby giggles Lock wished he could hear every day for the rest of his life. It was the best damn sound—free and full of pure joy. The sound of happiness before life intrudes. The little guy had been through a shitload of trauma in his tiny life but remained blissfully unaware. Everyone in the club showered love and affection on him, and that’s all he

needed to be sublimely happy.

He turned, baby balanced on his hip, to find Brenna staring at him with glassy eyes. As it always did when she seemed upset, his stomach bottomed out. “What’s wrong?”

She smiled through near tears—a gorgeous, colossal smile that radiated sunshine through the room. “Nothing,” she said, shaking her head. “Nothing is wrong at all. It’s just... the two of you together does something to me.” She pressed a hand to her heart. “It’s perfect.”

Feeling a little mushy inside, he closed the gap between them and kissed her softly.

“Mwa!” Caleb shouted, then giggled again. He leaned forward and smacked his open mouth against Brenna’s cheek. Giving kisses to Brenna had become his new favorite skill.

Lock couldn’t blame him. It was one of his favorite activities as well.

“Oh, thank you for the kisses, sweet boy,” Brenna said before returning the favor with a loud kiss on Caleb’s cheek.

“Mama,” he said, patting her face in the uncoordinated way he had.

Brenna gasped. Her eyes flared, and she shook her head. “Oh, no, baby.” She glanced at Lock and mouthed. “I’m so sorry.” Then focused on Caleb again. “I’m not your—”

“Bren,” he cut in.

She met his gaze, pupils wide and a little panicked. “I swear I haven’t been teaching him that. I know I’m not his moth—”

“Babe.” He cupped her face. “I know you haven’t. You’re my woman. You moved in a month ago. You take care of him as much as I do. You love him, and he loves you. Of course, he’s going to call you mama. It’s what he should call you. It’s what you are to him.”

Tears escaped the corners of her eyes. “Really?” she whispered, sounding awed. “You mean it?”

“Hell yes.” He pressed his forehead to hers. “I love you. Not just today or even tomorrow. I’m in this forever, baby. We both are.”

“Me too,” she whispered through the tears.

“Then, fuck yeah, he should call you mama. It’s what you are.”

“I love that. I love you.”

They stayed that way with their heads pressed close, lost in each other’s eyes until a third tiny face bumped against their cheeks. Caleb copied them, pressing his forehead to the sides of their faces.

Brenna chuckled, but it quickly turned into a full-blown laugh, setting Caleb off in a round of giggles.

Six months ago, Lock was lost in a dark hole so deep he almost didn't climb his way out. He'd thought he was alone with nothing but grief and sorrow to keep him company.

Today, he knew differently. He had his club family at his side, his son in his arms, and the most kind, loving, amazing woman to call his own.

The joyful sound of their combined laughter was his to cherish for the rest of his life.

Thank you for reading LOCK. If you enjoyed this book, please leave a review on [Amazon](#) or [Goodreads](#).

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About the Author

Lilly Atlas is an award-winning contemporary romance author. She's a proud Navy wife and mother of three spunky girls. Every time Lilly downloads a new eBook she expects her Kindle App to tell her it's exhausted and overworked, and to beg for some rest. Thankfully that hasn't happened yet so she can often be found absorbed in a good book.