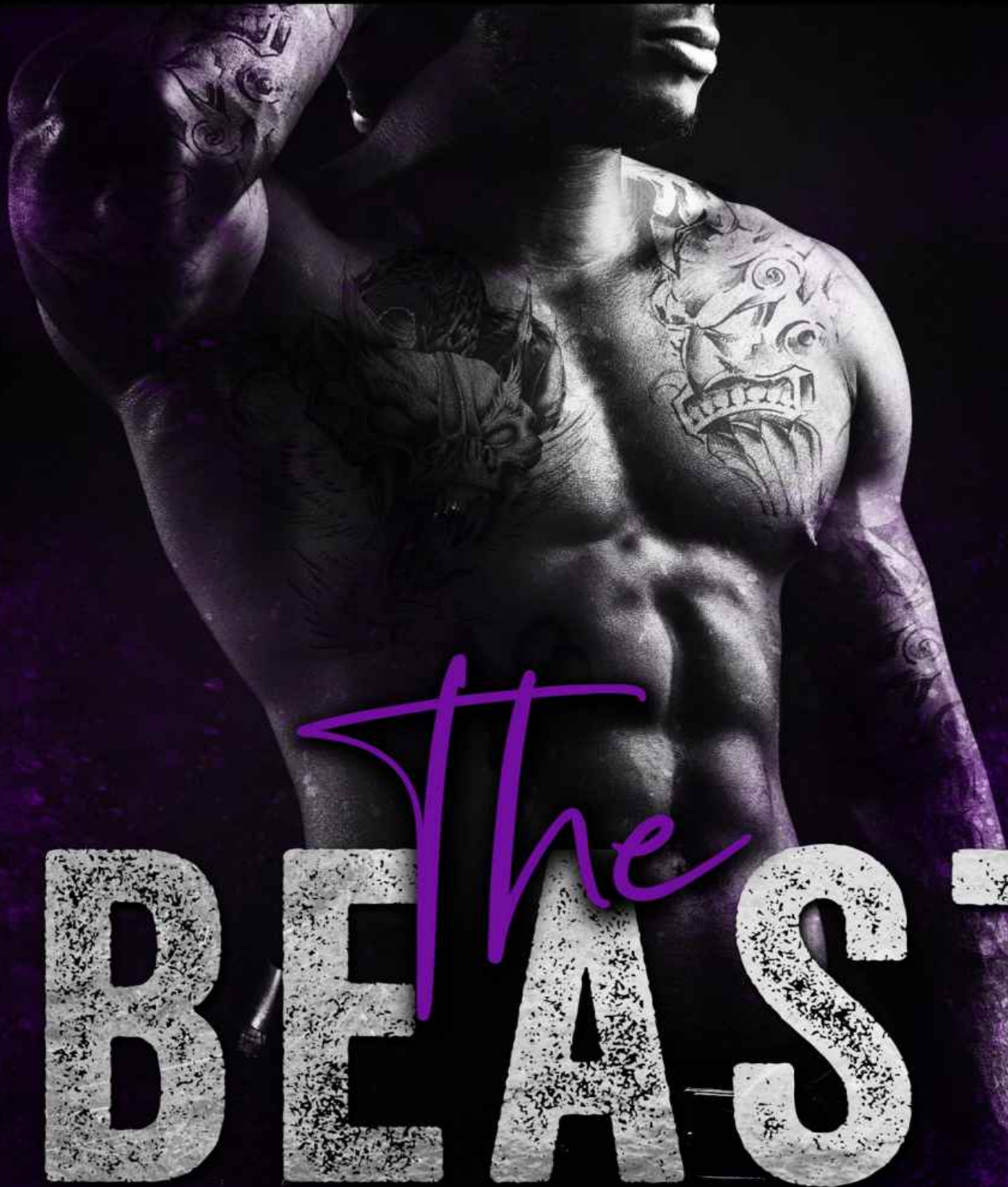


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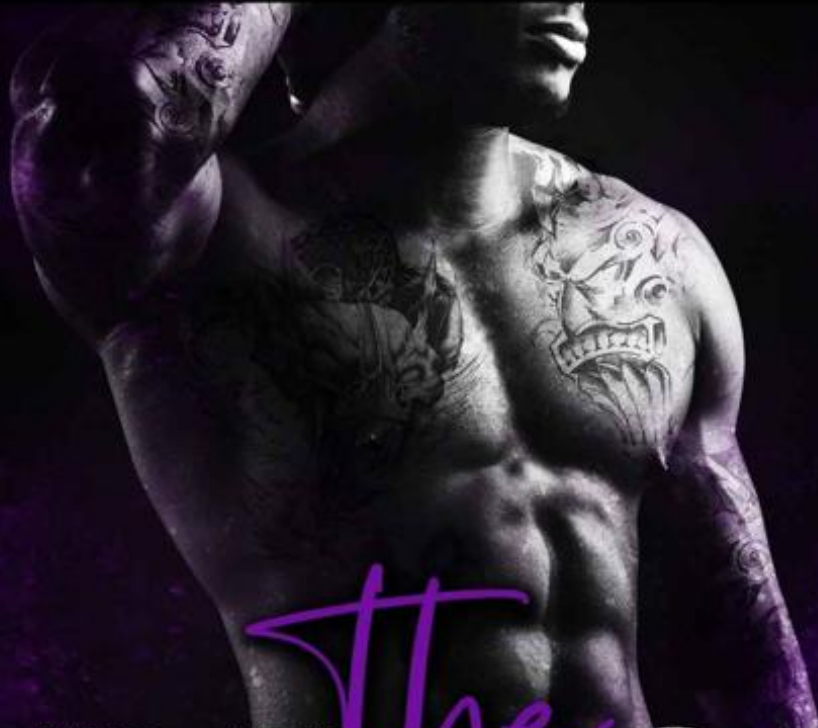
The
BEAST

GYPSY BASTARDS MC



J A D E M A R S H A L L

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DEDICATION

For Merrick Allen Jones

Thank you for always welcoming us into your home, your family, and your heart.

You inspired me to create Viking and he will now stand in your stead.

You have left a space in our lives and hearts that can never be filled.

Ride free, uncle.

He lived, he loved, he laughed, he left.

1970 - 2023

THE BEAST

Gypsy Bastards MC, 4

Jade Marshall

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Content Warning

The Beast may contain triggers for some. As a reader, I find trigger warnings to be spoilers, but as an author, I understand they are sometimes necessary. Although I am not going to list each one, there are many. Please feel free to email me at admin@jademarshallauthor.com with your specific trigger(s) and I will let you know if that trigger is in this book.

For those of you that wish to go in blind, please remember that this is a work of fiction, and I do *not* condone any of the situations or actions of the characters.

Glossary

1%	Diamond shaped patch on the cut of a rider. Proclaims him to be an outlaw. Not part of the 99% that are law-abiding.
Cut	Leather waistcoat. This item of clothing is respected by all who wear it as it has the club emblem emblazoned on it.
Patch / Rocker	Full members wear the patch on the back of their cuts. It is a way to easily show which MC they are part of. There are also smaller patches that denote rank, road name, and even the location of the chapter.
Rank	Similar to the army, members fall into different roles and ranks.
President	Leader.
Vice President	Second in command.
Sargent at Arms	Responsible for keeping everyone in line.
Road Captain	Responsible for planning all road trips.
Enforcer security.	Ensures rules are met. Usually handles security.

Prospect	Someone who wants to become a member of the MC but is still in their trial period. The trial period can last anywhere from two years upward.
Hang-around	Someone who just shows up for the parties. They are not officially affiliated with the MC.
Club ass members.	Women who are sexually available to all MC members.
Back warmer	Someone who rides behind a member on a bike. Usually, a friend or sister.
Old Lady	Wife or spouse of a member. They are held in the highest esteem and are protected at all costs.
Property patch	This patch is designed specifically for old ladies. It is also part of a cut such as those worn by the male members but has property rockers included. It states which member of the MC the woman belongs to, using their road name.
Road name	Nickname given to a member by the club.
Cage vehicle.	Car, truck, van, or any other enclosed vehicle.

Chapter One

A Favor for a Friend

Beast

Hard rock pumps through the speaker system, shaking the windows in their panes. There are a thousand forms of debauchery and illegal activities taking place around me and I couldn't feel more at home. This is who we are. We are well known all over this county and a couple of others, for our parties. And we don't need a special occasion to throw one. Tonight, I have no idea what we are celebrating but I do know that I'm glad we are.

My phone continues to ring even though I'm trying my best to ignore it. I have a brand-new piece of club ass down on her knees between my spread thighs, deep-throating my cock like her life depends on it. Her hair is tangled in my fist as I force her to take me deeper into her throat, reveling in the feel of it, and grinning like a loon once her gag reflex kicks in. I'm just starting to get into the sloppy blowjob when I give in and answer the call.

"What?" I bark down the line, unimpressed with having to answer any call at the moment.

"I need a personal favor," the voice of Severu Cammareri carries down the line.

I push the dark-headed woman sucking my dick away, zip up, and move to a quieter area of the clubhouse. The party is in full swing, and I need to be away from it all, somewhere quieter. Severu calling might be my chance to use my early affiliation with the mafioso, to do something big for the Gypsy Bastards. It isn't every day that the underboss of one of the most powerful mafia families in the US calls, asking for a favor.

"If I knew making friends with you all those years ago would be such a pain in the ass, I never would have done it," I

say casually.

I don't want him to know that this is something I have been waiting for. Severu needs to think I'm doing him a favor, that he needs me more than I need him.

"I'll owe you one," he replies immediately. There's a note of desperation in his voice, and I know this is my one chance.

"My president, Pope, wants a meet with your brother, Alceu. The Gypsy Bastards should be responsible for your shipments through our territory, no one else."

I don't beat around the bush. I knew what I wanted in return for this favor, I've always known. He wouldn't be calling me if this was something he could handle in-house. We may have known each other since we were ten-year-old punks playing in the street, but that doesn't mean shit anymore.

"Done," he replies instantly.

I know that doesn't mean shit. I got the meeting for the club. What happens after that is out of my hands. This is the most I can do.

"What do you need?" I ask, taking a swig of my already warm beer. Thankfully it's only my second of the night because I have a feeling I may need to be sober to do this favor.

"I need you to get rid of a body for me," he says.

I can hear from the tone of his voice that he isn't too happy to be placing this information in my hands, and I wouldn't be either if I were in his position. This is good news for me, though, it's always good to have more knowledge. I could use it against him in the future, even though I probably won't. We've been *friends* for a long time, and I won't throw that away, but you never know when you may need a favor, or to blackmail someone.

"Don't you have people for that?" I ask trying to rile him up for fun. Severu has always been calm and collected, and I would love nothing more than to ruffle his custom suit.

“This isn’t a family matter. It’s personal.”

“Text me the address.”

I don’t wait for him to say anything else before I hang up. A moment later my phone pings with a text and I head back to the party to see which of my brothers is sober enough to help me. After all, this is for the betterment of the club, not just one of my long-lost friends.

“Where are we going?” Bishop asks for the third time. “And why the hell are we in a cage?”

I don’t know why he has such a hangup with my truck, but I guess it had a lot to do with the way he was raised. His father was a member of a rival MC, training him to take his place one day down the line. But the way his father did things never sat well with Bishop. Long story short, he defected from his father’s MC and joined the Gypsy Bastards.

“Like I said the other times you asked, we’re doing a favor for a friend that will pay dividends for the club. That’s all you need to know.”

“You’re being very secretive,” he grumbles. “Who is this friend? What is this favor?”

“I’m not telling you shit.” I laugh. “And you’re here because you are technically still a prospect. It’s your job to help senior members when they tell you to. No questions asked.”

Bishop grumbles something unintelligible beside me while the GPS voice tells me that we have reached our destination and I pull the van over to the side. I know this building. The Cammareri family runs their brothel from this three-story brownstone. What the hell has Severu gotten himself, and me, into this time?

Getting out of the car I walk a couple of steps into a dark alley before I see a tiny woman smoking a cigarette. Dark

hair and long legs with a tiny waist approach us on a set of blood-red sky-high stilettos.

“There he is,” she says and smiles at me.

“Do I know you?” I ask instantly on alert. Just because she’s a pretty woman doesn’t mean she isn’t a threat.

“I sure want to get to know her,” Bishop says loudly causing the girl to laugh freely.

“No, you don’t know me, Beast. My name is Allegra. Severu said you’d be coming,” she replies, putting the butt of her cigarette out with the toe of her high-heeled stiletto.

“And you’ve been waiting in the dark alley?” I ask a little pissed off.

She is pretty but I can’t be sure she’s even old enough to vote. Her face holds an innocence I haven’t seen in a long time, but her eyes have darkness in them. She is so young that I’m wondering what the hell she’s doing here and how she knows Severu. They pride themselves on not forcing women to work for them, that every woman who works for them is there by choice. But this girl has me doubting that creed.

“I run Nocturn,” Allegra supplies. “I saw you pull up on the CCTV and I wanted a smoke anyway. Besides, I didn’t know Severu had friends, so I had to meet you.”

“I could be anyone for all you know. What you did is dangerous,” I chastise her thinking of my younger sister doing something stupid like this.

“Not really.” She smiles. “Severu said you would be the biggest black man I had ever seen, and he wasn’t wrong.”

At this Bishop barks out a laugh. To be fair, the girl is two heads shorter than me in her heels, if not more.

“So,” she hedges, “you’re here to take out the garbage.”

“Yeah.” I shake my head. This girl is something else. She would get along great with any of the women at the clubhouse. “Where is it?”

She points down the shadow-filled alley before walking back to the door on the side of the building. I watch Bishop watch her petite ass swing as she walks, almost drooling.

“Don’t feel too bad for him,” she calls out. “He deserved what he got.”

And with those parting words, she closes the door and disappears, leaving me with a million questions.

“We need to come back here when we’re done with this errand,” Bishop says as he falls into step beside me. “I need to spend some time getting to know Allegra.”

“If she runs Nocturn, she is under the protection of the Camarreri family,” I explain. Bishop is still new to this area and may not know this.

“I know. But I’m also sure that woman might be worth going to war over.”

Chapter Two

Unforeseen Situation

Irene

Someone looking at this situation from the outside might find it ironic. I'm sitting on my kitchen floor mentally scolding myself at the fucking stupidity that led me to this fucked-up situation. I work at a women's shelter for God's sake. I know the signs of abuse. I know what to look for. And I definitely fucking know what triggers abusive men.

Yet here I am. Leaning with my back against the silver double-door fridge/freezer combo, holding a bag of frozen peas to my quickly swelling eye. I'm not some damsel in distress but my options are limited. I can call my older brother Laine and within ten minutes my big brother will be here to help me pack my shit, kick the ever-loving hell out of Gerald, and all my problems will be solved.

That is, until they aren't. Because Gerald is a cop and a prick, and his ego would never be able to handle Laine beating him up. He would have my brother arrested and then he would probably have the entire police force of Louisiana so far up my ass I'd never be able to shit again. So, I won't be calling my brother. I'll handle this shit myself.

"Will you stop sulking?" Gerald asks as he sneers at me. "I didn't even hit you that hard."

Removing the peas, I glare at him with my good eye, the one that isn't currently swollen shut. I try to see him the way I did in the beginning. He really is a disgustingly handsome motherfucker. Dark hair and the most vivid blue eyes I have ever seen. He has a smile that belongs in a toothpaste ad, and he keeps his body in peak condition.

I can see why I fell for him. I remember his charming personality and the way he used to make me feel, not to mention how great his ass looks in his dress blues. But all of

that is gone now, lost to the fact that this prick put his fucking hands on me.

“I think you hit me hard enough,” I reply dryly.

“If you had listened in the first place, I never would have laid hands on you.” He stalks closer, anger still visible in every line of his body. “But you never listen. You think you can just do whatever you want, and the rest of the world will fall into step with you. But this is my house, and you will fall in line, or I’ll make you.”

Anger surges through me at his words. *His* house? My name is on the fucking lease. I decorated this place, and most of the fucking furniture is mine. I know the next words out of my mouth will probably set him off again and he’s bound to go into another fit of rage. I could really end up hurt worse, but I’ve never been known to keep my mouth shut.

He needs to understand that this is not normal behavior. Rising from my spot on the worn linoleum I stare him down.

“You lost your temper because I made chicken for dinner instead of pork. Does that sound logical to you? Because to me, it sounds batshit fucking crazy.”

Before the last word leaves my mouth, I see his fist flying at my face again and I know it isn’t going to be pretty.

I wake up sometime later in the fetal position. I’m back on the ugly cream-and-brown damn linoleum floor with congealing blood pooling around me. From the angry shade of purple his face turned, I’m surprised to be alive. Pushing up gingerly, I don’t feel too bad as long as I don’t try to breathe. That hurts like a bitch. But I pull myself up from the floor and walk through the house that we’ve been sharing for the past two months.

Memories assault me as I pass the framed photographs on the hallway wall. Better times, happier times. When I didn't know who Gerald really was.

It didn't start like this. Gerald was a great guy. Always bringing me flowers, being attentive, and trying to spend more time with me. We dated for six months and rarely spent time apart before moving in together. Thinking back now, I realize I was letting his controlling behavior lead our relationship from the beginning.

He has isolated me from most of my friends and has even recently started complaining about the time I spent at my job. I don't know why I didn't see it sooner because all the signs were right in front of me. He is a classic narcissist with major control issues.

Never mind the past, the little voice of reason in the back of my mind screams.

What do I do now?

Leave! my inner voice yells.

Yes, but where do I go? I can't let Laine see me like this. He's still on parole and will most definitely end up back in prison if he gets his hands on Gerald. My mind runs a mile a minute as I amble through the house to our bedroom.

Motherfucker!

This bastard was lying in my bed, sleeping peacefully, while I was bleeding on the kitchen floor. My temper spikes and for a full five minutes, I stand frozen in the doorway glaring at him. I consider taking his service pistol off the nightstand and simply ending him. It takes me that long to decide whether I really hate the color orange enough to let him live. Instead, I grab my handbag, toothbrush, charger, and car keys, and slam the door as hard as I can on the way out.

A message blinks on the screen of my cell phone and I hesitate before opening it.

Kaiya: **I miss your face!**

A small smile twitches at the corner of my mouth before I hit “call.” I don’t even think it through. It rings twice before she answers, laughter and music floating down the line.

“Hey, bitch!” she says loudly.

“Hey yourself, bitch.” I chuckle.

Smiling hurts. I think about looking at myself in the mirror but decide against it. I need to be across state lines for that because I may change my mind about shooting him.

“What are you up to? I miss you,” Kaiya continues speaking, none the wiser about my personal dilemma.

“Well...” I hesitate for a second before turning the key in the ignition and backing my little red car out of the driveway.

“Tell me!” Kaiya says with another laugh.

“I hope you have an extra room,” I say nervously. “I’m coming to visit.”

“Hell, yes,” she whoops loudly down the line. “When?”

“I just just got into my car.”

“It’s ten o’clock. You can’t drive here in the middle of the night.”

“Like hell I can’t,” I say. “I miss you. And Storm and Brogan. I need a break and I can’t think of a better place to do it than with my favorite people.”

“Fine,” Kaiya gives in begrudgingly. “But I’ll be calling you every hour until you are right in front of me.”

“Yes, Mother,” I sass, earning a growl for my effort. “See you in a couple of hours.”

I wait for the light to turn green before taking off into the night. The drive will give me some time to work through everything going on in my head. I can surely get a week of work if I tried hard enough. But I have a feeling this is the last Louisiana will see of me. Too many things have happened here for me to call it home anymore.

Chapter Three

New Arrival

Beast

Getting rid of a body isn't as easy as they make it seem on TV. There are many factors that play a role in getting rid of the evidence. After driving for an hour, I find the spot close to what I'm looking for. It's secluded, the earth is moist because of the stream a little bit down the hill, and I know it will have full sunlight throughout the day.

I sound like a damn gardener trying to pick out the right spot to plant roses but it's just as complicated as getting your plants to grow.

The ground can't be hard and packed because Bishop and I need to dig a ditch for the body and the moisture will speed up the decomposition along with the sunlight. The ideal would be to leave the body uncovered but we obviously can't do that.

Throwing a shovel at Bishop I smirk. "Let's get digging. The sooner this shit is done, the sooner we can get back to the compound."

"I fucking hate digging," Bishop complains. "Can't we just burn him?"

"No. This is an insurance policy." One I'm hoping I'll never need.

We each start to work and try to get as much done as quickly as possible. I can feel my shoulder muscles start to burn after the first ten minutes, but I keep going. After digging three feet down, Bishop turns to me.

"I think this is deep enough."

"We need between five and six feet to make sure the scavengers don't smell the remains and dig it up."

“Where the fuck did you learn all this shit?” He stares at me.

“College,” I reply with a shrug.

“Shut up!” he exclaims with a look of shock. “You went to college?”

“Three years on a football scholarship before I blew out my knee,” I say while throwing another shovel of dirt over my shoulder. “I lost my scholarship and never finished my degree.”

“That’s a raw deal, man. Do you ever think of going back?”

“Not interested. I learned everything I need to know to make me the best criminal possible.” I laugh. “Now, get back to digging, asshole.”

It takes us a couple of minutes more but when the ditch is finished, I drag the body closer on a piece of clear tarp, leaving as little evidence as possible. Taking my hunting knife, I cut away all the clothes from the body and put them in a separate pile before rolling the man into the hole. I’m happy to see he has some extra fat around his belly. The fat will liquefy and speed up the process even more. Judging by his size and the spot we pick, he should be in active decay in about five or six weeks.

Bishop watches me as I do all these things, studying me but never saying a word.

After the man is in the hole, we shovel as much of the dirt back in as we can. I gather some dry wood and build a fire on the mound before getting us each a beer from the cooler I loaded into the back of my truck before we left.

“Why didn’t you get these out earlier?” Bishop asks after taking a massive draw from the green bottle.

“Because we needed to do this properly. And drinking beer while working has never ensured that shit got done right.”

Taking the man’s clothing and personal belongings, I wrap them in the plastic tarp before throwing them onto the

fire. I watch as the flames consume the last of the evidence, adding more wood occasionally. I don't want anything left over.

When I'm satisfied that everything has been destroyed, I put out the fire before getting back in my truck with Bishop and heading home.

Six hours and a shower later I find myself seated at the bar beside Bishop, sharing another beer.

"That was fucking insane," he murmurs.

"Yes, but necessary," I reply. I finished the beer and signaled my younger brother, Justice, to bring a new one.

Justice is manning the bar as part of his prospect duties. Although, I think he may enjoy it enough to still do it after he gets patched. He says he hears things and I believe him. Alcohol does tend to make people loose-lipped.

"Do you know what happened?" Bishop asks lowly.

"Don't care," I reply taking my beer with me as I rise. "What I care about is what I'm getting out of the deal."

"Which is?" Bishop asks with a raised brow.

"Wait until we go to church, and you'll find out. For now, have some fun."

Walking away I scan the bar for the little brunette piece of ass I had between my legs before this entire shitshow started. I can't even remember her name. I don't see her around but some of my brothers aren't here either so she might be servicing a different member right now.

Member. The double entendre makes me chuckle as I scan the crowded room.

My gaze lands on Mad Dog and Kaiya as she gestures wildly with her hands. Mad Dog is frowning so I make my

way over to them wondering if there's something wrong.

"I'm sorry, little bird," Mad Dog says to his wife. "We just don't have the room. She will have to stay here or at the motel in town."

Kaiya makes a noise in the back of her throat that sounds a lot like a kitten growling before stomping away. Mad Dog watches every step she takes until she is seated beside Storm, our president's old lady.

"Don't ever get married," he jokes. "Women will drive you crazy."

"First, brother, you love that woman and the fact that she drives you crazy. It's like the two of you thrive off that shit." I chuckle. "Second, don't ever let Kaiya hear you say that about marriage. I really don't feel like digging a hole to hide your body, but you know I will if she asks me."

Mad Dog throws his head back as he laughs loudly, drawing the attention of every person here before clapping me on the back.

"I love that you love all the women here enough to help them hide a body. You're a good man, Kelly."

He is the only person that still calls me by my actual name, most people just refer to me as Beast nowadays. I'm about to give him shit when Kaiya screams behind us.

"What the ever-loving fuck happened to you?"

Chapter Four

I'm Not Explaining a Damn Thing

Irene

In theory, I know exactly how many miles there are between Louisiana and Gypsy Falls. That's bullshit when you're driving all those miles with a throbbing headache, one eye swollen shut, and what I'm starting to believe is not simply a cracked but a broken rib. It doesn't help that it's the middle of the night and every passing vehicle has their lights on. It only makes my head hurt a little more.

Sitting in the same position for over three hours has made me regret my decision quite a few times, but I push through. I know when I get to Gypsy Falls, I'll have a lot of explaining to do but I can't think of anywhere else to go.

Finally, the lights of the Gypsy Falls beckon from just beyond the horizon and I feel pure elation at the thought of getting out of my car and just having space to breathe and move, however painful both actions may be. I drive down Main Street following the GPS as the generic voice directs me to the location that Kaiya texted.

Mentally I'm preparing to see a woman who has become a dear friend to me in the past year. But I'm aware that it doesn't matter how much I prepare, Kaiya is going to lose her shit when she sees me. I stop at the local gas station and buy a pair of cheap sunglasses, some makeup, some pain pills, and a pack of wet wipes.

A pimply kid working behind the counter stares at me before handing over the key to the restroom.

"Are you okay, lady?" he asks nervously.

"Yeah, you should see the other guy," I joke before closing the bathroom door.

I spend fifteen minutes cleaning my face and trying to hide some of the damage with the shitty makeup I bought. Looking at myself in the mirror I throw my hands in the air and give up trying to disguise the bruises already discoloring my face. It clearly isn't going to work.

I give the kid the key back with a smile and gingerly clamber back into my car. I drink three of the pain pills with a swig of water before following the voice for the last couple of blocks until I reach a building that looks more like a factory than a clubhouse for an outlaw biker club. But I recognize the building from the photos Kaiya has sent me over the past year.

There are at least twenty gleaming chromed-out motorcycles and a handful of cars and trucks parked on the gravel. Suddenly, I'm not so sure about being here. I don't know anything about these people except what Kaiya and Storm have told me. Granted, they sound like good guys, but I shouldn't have come here in this state. I should have found a motel and laid low until I looked better before coming out here. I want to be here, I miss Kaiya, and I need the break, but this isn't the right way to do it.

As usual, I didn't think things through before making a snap decision. I'm about to reverse out of the lot when my car door is ripped open and a shrill scream escapes me.

"Fuck, lady," a mocha-skinned man with dreadlocks stares at me. "Are you okay?"

My mouth hangs open as I ogle the young man before me. His name is Justice. I know this from Kaiya's photos as well as the tag on his cut.

"I'm fine, Justice," I say while trying to extract myself from my car. "I'm here to see Kaiya."

Taking my hand, he helps me out of the car. He doesn't ask how I know his name, but his gaze assesses me. If he hadn't seen me, I would have driven away, found a motel, and lied to Kaiya. But he has seen me and there's no turning back now.

“No offense,” he says as he walks beside me looking like he’s afraid I may pass out or fall. “But you don’t look fine.”

“I’m sure I don’t.” I smirk at him as he swings the door open for us to enter.

No more words pass between us because the moment we walk in, Kaiya’s gaze finds me.

“What the ever-loving fuck happened to you?” she shrieks.

The attention of every man and woman in the building shifts to me and I’m acutely aware that this is what an ant must feel like under a microscope.

I smirk and shrug nonchalantly. “Nothing much,” I reply in a sarcastic tone. “Got in a fight.”

Before I can blink, both Kaiya and Storm are in front of me along with a beautiful blonde woman I know to be Hadley. The men are watching closely with a wariness I can feel all the way to my soul. They are assessing the situation, trying to decide if I have brought problems to their doorstep.

“With whom?” Storm asks. “An MMA fighter?”

I chuckle lightly. I don’t look that bad. My eye is swollen, my lip is split, and my nose is a little more crooked than before, but I have seen women look far worse when they show up at the shelter where I work. The real damage I took was to my pride. I just can’t figure out how I ended up in this situation. Did I consciously miss all the red flags? Because thinking back, there were many.

“It doesn’t matter,” I say and try to smile but it feels more like a grimace. “It won’t be happening again.”

“Irene,” Kaiya cuts in. “This isn’t nothing. You need to go to a hospital. You shouldn’t have been driving like this.”

I can hear her picking up speed. In the past year, I’ve gotten to know her pretty well. I know that when she cares for someone, she cares deeply. If I don’t stop her now, I’ll probably end up in bubble wrap and she doesn’t even know

what happened to me. My gaze sweeps the gathering before landing on Mad Dog, pleading with him to help me.

He shakes his head before walking up behind her and wrapping an arm around her waist. “Babe, Irene says she’s fine,” he says to her.

“*Does she look fine?*” Kaiya shouts loudly.

“She looks like she could use a tequila and a beer,” an older man says. He’s wearing a cut with a tag that says “Viking,” and he gently puts his arm around my shoulder. “How does that sound?” he asks me.

“Divine.” I sigh as he leads me through the crowd toward the bar.

Chapter Five

A Fucked-Up Vision

Beast

“That’s fucked up,” Justice leans closer over the bar so he won’t be heard, but keeps his gaze glued to the woman at the end — Irene.

Kaiya has told us so much about her. I’ve seen the two of them video call at all hours of the day and night. Mad Dog once told me that Irene was instrumental in getting Kaiya to move past the shit her brother and his fucked-up little club had put her through. Kaiya went through more than most people do in a lifetime. They assaulted her, branded her, and treated her like she wasn’t even a human being. She was so broken when she first came to us, but Irene helped her to heal and move on with her life.

If you hadn’t known Kaiya before, you wouldn’t ever be able to believe the confident, outgoing woman had a hard life at all.

By all accounts, Irene is an amazing woman, and seeing her bruised and clearly beaten has me wondering what could have possibly happened to her.

“Definitely,” I reply as I take a swig of my beer.

I’m trying my best not to stare at her, but my gaze keeps getting drawn back. Raven-colored hair that cascades down her back even though it’s tied at the nape of her neck, she is short but with curves that could bring any red-blooded man to his knees. Even through the bruising I can see she is beautiful. If she didn’t look like she just escaped a war, I would be all over that woman.

“Do you think she’s on the run?” my brother asks.

A chuckle escapes me. “That isn’t the type of woman who runs.” I nod in her direction.

She is seated between Viking and Hadley, drinking tequila shots, shooting the shit, and laughing even though it visibly hurts. “No, that’s the type of woman to take the war to you, not try to hide from it.”

To my left, Mad Dog takes a seat beside me, and Justice heads off to serve other people down the bar. I wait patiently for him to speak. I’m pretty good at reading people and I know he has something on his mind.

“I need Gunner and Tatum to stay with you and Justice for a couple of days.” He isn’t asking because he knows he doesn’t have to. I’ll always do whatever my club and my brothers need me to do.

“Sure. Trinity is at college until spring break. You know they’re always welcome.”

“Thanks, brother. I knew Irene was coming for an impromptu visit, I just wasn’t aware of the condition she was going to be in when she got here.” Mad Dog rubs his forehead.

“Don’t think anything of it.” I click my beer against his. “Has she said anything yet?”

“No. And from the little bit I do know about her, she isn’t going to. She isn’t the type of woman to rope other people into her problems. I do know that whatever happened, happened in Louisiana. And she didn’t go to her older brother to help her out either.”

“So, you think she’s running?” Could I have read her wrong?

Mad Dog watches her closely as she hugs a teary Kaiya before handing her a tequila with a smirk. Kaiya shakes her head before smiling and downing the shot.

“More like regrouping,” he says before heading over to the women.

I'm not used to having children in my house, so this is quite an adjustment for me. Luckily, they aren't small and don't require my constant supervision and attention, because I would probably lose one of them.

I left the clubhouse early last night. I was dead sober and hadn't gotten laid, but I needed to pick up Tatum and Gunner from Mad Dog's house and get them over to mine before they headed off to bed. Now I'm faced with getting them ready for the day and thanking God it's a weekend. Hopefully, I won't have them for the week when school is in session because that is way too early for me to be awake.

But let's deal with one problem at a time. After hopping through a quick shower, I get dressed in a t-shirt and jeans before heading into the kitchen to start breakfast. I need to feed them.

To my surprise, breakfast is already made and both the boys and Justice are using the dining room table for the first time since Trinity went away to college.

"Are you trying to kill Mad Dog's kids?" I ask Justice as I move to take away the food. "We both know you can't cook worth shit, and they will probably end up in the hospital with food poisoning."

"Don't worry," Tatum says around a mouthful of eggs. "Gunner and I cooked. Justice almost set the kitchen on fire just making toast."

Gunner laughs from the other side of the table almost spitting out his food and earning a glare from Justice.

"You should ask Kaiya to teach you how to cook," Gunner says after swallowing, pointing his fork at Justice. "She says no woman wants a man that can't take care of himself."

"Whatever, dude." He dismisses Gunner before scarfing down his food, dropping his plate on the counter, and walking out the back door.

"Was it something I said?" Gunner asks with a mischievous gleam in his eye.

“You’re just like your dad. Always stirring the pot,” I say with a laugh.

“I’ll take that as a compliment.” Gunner nods before taking his plate and Justice’s to the basin and rinsing them off before popping them in the dishwasher.

“Do you know how long we’re going to be here?” Tatum asks while texting on his phone.

“No clue. Probably just a couple of days.”

Both boys nod but don’t ask any other questions. When they’re done eating and everything has been cleared, they plop down on the couch, grab a console remote, and start up some first-person shooter game that soon has them shouting at each other.

Well, what the fuck am I supposed to do now?

Chapter Six

The Morning After

Irene

I wake up feeling like someone has taken a jackhammer to the side of my skull. Lying in bed with my eyes closed, I take inventory of everything that hurts besides my head. I definitely have a rib on my right side that's causing me problems, but I doubt it's broken. I've done that before, and it doesn't hurt as much as I remember. My left eye is still swollen shut and hurts like a bitch but that too is manageable.

That only leaves my head. And that's all my fault. I know tequila is not my friend. I'm more of a Jager girl. Tequila always ends up giving me a hangover from hell. Opening my one good eye I scan my surroundings. Most of last night is intact except for how I got here. The room is decidedly masculine but in a way that screams teenage boy. I must be in Mad Dog's son's room.

Shit! I don't want to put anyone out or have the kids sleeping on the couch to accommodate me. Rising, I wait for the dizziness to pass before leaving the room. Looking left and right down the hall, I try to figure out which door is the bathroom before I go searching for my friend and her husband.

"This one." A little girl I know as Rose pushes open a door for me. "What happened to your face? Did someone hit you? Are you going to be okay? Will your eye work again?" She peppers my scrambled brain with nonstop questions.

"Rose!" Kaiya gasps. "Give the woman a minute to go to the bathroom before you explode her mind with all your questions."

"But Mom..." she moans.

"If you let me pee, I'll answer all your questions."

I hold out my pinky finger to her. She watches me carefully, assessing me in a way a child her age shouldn't have the intelligence to do, before hooking my little finger with hers.

"I'll wait in the kitchen," she says and smiles before walking past me.

"You just made a deal with the devil. She is at that phase where everything out of her mouth is some kind of uncomfortable question," Kaiya laughs. "There are extra toothbrushes in the second drawer, and I left you some clothes in there if you want to grab a shower."

"You are a goddess." I smile at her before walking in and making sure the door is locked.

Getting undressed hurt more than I was hoping but once I'm naked I can fully evaluate myself in the mirror. My left side is bruised to hell, from my shoulder to my stomach and lower to my hip. Black and blue is an understatement.

Opening the shower on full blast, I step under the hot water and wash away Gerald, the fight, the road, and God willing, this fucking hangover. The hot water helps to ease my sore muscles and getting dressed is easier. I pull my wet hair up into a messy bun before brushing my teeth. Laughter catches my ears as I leave the bathroom, and I let the sound lead me to the kitchen where everyone is gathered for breakfast. When I enter the kitchen, silence envelops everyone seated at the counter.

Rose and Kash stare at me while Mad Dog simply shakes his head before pouring a cup of rich black coffee and handing it over to me.

"You need to go to a hospital," Kaiya states. She stares me down with her hands on her hips. Mad Dog clearly knew this was coming before I walked in.

"I'm fine." I take a sip of the life-saving caffeine. "The swelling will go down in a couple of days."

Turning to glare at Mad Dog I ask, "You couldn't warn me?" At which he simply chuckles while lifting his hands in a

gesture that screams, *I should know better*.

“But — ” Kaiya starts.

“Leave it, Kaiya,” Mad Dog cuts her off with a smirk. “If memory serves, not so long ago, you were just as difficult.”

Kaiya’s cheeks flame red, but she doesn’t say another word about me going to the hospital. Looking around I take in the home they have built together. School bags line the wall near the door, and frames with photos of all the kids and their parents are against the walls and propped up on shelves. Kaiya may not biologically be their mother, but she has stepped into the role easily.

“What happened to your eye?” Rose asks. “Will it work again or is it broken now?”

A chuckle escapes me at the serious look on her face. Children her age are way too cute.

“I fell off my horse,” I say, blurting out the first lie I can think of. “My eye is just swollen shut but it will work fine once the swelling goes down.”

“You have a horsey?” She gasps excitedly and it’s clear we are off the topic of my bruises. “I love them.”

“Well, one day I’ll take you riding.”

“But you fell off. Aren’t you scared?”

“I fell off because I didn’t follow the rules. Now I know better.” I ruffle her hair as I walk past her to pour myself another cup of coffee.

“I can follow the rules,” Rose says excitedly.

“Come on, Rose,” Kash interrupts. “We need to go and make sure the chickens have enough food.”

Rose jumps down from her chair and rushes past all of us to meet her brother at the door before they both disappear outside.

“Chickens?” I ask Kaiya with a raised eyebrow.

“Only two.”

“Where are Gunner and Tatum?” I ask.

“They stayed with Beast and Justice,” Mad Dog answers.

“Hell, no.”

“What do you mean, no?” Kaiya asks.

“I mean...” I look directly at her making sure she will hear what I’m saying. “I won’t have your boys kicked out of their home so I can sleep in their room. I’ll find a motel.”

I don’t wait for her reply as I walk back down the hall. In the room, I grab my handbag, cell phone, and charger. Turning to leave, I run into a solid wall of muscle and almost fall flat on my ass. Luckily, Mad Dog catches me in the nick of time.

“Kaiya will have my ass if I let you stay at a motel,” he says as he releases me. “If you’re okay with it, you can use my old room at the clubhouse. It isn’t much but she’ll know you’re safe, and the guys won’t bother you.”

He watches me carefully as he speaks, looking for some kind of reaction that tells him I’m not going to be happy with his suggestion. What he doesn’t know is I don’t plan on returning to Louisiana, ever. Staying anywhere I don’t have to pay rent is going to be a godsend until I can find a job and a place of my own.

“That sounds great,” I reply with a smile. “But please stop looking at me like I’m going to have a breakdown at any moment.”

“Sure thing,” he replies with a nod before walking out.

Chapter Seven

Keeping Other People's Kids Alive

Beast

Having the kids over is actually more fun than I was expecting. I never realized how quiet the house became after Trinity went off to college. Gunner and Tatum are always talking or laughing, and there is always some form of game being played in the lounge. But it didn't last long. Mad Dog let me know I could drop them off before I headed to the club and now the house is cloaked in silence again.

I have no idea where Irene went but she isn't staying at Mad Dog's anymore. Not for the first time, I wonder what happened to her. Did she go back home? Is she in danger? If she is still here, will her problems follow her?

Shaking those thoughts off, I grab my cut and head out to my bike. She is no concern of mine. I don't know the woman from Adam, and I'm not going to get involved in someone else's business. Especially not the type of business that gets women beat to a pulp.

Cruising through town I stay vigilant even though we aren't currently having problems with anyone in particular. That doesn't mean there isn't shit brewing in the background. King still wants to get his hands on Hadley, so that means the Iron Disciples are out there somewhere waiting for their chance to get us when we least expect it. I'm sure the death of Riot doesn't help matters in any way.

And even though it's been a year, the police are still sniffing around the disappearance of the vice principal at the local school along with Mad Dog's psycho ex-wife. If they find those bodies for some ungodly reason, Kaiya will be so far up shit's creek nothing could save her.

So, instead of enjoying my ride through our little town, I keep an eye out. Watching. Waiting for shit to hit the fan.

When I make it to the compound where the clubhouse is located, I let out a sigh of relief. Another safe ride. Doing what we do, and being who we are, I'm thankful every time I can safely stop my bike at my destination.

Pulling a joint from the inner pocket of my cut, I make my way across the gravel and into the clubhouse. Although it's five on a Saturday afternoon it should be quiet here. Most of the guys are still hungover or spending quality time with their families and will only be in much later tonight. But that isn't the case. Angry rap metal is raging through the speaker system.

Viking is seated at the bar smiling like a loon and I can't figure out why. Looking down at my joint, I see that I haven't even smoked half yet so it's not like I could be stoned.

"What are you smiling about?" I ask loudly when I finally reach him. "And why is the damn music so loud?"

"Thank God," a feminine voice says from behind the bar, lifting my joint from between my fingers.

Turning, I'm about to lose my shit on some piece of club ass. You can't just take a man's joint without his fucking permission. But the sight that greets me has me holding my tongue. Irene is behind the bar in a fitted light-pink shirt, enough buttons undone to show off her black lace bra and stunning cleavage. She takes two deep drags before passing the joint back.

After holding the smoke in her lungs for some time, she exhales and smiles brightly at me.

"I haven't had a joint in over two years. God knows I missed that."

I nod, not knowing what to say as she turns around to change the song. She is wearing a pair of dark cutoff jeans that hug her peach-shaped ass like it's been hand-painted onto her. Seeing what looks like a boot mark on the back of her thigh has my anger spiking.

What the fuck?

“Breathe, son,” Viking says as he hands me a beer. “If you start pushing for answers that girl will shut down so fast your head will spin.”

“So, I just do nothing?” I grumble, not happy at the prospect. Someone clearly hurt her, and I want to find that person and pummel the shit out of them.

“Well, if you want to do something, just be here. If she wants to talk, she will.” He breathes out the smoke from his cigarette. “One would think after Hadley, Kaiya, and Storm, you boys would have learned something by now.”

“What are you trying to say, old man?”

“He is saying my business is just that. My fucking business.” She steals two more drags from the joint I haven’t been smoking. “You want to drink? We can do that. You want to play some pool? Hell, I’m game. But I’m a big girl. I can take care of myself. And I don’t need some biker in dented chrome armor trying to save me.”

“Shit, lady.” I frown at her. “Don’t you think we deserve to know if you have trouble following you around?”

Her head falls back as she laughs loudly. “No one knows where I am except you guys. I didn’t even tell my brother. My problems won’t follow me. Besides, that fucker is too lazy to track me across state lines.”

The moment the words leave her mouth she knows she’s given away more than she wanted to. Instead of pressing for more information, I change the subject.

“And to what do we owe the honor of having you behind the bar instead of my ugly little brother?” I ask.

“I offered to take his shift. He needed to do a stock run because the bar is running low on some stuff and I need to do my part now that I’m staying here for a while,” she tells me while she dries a glass before putting it on a shelf. “And he’s actually kinda cute.”

“He’s also nineteen,” I spit out before thinking it through.

Am I jealous that she thinks my younger brother is attractive? Couldn't be. And yet the thought of him or any of my other brothers — any man really — getting their hands on this curvy woman has me clenching my fist on the bar.

“What do you mean, living here?” Viking asks. He saved me from having to explain my reaction to her or myself.

“I wouldn't let Mad Dog send his kids away so I could have their room, and Kaiya won't let me go to a motel,” she says and shrugs. “This was the compromise we came to. I stay in his old room until I'm ready to go home.”

“Are you going home?” I ask.

“Depends.”

“On what?” I lean in.

“What Gypsy Falls has to offer.” Irene smirks before winking at me.

Chapter Eight

Finding My Place

Irene

It's been three weeks since I moved into the Gypsy Bastards clubhouse and I'm loving it. I can understand the appeal that Kaiya and Storm see in the guys. They are big, strong, muscle-bound bikers, but they all have hearts of gold. And holy hotness! If I knew this was in Gypsy Falls, I would have come to visit ages ago.

They have also gone out of their way to make me feel welcome and to make sure I don't feel like an outsider. It wouldn't have mattered either way.

Kaiya has told me so much about everyone that I felt like I already knew them before I even met them. Most of the time Viking is around. From what I've seen, he rarely leaves the clubhouse and stays in one of the rooms like I do. Bishop lives on the top floor in what used to be the president's quarters before Pope set up house with Storm. And then there are three girls the men refer to as "club ass" that all live here.

Beast hasn't been around in about a week. I'm not sure why that catches my attention, but I write it off to simply wanting to ogle his fine ass. The man is built like a mountain and all those muscles have me wanting to jump him at the most inappropriate times.

I try to get my mind clear of my hormones, instead trying to think of something that will quench the fire in me immediately.

"Why do they refer to the woman as club ass?" I ask Hadley as I wipe down the bar. This subject should do the trick.

I was introduced to her the same night I got here, and we immediately hit it off. She is with Wolf, the club's enforcer, and they have the cutest little girl together. She is also the local

tattoo artist and hard-ass. I've heard her tell off at least three of the members if they were doing something stupid, even though she can be just as impulsive sometimes.

Melodious laughter tinkles from her as she cradles her sleeping daughter. "Because that ass belongs to the club." At my frown, she continues her explanation. "They are available to any member of the club for sexual favors."

"Are you fucking kidding me?" I gasp.

"No, but don't feel bad for them. It's a choice they make." She frowns. "The guys won't force anyone to be here that doesn't want to be. By outlaw bike club standards, these girls are treated really well. Some other clubs..." She shuddered before stopping.

"Well, there's that," I grumble as I store the liquor Justice brought earlier behind the bar.

"So," Hadley starts to pry.

"Again?"

"Yes. Again." She smiles sweetly. "What are you going to do? I saw you deny three calls from your brother in the last thirty minutes."

"I'm a grown-up and I don't need my older brother checking on me three times a day."

"Does he know what happened?" she asks softly.

"No one knows," I reply angrily before taking a breath. "Just thinking back to that night pisses me off. I can't believe I allowed myself to get to that place. And my ego is still bruised."

"Do you want to talk about it?" Hadley asks.

I watch her closely, trying to see if she has any ulterior motives for wanting to talk to me about what happened that night. But she doesn't know me well enough to have anything to gain from knowing. Sighing, I walk around the bar and take a seat beside her.

“Have you ever ended up in a fucked-up situation and just thought, well, I did this to myself?”

Hadley laughs loudly. “Did no one tell you?”

“Tell me what?”

“I think we all forget that you haven’t always been one of us.” She bumps my shoulder with hers. “You just fit in so effortlessly.” She seems to be lost in thought for a moment before continuing. “A couple of years back, I was being my regular hard-ass self and I got kidnapped. Got shot too.”

“The fuck?”

“Oh, we all have some kind of damage around here. And not just Daddy issues like the club ass. But that’s each person’s story to divulge in their own time. But know this,” Hadley’s face is stern as she speaks. “We are all broken. Some more than others. That’s why no one pressures you to tell your story.”

We sit in silence at the bar, both of us lost in our own thoughts. Who knew I would find peace with some of the most dangerous people I have ever met? That I would be accepted so wholly by complete strangers and welcomed without judgment or prejudice? Not me, that’s for sure.

“My boyfriend hit me,” I say with anger coating my voice. “He lost his temper because I made chicken for dinner instead of pork.”

“That’s a dick move.” Hadley frowns at my words.

“I don’t even care that he hit me, though.” I turn to face her and see that she’s laid a sleeping Ainsley down in her stroller in the time I was lost in thought. “It’s that I didn’t see it coming.”

“It’s not like you can predict the future.”

“No, I can’t, but I’m trained to know an abusive man. To assess a situation.” I sigh. “It used to be my job to help abused women get away from their abusers, move on, and to identify a similar situation before you’re in it.”

Hadley doesn't say anything in reply to my verbal vomit. There isn't anything she can say. The fact is I failed myself. I allowed myself to be in that situation and no pretty words or platitudes will ever change that.

"I think we need a girls' night," Hadley announces. "I'll get Storm and Kaiya together and find a babysitter. We are going out tonight."

She hugs me closely for long moments after vacating her seat, and I swear I can feel her trying to push her love and positive vibes into me. Usually, I would cringe at a show of affection like that, but I find that day by day, these people are changing me.

Hadley takes the stroller with Ainsley and moves toward the door, but it opens before she reaches it and in strolls a man with olive-toned skin, followed closely by a younger carbon copy. Hadley gasps loudly before covering her mouth with her hand.

"*Hola, chica,*" the man says. He smiles as Hadley bursts into tears.

I can visibly see her shake from where I'm sitting and panic settles in my stomach. We are all alone in the clubhouse and I don't know this man. Hadley's eyes are the size of saucers, and she looks like she might freak out. So, I do the only thing I can, and I call the first person that comes to mind. The fact that I end up calling Beast says more than I'm comfortable thinking about.

Chapter Nine

An Important Moment in Time

Beast

The meet with the Cammareri family is set to happen today. I know the location well and have been scouting it for the better part of the last week. The warehouse is located in the town of Bismarc, which is halfway between our compound and the Cammareri's. We decided to keep the territory neutral for both parties.

I may have grown up with the Cammareri brothers, but my club doesn't know or trust them, and if I'm being completely honest, neither do I. Running in the circles we do, we are all extremely aware of the fact that loyalty isn't that high on everyone else's list of important shit.

My brothers are all driving their motorcycles down the freeway to our destination as I drive the van with Bishop beside me. Usually, I would be on my bike too, but this is my meet and if something goes wrong, we might need the van.

The music on the radio cuts out and is replaced by the trilling ring of my cell phone. I hit the dial on the steering wheel allowing the call to filter in through the speakers.

"Beast?"

I know that voice. "Anderson."

"I saw the club leave town enmasse and now there are reports of the Cammareri brothers heading in the same direction," he says.

"What is it to you?" Bishop asks.

He knows that Anderson is a DEA informant for the Gypsy Bastards, keeping us under the radar. He owes us as much after Justice found his daughter drugged out of her mind and about to be gang-raped. He saved her and now Anderson is ours.

“Just wondering if you’re meeting up with them. Because that would be an epically shitty idea.” He sounds bored, like he’s talking about a grocery run.

“Get to the fucking point,” I say loudly. “I’m busy and I don’t have time for your shit today.”

“Vice has an agent on the inside of the Cammareri operation. It’s only a matter of time before she has all the evidence they need and then they’re going down.” He sounds excited by the prospect. “And anyone too close to them will be sucked down right beside them.”

“Not our problem,” I reply before ending the call.

“Shit.” Bishop shakes his head. “This is a big fucking problem.”

“Just keep what you heard to yourself.” I don’t turn to look at him. I focus on the road ahead of me and my brothers speeding along.

“We need to tell Pope.”

“No, we don’t,” I say. “The club needs this deal as much as the Cammareri’s do. Besides, they will know who the rat is.”

“And how will they know that? An operation of their size has too many people involved.”

“Anderson said *she* was gathering evidence. There aren’t many women in an organization like theirs that have the opportunity to learn enough to take them down,” I explain. “One of them will know who the woman is and then they can take care of their own problems without putting this deal in jeopardy.”

After a moment Bishop nods in agreement, even though he looks skeptical.

Mancuso and Stefano stay outside of the warehouse with myself, Bishop, and Mad Dog. Inside, Alceu, Severu, Pope, and Wolf negotiate what could change the future of our entire club. I'm not mad to be cut out of the meeting, I hate shit like this. I set it up and that's more than enough for me.

None of us speak as we stand outside waiting. Stefano does wink at me with a smile, and I smirk in return. He has always been a little shit but even when we were younger, I was always fond of him. My phone vibrates in my pocket, but I ignore it as the door behind me opens and the men inside emerge. All of them look happy enough as they shake hands and part ways.

I call out to Severu while he's walking away. I watch him silently communicate with his brothers to give him a moment. Alceu nods in my direction before hopping into his black SUV.

"Beast," he says casually as he turns to face me.

"Severu." I scan the area around us for any sign that someone may overhear our conversation before continuing. "There's a problem."

I can see his mind working. I should have started this conversation better but there's no time for that now. He probably thinks someone found the body we disposed of.

"No, not that," I say. "I have some intel. Reliable source. But I don't want to be poking around in your family's business."

"Perhaps you could tell me this information as an old friend?"

"It's the same damn thing and you know it," I grumble. "But this doesn't just affect the Cammareri empire. Now that we are running for you, it affects the Gypsy Bastards too."

"Well, then, out with it. Neither of us has all day to stand here chatting."

"Vice has someone planted in your organization," I say flatly. "Heard it was a woman, but that's all I know. These

fuckers are getting increasingly creative in their pursuit to try to snuff us out.”

“Thank you.” He nods. A myriad of emotions scrolls across his features before he schools his expression. “I’ll bring this to the attention of my brothers. If there is a rat, we will weed them out.”

He walks away quickly and jumps in beside Alceu. By the anger radiating from him, I’m sure he knows who the rat is. The problem should be taken care of soon. Pulling my phone from my pocket, I find the missed call: Irene.

Kaiya had us all save her number in case there are any problems while she’s with the club.

My heart is beating a mile a minute. She has never called me before and I’m not sure what this could be about. She still hasn’t told any of us what brought her to us in the first place. Could her problems have caught up to her? Taking a deep breath, I hit “redial” and press the device to the side of my face as I walk over to my brothers.

“What’s wrong?” I ask before she can speak. Everyone’s attention is instantly focused on me, waiting to hear what the problem could be.

“I overacted. A man showed up and Hadley started crying,” Irene talks a mile a minute. “I called the first number I pulled up. I feel so fucking stupid.”

“It’s fine,” I tell her, feeling my entire posture relax. “You did the right thing. Do you know who the guy was?”

“He says his name is Sparrow?” She sounds unsure if she should trust him. “He’s still here,” she adds in a lower tone.

“Don’t worry about it. We’ll be there in less than an hour.”

I end the call and stare at my cell for a long time before looking at my brothers. I don’t want to build up any hope in them if I’m not sure, but with everything Irene said, and Hadley crying, it all points to one thing.

“Sparrow is home.”

Chapter Ten

The Return of a Ghost

Irene

I watch Sparrow and Hadley carefully after speaking to Beast. There was something in his voice before he hung up that has me a little edgy. He didn't sound worried but there is something off about the situation.

"Look at how big you are?" Hadley hugs the boy to her chest.

"Hadley," he complains loudly.

"Don't even." She glares at him. "It's been over two years since I've seen you. I'm allowed to be mushy."

Sparrow chuckles at their interaction but the laughter doesn't reach his eyes.

"Are you back then?" Hadley asks, her tone hopeful as she takes a seat at the bar.

"Yes." Sparrow nods, joining her. "We needed the time away to heal. But we both miss everyone here. This is our family."

Before anything else can be said, Storm, Kaiya, and all the kids come through the door. Both women hug Sparrow in turn, and I realize my fears were unfounded. He is clearly someone they all know. Everyone is talking a mile a minute trying to get as much information as they can.

The kids are loud and busy. Just as happy to see their friend and introduce Rose to the young boy.

"Guys," Kaiya calls out. "Why don't you go play out back? You're going to wake Ainsley." The words barely left her lips before all the children were running out the back door.

Pope and Mad Dog have set up a play area for when the club has family barbeques. They even have a tree house

out there. Sparrow watches his son carefully but doesn't stop the boy from joining his friends.

“Do you guys want something to drink?” I ask casually.

Sparrow runs his gaze down the length of my body before smirking. “The club ass sure got a hell of a lot better while I was gone.”

Hadley looks like she may want to say something, but I silence her with a look. Leaning over the bar, I flash my cleavage while beckoning him closer.

“I'm not club ass,” I whisper. “But you can kiss my ass later if you want.”

For the first time since he walked in, a genuine smile crosses his features. “Shit,” he whispers back. “I might just take you up on that offer.”

I hope to God he doesn't think I'm serious. I don't want any man that close to me for the foreseeable future. Maybe never. Except ... nope.

Storm, Hadley, and Kaiya both watch us closely before bursting out laughing. I get everyone a drink and listen while they tell Sparrow everything that has happened in Gypsy Falls in the past two or so years. He doesn't offer much but it doesn't seem to matter to them. They are simply happy to have him here.

When the guys walk in a while later, they don't stop to talk to anyone. Each of them nods at Sparrow before heading up the stairs. The only person that makes his way over is Pope, the president of the club, as Sparrow stands from his seat. I watch Beast as he climbs the stairs, his jeans hugging his ass and thighs with every step. The visual alone is enough to have a woman swooning. He walks around the corner, and I focus my attention back on the people in front of me.

I watch as Pope grabs him in a full-on hug — none of that side shit, bro hugging here — and holds him for long moments. When they pull apart, I can see both men trying to get their emotions back under control.

“Let’s head to church,” Pope says. “We need to break down today’s run and then we can all talk together.”

Sparrow nods and follows Pope up the stairs to the conference room. I learned early on that they refer to their meetings as “church.” No outsiders are allowed to sit in these meetings and the only woman that has ever been to a church meeting in this club is Storm. And those were special circumstances.

“I can’t believe he’s back,” Storm says while wiping away a tear. “I thought we were never going to see him or Gage again.”

“I know,” Kaiya agrees softly.

For long moments silence blankets the four of us, but I’m too curious to just leave it at that.

“Are you guys going to fill me in or am I just going to stand here wondering for the rest of my life?” No one ever said I had tact. If I want to know something I usually just ask. I prefer the direct approach.

Storm smiles at me before speaking. “Sparrow is the vice president. His wife died just over two years back. A horrible situation all around, and he left.”

“But he’s back now,” Hadley adds. “And that is all that matters.”

I frown. “Shit, I flirted with him. How tacky was that?”

All three women laugh. “I didn’t know what was going to happen,” Kaiya says. “But he didn’t seem to mind. Most of the guys here wouldn’t mind.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” I ask while watching her smirk.

“That you’re hot!” Hadley exclaims. “It doesn’t hurt that you’re smart and have a great sense of humor. Any of the

guys here would be happy to have you.”

“I don’t want or need a man in my life,” I state firmly before turning to add more beers to the fridge.

“No one said you had to get married,” Kaiya interjects. “But it does seem like you could use some fun in your life.”

I know she is talking about sex for fun. It has crossed my mind with all these delicious men around me the entire time. But how the hell would that work? You’re not supposed to have to face your one-night stand every day. If I sleep with one of the Gypsy Bastards I either must move out or see him constantly, and I don’t know if I can handle either of those prospects.

Thoughts of Beast swirl in my mind. Broad shoulders, thick thighs, strong hands. I can hear his voice in my head, and I know I would sleep with him if I ever got the chance. But I also know that Beast is the kind of man I could get hooked on, and lose myself in. I’m not giving myself up for another man again.

If I ever decide to jump into bed with one of the Bastards, I’ll sure as hell be actively avoiding Beast.

“Yes!” Hadley exclaims. “I was going to call you both to go out on a ladies’ night tonight. We haven’t done that in ages. And now the guys are all going to be spending time with Sparrow, so we have the perfect excuse.”

“But — ” I try to stop this roll they all seem to be on but Storm cuts me off.

“That’s perfect! We can meet here at eight.”

After that, I haven’t got a choice. Seems like my friends have decided I need a bit of fun in my life. Starting tonight.

Chapter Eleven

Blast From the Past

Beast

Every member is silent while we wait for Pope and Sparrow to enter the old conference room we use to hold church. After I spoke to Irene, I called all the members that weren't on the run with us and told them to meet us here. Sparrow was, and is still, our vice president. Pope wouldn't replace him. Didn't even contemplate it in the two years he was gone. It's one of the things that drew me to the Gypsy Bastards in the first place — their complete loyalty toward each other.

Every member is seated at the scuffed-up table surrounded by mismatched chairs. The other three prospects, along with Bishop and my brother Justice, are standing in the corner of the room.

Pope enters and takes his seat at the head of the table. Sparrow stands in the doorway and stares at the vacant seat to the left of our club president. He tries to swallow down the emotion he is feeling but it's palpable to every person in attendance. He wasn't sure what he would be returning to, but we left everything exactly the same as it was the day he walked out to grieve away from us.

Over the back of his chair hangs his leather cut with his patch embroidered into it. His hands skim over the leather before he pulls it off the chair and pulls it on like he never stopped wearing it. A raucous round of applause accompanied by hoots and hollers fills the room. Sparrow takes his seat with a grin spread across his face as everyone calms down.

Pope speaks when everyone is finally silent. "As you can all see, Sparrow has returned to us." He turns his head to face Sparrow. "I hope this is a permanent return."

"It is." Sparrow nods, and everyone smiles.

“Well,” Pope continues as his gaze lands on each of us. “Let’s get to business. Thanks to Beast we are now running the Cammareri shipments through our territory. That means we get a substantial cut from all their deals, more than we ever got from anyone else.”

“I don’t know what kind of magic you worked on those brothers,” Wolf chirps in. “But they were happy to agree to all our terms.”

Bishop and I smile together before I nod. I don’t fare well with too much praise, I never have, but I’m happy to have brought this to my club. It helps everyone in the long run.

Pope looks at the screen of his cell phone before laughing. “It seems that Storm, Hadley, Kaiya, and Irene will be going out tonight. The children are being taken care of at Mad Dog’s house and we men have been delegated to the club. Any opposition?” No one says anything so he continues. “Both Justice and Bishop have been prospects for longer than a year. In my opinion, they have earned their patches. Any opposition?”

He gives us a moment to think it through before banging his gavel on the table. I didn’t for a second think anyone would be opposed. Justice took a bullet for Wolf during his first month as a prospect, basically cementing him as one of us. And Bishop took care of Storm and Brogan, Pope’s son, when he wasn’t there. He is also the person that ensured Sparrow could avenge the death of his wife. Giving us a chance to object is merely a formality.

“Next week we will have the patching ceremony and a welcome home party for Sparrow. Everyone knows what to do to get this organized, so let’s do that.”

The other three prospects have been around a while but none of them have proven they have what it takes to be a Gypsy Bastard.

“And keep your eyes and ears open if you see anyone that might be a good fit for the club,” Mad Dog adds. “We always need new blood coming in to do the shit we don’t want to.”

Everyone laughs before Pope lifts his hand. “That’s all for today. Let’s grab a drink.”

The women are nowhere to be found when we get downstairs. Justice steps behind the bar and starts handing out drinks with a smile.

Everyone is just happy to be here again. All of us together.

A couple of hours and a lot of drinking later, Sparrow lets out a low whistle.

“*Maldito infierno*, woman,” he exclaims with his palm pressed to his chest. “You are looking fine.”

“What was that? Spanish?” Irene asks as she smiles up at him.

“Yeah. I said fucking hell,” he says and smirks.

“Nice try.” She pats his cheek while moving past him and kissing Viking’s cheek before exiting the side door.

“She’s something, that one,” Sparrow says as he takes a seat beside me. “Anyone hitting that?”

I feel like smashing his face against the solid wooden bar repeatedly. I want to tell him to leave her alone, that she’s mine, but I can’t do that because it’s not true. Viking doesn’t have the same problem, though, because he smacks Sparrow on the back of his head before speaking.

“That woman is not some random piece of ass for you idiots to run through because you’re bored and want to get your fucking dicks wet.”

“Damn, Viking.” Sparrow rubs at the spot. “It was just a question.”

“I don’t care. She deserves more than being treated like a piece of club ass.” He frowns at Sparrow. “There are plenty

of girls for that.”

Taking his beer, he walks toward the other end of the room where Mad Dog and Bishop are playing a game of pool.

“What’s up his ass?” Sparrow asks me.

Justice answers before I get the chance. “Irene is one of us.” He shrugs. “She came for a visit and never left. She fits in like she was always meant to be here. He’s protective.”

My little brother doesn’t give away anything about Irene she wouldn’t want to be known. They have also become close these past weeks. He treats her the same way he does Trinity except she isn’t his little sister. But he’s right, a lot of the guys are protective of her.

I’m not protective, I’m obsessed.

Thoughts of Irene invade my waking and sleeping thoughts. I actively avoid the clubhouse when I know she’s working because I hate the way some of my brothers watch her. I want her.

But I also know I can’t have her. She is not the type of woman to settle for a biker, much less one like me.

Chapter Twelve

Ladies Night

Irene

This isn't exactly what I was thinking when we talked about having a ladies' night, but here I am. We are at From Dusk 'til Dawn, a strip club that's partly owned by the club. All three of my friends worked here in some capacity at one point or another and people are happy to see them. We spend hours laughing and chatting about everything and nothing. Every so often someone will show up to greet one of my friends and I'll be introduced.

A man with dark hair, piercing green eyes, and a muscular body clad in an impeccably tailored black suit walks over to the table. I try not to stare but it's hard. Half of his face is classically handsome, with high cheekbones and a strong jaw. The other half is disfigured. I've seen scars like this before and know that they're caused by fire. He looks like some kind of comic strip villain.

"Hello, Preacher," all three of my friends singsong loudly when he comes to a stop.

"I heard trouble was here," he groans dramatically. "Please behave. I don't want to have to call husbands and boyfriends this time."

Storm sticks out her tongue at him, causing Preacher to laugh. "We aren't that bad."

"Right," he replies sarcastically before walking away. "Let me know when you're ready to leave and I'll drop you at the compound."

"Damn." I sigh, tipping my head into the aisle while watching his taut ass as he moves between the tables.

"I know we said you should get laid," Storm cuts into my view. "But Preacher is..." she trails off.

“The devil,” Hadley finishes for her in a whisper-shout. “That man will chew you up and spit you out. All while whistling a happy tune. He is darker than dark.”

“With an ass like that, it might be worth it, though,” I muse and all the girls around me burst out laughing.

I’m not usually a sloppy drunk. I drink until tipsy, water down, and repeat. It just means I can drink longer, and I might save myself the embarrassment of not knowing what I got up to, and if I’m lucky keep my hangover to a dull throb instead of full-on torture. The same cannot be said for my friends.

It’s well after four in the morning and Dusk is closed. The only people that remain are our group, the bouncers, bartenders, and a new girl named Chastity.

Storm is up on the stage trying to teach a beet-red Kaiya how to dance with the pole. Hadley watches with rapt interest as she sips a fruity pink drink through a straw.

“I wish I had her confidence.” Hadley sighs loudly.

“You’re awesome just the way you are,” I reply with a smile taking another draw of my beer. “Besides, you have plenty of confidence.”

“Do you really think so?” Her eyes are glassy from all the alcohol, and I doubt she will even remember our conversation when she wakes up later.

Before I can reply she jumps out of her chair, wobbles on her heels for a second, and then marches up the stairs to the stage. She gestures wildly to Storm, her words drowned out by the music. A devious smile lights up Storm’s features before she nods enthusiastically.

“Is this seat taken?” a deep voice asks from behind me. I can’t help the shiver that works its way down my spine at the sound.

I don't reply because I'm not sure my voice is capable of functioning at the moment. Instead, I gesture to the other side of the booth. My attention is focused on Preacher as he slides into the booth. He watches me closely assessing everything. I feel stripped naked, bared to his gaze. I do have to admit, though, I don't mind being the sole focus of his attention.

"I haven't seen you here before," his voice is low and gravelly. "Are you visiting someone?"

"It started out as a visit," I reply. "But it may become something more permanent."

"That's good," he says and nods. "Perhaps we can get better acquainted while you're here."

Taking a drink from my beer I take my turn to assess him. His gaze follows the bottle to my lips. His gaze feels like a caress. This man will definitely leave his mark on a girl. The moment between us is broken when Hadley squeals loudly. My gaze drifts from Preacher to the stage to see Wolf has his wife thrown over his shoulder as he stomps out.

Mad Dog and Pope are also here smiling up at their women. My heart fills with longing when Kaiya jumps from the stage into Mad Dog's waiting arms. I wish I could find something like that. Someone who wanted me for me and accepted me as I am.

But that isn't in the cards. I'll probably end up old and alone surrounded by ten cats or something.

"Are you okay?" Preacher asks as he takes my hand in his. His dark gaze shows nothing but concern.

Before I can answer, Storm sashays over to us dragging Pope behind her. She grabs her drink off the table and downs it in one go. "Time to head out." She smiles at me.

I nod and move to rise but Preacher squeezes my hand. "I'll get her back." He doesn't look at them but continues to stare at me. Again, I feel that tingle run down my spine.

"You sure, Irene?" Pope asks as he tucks Storm under his arm and pulls her against his side.

I have been here for three weeks, and I don't know a single person outside the club. I need to expand my boundaries. The Gypsy Bastards have become a safety blanket for me, and I need to step out of that safe space.

"I'll be fine." I smile at both of them. "Besides, Preacher doesn't seem like the type to strangle me, chop me up, and put me in the freezer."

"You'd be surprised what people are capable of," Preacher mumbles.

Pope glares at him before nodding. "Don't let anything happen to her." The threat in his voice is clear as he and Storm walk out of the club.

Preacher glares at their backs until the door is closed behind them before returning his attention to me. "Breakfast?"

A laugh escapes me as I nod in agreement. After the change in his demeanor, this seems like a much safer topic. Although it is killing me not to ask what the hell that was about.

Preacher helps me out of the booth before we head outside. He leads me to a sleek, black sports car before holding the door open for me. We drive in silence for a couple of blocks before he pulls over at an all-night diner. From the way he's dressed, I never would have expected to find him eating at a place like this, but I don't argue. With the amount of alcohol swimming in my veins, something greasy is exactly what I need.

Preacher helps me out of the car and leads me inside to a booth at the end of the building, his hand firmly on the small of my back. A waitress walks over and hands us menus. She stares at Preacher, and it starts to piss me off. He is a fine-ass man but that isn't what has drawn her attention. No, she is stuck on the scars that mar half his features. I may not have said anything if I was sober but I'm not, and I feel strangely protective of this man I only just met.

"If you take a picture, it will last longer," I snark.

Both their gazes flash to me. Preacher seems amused while the waitress seems mortified.

“It’s rude to stare.” I lift an eyebrow.

“Sorry,” the waitress sputters before taking a deep breath to compose herself. “Can I get you something to drink?”

“Coffee,” both Preacher and I say in unison.

As the waitress scurries off, Preacher and I stare at each other before he chuckles deeply. “I think you and I are going to get along just fine.”

“I’m not going to sleep with you,” I blurt out.

“That’s perfect,” he says, leaning back in his chair. “I don’t want sex. I can get that anywhere.”

If we can keep this to friendship only, I know there will never be a dull moment with Preacher in my life.

Chapter Thirteen

Fuck You, Preacher

Beast

This is my favorite time of the day. Sitting outside the clubhouse on a felled tree, I watch as the sun kisses the horizon, a new day being born. Taking a deep drag from my joint I enjoy the early morning air, listening to the world come to life around me. All the guys have finally gone to sleep, and I'll join them shortly.

I thought about driving back home, but Trinity won't be home until Christmas and Justice is upstairs with a piece of club ass. The house is empty and I feel like I'm going crazy there all by myself. I have a room here at the compound so I might as well just crash and get it done with. The joint hits me, and I feel myself relax, knowing I'll sleep fitfully when I head inside.

My peace is interrupted by the crunch of tires on gravel, and I turn to see who it could be. What I'm not expecting to see is the little sports cage that Preacher drives. I'm even less prepared to see Irene get out of the little car with a broad smile painted across her beautiful features. My anger spikes at the thought of her with someone like him even though I know I have no right.

If I take a moment to be brutally honest with myself, I know I'm just as bad if not worse than he is. But my logical mind isn't calling the shots now. I'm pissed at him for making a move on her before I did. Even though I know that's my fault.

I watch her laugh at something Preacher says as she leans in the window of his car before turning to walk away. It's then her attention falls on me and she smiles even wider.

"Beast..." She waves as she heads over to me.

"Irene," I mumble as she takes up space beside me.

For long moments we sit in silence watching the world becoming more colorful as the sun rises. Irene bumps her shoulder against my arm to draw my attention. Looking down, I see her smile.

“Are you going to share?” She stares at my joint.

“Didn’t you already have enough tonight?” I ask.

I’m being a bastard, but I can’t help it. I want to throttle her for staying out until dawn with Preacher doing God knows what. But I have no claim on her so I can’t even say something. On the other end of the spectrum is this all-encompassing desire I have for her. Even with all my anger, the moment I look at her I want to kiss her until she can’t remember another man.

“I didn’t drink that much.” She pushes against me. “Besides, I just had a wonderfully delicious greasy breakfast.”

Handing over the joint, I watch her closely as she inhales deeply. She is exactly the type of woman I want for myself. Not just the way she looks but her personality, intellect, and everything in between.

“Breakfast?” I ask, slightly confused, as she hands the joint back to me.

“Yeah.” She breathes out the smoke through her nose. “Preacher took me to a diner after Dusk closed.”

Instead of speaking my mind, I take another drag of the joint before passing it off to her with a nod. Irene takes two big drags and smashes the end under her heel. We remain outside, neither speaking, but the tension in the air is palpable.

“Did I do something?” Irene asks quietly, shocking me.

“What do you mean?” I frown. “Why would you ask that?”

“When I first got here you were always around, talking to me, flirting with me.” She looks up at me, the morning sun setting her eyes ablaze. “But the last week, you’ve been actively avoiding me.”

Shit! I didn't think I was making it that obvious. I don't want her to think this is her fault.

"It isn't something you did," I draw my gaze away from her. All I want to do is kiss the shit out of those pouty lips.

"Then you'll have to explain what the hell happened. Because this sucks," she says and sighs. "I thought we were becoming friends. I get along with everyone else."

"That's the problem," I say as I get up. "You want me to be just like all the other guys."

I don't say anything else as I stomp away. I can't do this shit with her. I can't be just another one of the guys, another friend. How the fuck am I supposed to just sit around and be her fucking friend while someone like Preacher gets to have her? Maybe it was just never meant to be.

"Don't do that!" Irene yells from beneath the tree. "Don't start a conversation and walk away from me."

"Leave it alone, Irene," I call out without turning around.

"Whatever!" she yells.

Walking into the clubhouse I move toward the bar instead of my room. My buzz has been ruined and I know I'll never be able to get to sleep now. So, I round the counter and grab a bottle of whiskey from the shelf with a glass before pouring myself a decent measure and shooting it back. I hear the door open and her heels clicking on the floor, and I don't look up but rather refill my glass. My control is at the snapping point.

I can hear her talking but I don't catch the words. I've seen Hadley do this when she is mad at Wolf, so I know she isn't talking to me. I fully intend on ignoring her, that is, until I do catch something she says.

"I can't fucking believe it," she mutters to herself as she heads toward the stairs. "Maybe if he had some damn balls."

My gaze snaps to her when I hear those words. The glass in my hand protests how hard I am gripping it before it shatters. I watch that perfect ass sway in her skinny jeans as she climbs the stairs clearly still talking to herself. It's only seconds before my feet are moving after her, pounding up the stairs.

Pushing her up against her bedroom door, I cage her in from behind. I'm so much taller than she is that I have to bend down to growl in her ear.

“You're playing a dangerous game, Irene.”

Chapter Fourteen

One-Night Standards

Irene

You would think that after what I've been through, I would be terrified when Beast pushes me against my room door, pinning me there. That it would trigger some kind of PTSD in me, making me panic or the very least cringe and pull away from him. But that's not what happens when he growls in my ear. No, a full-body shiver makes its way through me.

"A game?" I ask. "No, Beast. That's *your* department."

"Woman." His growl is low and rumbly.

It fries every circuit in my brain and all I can think of is hearing him whisper dirty things to me in the dark.

I'm caged in by him, but he's still giving me enough room to move around. I turn and stare up at him. I watch him closely waiting to see what he will do but he doesn't move.

"What do you want from me?" he asks.

"Someone I can trust."

"What does that mean?" A frown creases his forehead. "Don't you trust the rest of the guys?" The thought seems to bother him.

"I trust them just fine," I say while running my finger over his frown hoping to ease it. "But this is something different."

"Different how?"

Opening the door behind me I step inside. "I need someone that can keep their mouth shut and walk away afterward." I know this is going to be a mistake. I told myself I would stay away from him, but I can't seem to stop myself. "I need someone I can trust with my body."

Beast stares at me as I make my way into the room. I may be nervous, but I won't let him see it. He looks conflicted and I worry that he may not take me up on my offer, but a moment later he steps into the room and closes the door behind him.

"You want a one-night stand?" He prowls closer to me. "Is there an itch you want me to scratch?"

"One night only." I lean in closer to him when he stops just out of reach. "We could help each other out."

"No feelings?" He leans in, his lips almost touching mine.

"No attachments," I agree.

"And you're sober?" He quirks an eyebrow at me.

"I haven't had a drink in almost two hours."

It must be the answer he was looking for because his lips slam into mine as he pulls me against his chest. His lips are soft but firm, his kiss intoxicating. A sound rumbles from deep in his chest making my knees weak as a gasp escapes me. His tongue sweeps into my mouth, and I'm instantly lost in him.

I have wanted this for as long as I've been here. The reality of Beast far outweighs the fantasy. His hands mold to my hips pulling me even closer to him. He has me bent backward at an angle as he ravages me, having to lean forward to kiss me. I find myself lifted into the air and wrap my legs around his hips, finally at the same level as him. His lips leave my mouth as he runs them down the column of my throat.

"Fuck, you smell good," his low voice rumbles out as he inhales deeply.

"Less talking," I complain.

His body vibrates with laughter as he seals his lips to mine again. Gripping the back of his head I try to get closer to him. Knowing this will be nothing more than a one-time occurrence, you best believe I'll be making the most of it. I want to remember every moment of this night.

Shimming against his body I wait until he puts me down. My hands on his shoulders push his cut down his arms. Before it can hit the floor, I catch it and hang it over a chair. He watches me with curiosity, waiting on me to make the next move. It's rare that a man gives me the lead in the bedroom, and I'm going to enjoy every second of this. I have a feeling it may not last long.

Slowly, I circle behind him, my hands on his body the entire time. I run them from his broad shoulders, down his muscled arms, until I reach the hem of his t-shirt. I take my time lifting it up and he raises his arms. But I reach a certain point where I can no longer lift, and a huff escapes me. Maybe I should stand on the bed?

"Need help?" I can hear the smile in his voice even if I can't see his face.

"Just take it off, will you?"

He chuckles as he tosses his shirt to the floor.

I trace my hands over his back, taking in all the muscles, his dark skin drawing me in. There's a scar running from his neck to his shoulder that I run my fingers over before kissing it lightly.

"Football injury," he explains hoarsely.

I don't say anything, just keep exploring the expanse of his body. His muscles ripple beneath my fingers and his breathing becomes heavy. When I reach the front of his body, I see that his pupils are blown out, drowning the honey color of his eyes, his jaw clenched with the effort it's taking to remain still.

My gaze travels from his gorgeous face to his broad chest. Three small wounds cluster together below his right pectoral. I trace them with my tongue and his big body shudders.

"Bullet wounds," he says hoarsely.

My heartbeat spikes at the idea of Beast being in any kind of danger but I don't say anything. It isn't my place and I'm terrified to ruin the mood.

Above his heart is a tattoo of a rose with the word *Lydia* in a cursive script. When I touch it, he moves for the first time, covering my hand with his.

“My mother.”

I don't need any further explanation. I feel like that topic is for people who might be in a serious relationship and not just fucking for a single night. Nodding with a smile, I remove my hand from beneath his and travel lower to his belt buckle, but he stops me.

“My turn.”

Chapter Fifteen

More Than a Fantasy

Beast

This woman has featured in every fantasy I've had for the past few weeks. I mean, I'm even turning down the club ass. I have never been the type of man to turn down easy pussy, but Irene has got me so spun out over her that I just haven't been interested.

That is not to say my dick hasn't been active. No, that motherfucker springs to life just at the mere thought of this vixen before me. I've damn near rubbed myself raw. And now I have her in front of me, the woman that stalks my dreams, and I'm going to take full advantage of that.

Slowly, I lift her shirt above her head revealing the red lace bra she's wearing. At the sight of her dark nipples barely hidden beneath the fancy fabric my dick nearly punches a hole through the front of my jeans. Need and desire ride me hard making it almost impossible to take it slow, but I force myself to calm down.

Running my fingers along the outside of the cup, teasing the swell of her breasts, I watch a shudder work its way through her body. I'm happy to see it's not only me that's affected by this situation.

"Turn around."

My voice sounds like I've been chewing gravel. Although I should be grateful that my voice works at all.

She turns immediately at my command, and I feel my chest tighten. I wonder if she will be this submissive with everything or if she will push back at some point. Only time will tell. Taking the clasp of her bra in my hands I snap it open and let it hang there. Bending down I kiss her neck before nipping at her skin. Slowly, I tease the straps from her shoulders allowing her bra to fall to the floor.

Not once does she lift her hands to stop me or cover herself. Grabbing her hips I pull her toward me, her naked back flush with my chest. My hands cup her breasts, testing the weight of them. Callouses against silk. A moan escapes Irene as I gently knead the globes.

“I’ve been dreaming of these tits,” I say into her ear as I twist a nipple lightly.

“Oh God,” Irene mewls arching her back.

“I want to lick them, suck them, and leave my mark all over them,” I continue. “I want to fuck them and watch as I come all over them.”

Running my hand down her stomach I undo her jeans before slipping my hand inside. She isn’t wearing underwear and her pussy is waxed. A growl pushes forth from my chest as I run a finger down her slit and find her wet. That’s an understatement, she is soaked.

My control snaps and I push her forward, grabbing her hips just before she hits the bed. I hold her up as she readjusts.

“Hold onto the edge.”

Without waiting for a reply, I start pushing her jeans over her hips and down to her ankles. On my knees, I take a moment to wriggle her feet through while keeping her high heels on. I can’t imagine a better sight than her, naked, in high heels. When I finally have her naked, I take a moment to enjoy the view. Irene wiggles her hips, and I can’t hold back anymore. Running my hands up the back of her legs until I reach her ass, I squeeze the globes before pulling them apart so I can see my prize.

Her pussy is a pretty pink, the lips swollen, and her wetness visible. I run my tongue through her slit and am rewarded with a low moan as she pushes her hips back. I take that as a green light and repeat the motion several times before finding her clit and sucking it hard. I wasn’t expecting the orgasm and barely catch her as her knees give out.

“Fuck,” she moans as I turn her in my lap and capture a nipple between my lips. Her hips writhe against my cock, only

my jeans separating us.

I wanted to draw this out and take my time. Get her as addicted to my touch as I am to the mere thought of her, but I don't think I have the patience for that right now. Lifting myself from the floor, I place her down in the center of the bed. Her hooded eyes stare up at me as I take in every inch of her flawless skin. Working loose my belt, I undo the button of my jeans as I kick off my shoes. The rest of my clothes land in a pile on the floor beside hers as I pull a condom out of my wallet. Irene's gaze follows my hand as I stroke my cock. Her legs fall apart, welcoming me into her heat.

I make quick work of getting the condom open and roll it down my length before I crawl between her welcoming thighs. Taking myself in hand I run the length along her slickness, both of us hissing at the contact.

Irene takes my jaw in her hands and pulls me down toward her, kissing me passionately while tilting her hips up, begging me to fuck her. Slowly I sink into her heat, hating the barrier between us, but relishing in the warmth and tightness of her cunt. Her legs wrap around my hips urging me in deeper, and when I'm finally fully seated both of us groan in appreciation.

Irene throws her head back with a moan and I can't help but pull out and stroke into her again. Her breasts jiggle with the movement, grabbing my attention, and I do it again.

"Harder," she urges, pushing at my thighs with her high heels.

Slowly I pull out before shoving my length back into her harshly, stealing her breath.

"Like that?" my voice is hoarse with the strain of trying to control myself. She is so small, and I don't want to hurt her.

"Yes."

"This pussy is perfect," I say in her ear as I thrust in again eliciting a yell from her. "Better than I imagined all those times I had my dick in my hand, thinking of you."

Irene's walls flutter before clamping down on me hard. That's good to know.

"Do you like it? Knowing I jerked off to thoughts of you?" I punctuate each question with a bruising thrust, holding her hips firmly in place. I know my grip on her hips is too hard and I might leave bruises on her beautiful skin. "Or is it simply the dirty talk that makes your cunt grip me like a vise?"

Shit, at the moment I couldn't care less what it is. But I need to know so I can make her do it again.

She writhes beneath me on the cusp of her orgasm. Slowing down, I try to drag this out for as long as possible, terrified that I'm never going to be able to do this again, but she has other plans. One hand holds her breast, harshly tweaking at her nipple while the other slides between her legs and furiously starts rubbing at her clit. The visual is enough to snap the last restraint I have.

Throwing both her legs over my shoulders, I go to work. My thrusts are deep and punishing as I fuck her. Her breathing stalls as her orgasm consumes her and locks up her entire body. Her walls clamp down on me so hard, I have no option but to follow her over the precipice into oblivion. A roar leaves me as I come so hard, I see stars for a moment.

Rolling to the side I pull out of her before falling to my back and trying to catch my breath. Removing the condom, I chuck it in the bin beside her bed. Silence envelops us as we lie there, both breathing harshly. My mind is mush as I try to figure out the protocol. Should I leave? Does she want me to cuddle?

My questions are quickly answered as Irene turns and gets off the bed. She grabs a dark-blue t-shirt from her chest of drawers and pulls it over her head.

"Thanks for that. It was exactly what I needed." Irene laughs without looking at me.

I've never had a woman dismiss me after sex, but I know that's what this is. I've been the asshole enough times to

know the signs. Seems like the shoe is finally on the other foot.

Chapter Sixteen

I'm Not Your Woman

Irene

Let me tell you, sex — good sex — can do wonders for anyone's disposition. I haven't felt this well-rested in months even though I have no problem sleeping. It's all the endorphins flowing through my system, even ten hours later. Not to mention that I still feel the aftereffects of what we did every time I move. The man is big. Everywhere. He damn near broke me in half with that monster cock of his but it was so worth it.

It almost brought me to tears to act so callously toward him after what we shared. I wanted nothing more than to cuddle up and let him hold me while I slept. But I can't risk my heart and my sanity on a man like Beast.

"And what has you smiling so beautifully today?" Sparrow asks as he takes a seat at the bar.

"It's a beautiful day." I smile in return. "And I'm not hungover."

He smiles. "And it has nothing to do with a certain strip club manager driving you back here last night?"

"Preacher?" I laugh. "I wouldn't sleep with that man if he paid me to."

"I didn't think you were the type of girl to look down on a man because of his appearance," he says with a frown as I put a bloody Mary down in front of him.

"I'm not," I reply as I get back to cleaning the bar. "And his scars don't bother me in the least. But I've known men like him and I sure as shit don't want to get caught up in that."

"Preacher is a good man," he defends. I may not know Sparrow as well as I know some of the guys, but I do know he

has a good heart, and he's as loyal as they come.

"I'm sure he is." I stop cleaning and face him. "But he is also the type of man that can't give a girl more than a good time. He is closed off to the world. So yes, if I was looking to simply get laid, he would be at the top of my list. But I don't fuck people I don't trust."

"Shit, chica. Tell me the truth, why don't you?" Sparrow laughs loudly. "Are you always this blunt or is it just me?"

"She's always like this," Viking cuts in before taking a seat beside Sparrow. "That is, until you ask her something about herself." I flip him the bird before getting his morning coffee ready for him.

"Is that true?" Sparrow smirks.

"I'm not that interesting. But ask away. I have nothing to hide." I realize the mistake the moment the words leave my lips. I continue like nothing has happened, placing Viking's black coffee in front of him.

"Why are you here?" Sparrow locks his gaze with mine. I can't back down now.

"My asshole boyfriend kicked the shit out of me and left me bleeding on the kitchen floor while he got in bed and got a good night's sleep."

I don't blink as I say the words. I have long since gotten over the fact that he's an asshole and there's nothing I could have done to avoid the situation. My personality is too abrasive to spend time with someone like him and not set him off. None of it was my fault and I have moved on.

"The fuck, woman? Are you pulling my leg?" Sparrow looks pissed off about my revelation.

"Nope." I turn back to continue cleaning. "You asked and I answered."

"And you're okay with that?"

"Fuck, no, I'm not okay with it." I turn to glare at him. "But I have made peace with the fact that I didn't do a fucking

thing wrong. The problem lies with him, not me.”

Sparrow lifts his hands in a gesture of surrender. “My bad. I didn’t mean to ruffle any feathers.”

“And I didn’t mean to snap at you,” I say with a nod and half a smile. “But it’s a good lesson for you not to assume shit until you actually know what’s going on.”

Viking pats Sparrow on the back with a smile. “And this is why we kept her around. Could have sent her packing a long time ago, but it’s funny as fuck seeing you idiots put your foot in your mouth and her kicking your asses every now and then.”

“And you like looking at my ass,” I wink at the older man.

“Can’t think of a man who wouldn’t,” he says and laughs in reply.

My cell phone vibrates in my back pocket and Preacher’s name flashes across the screen. It’s quiet in the clubhouse, most of the members are still sleeping off last night, so I answer with a smile.

“What do you want?” I snark.

Preacher’s laughter filters through the speaker making me smile. “I was thinking of you so I thought I would call.”

“And what exactly were you thinking?”

“That I may have a proposition for you.”

I already know that neither Preacher nor I have any intention of sleeping with each other so it obviously isn’t about sex. But I can’t think of any other reason.

“You still there?” he asks.

“Yeah,” I can hear the tenseness in my voice as I reply. “What can I help you with?”

“I want to offer you a job.”

For a moment I’m stunned into silence. “What?” I stammer.

“Why don’t we meet up and we can discuss it? This would really be easier face-to-face,” he says, something close to nervousness coating his words. “Unless you don’t want to.”

I spent two hours in this man’s company last night and from the little I learned from our generic conversation, this is nothing like him. He sounds almost vulnerable.

“Sure. Where and when?” I reply without thinking on it any longer. Besides, I can’t live in the clubhouse and manage the bar forever.

“Twenty minutes. At the coffee shop on Main Street.”

“Great. I’ll see you there.” I pocket my cell after ending the call.

When I turn around to head upstairs, I run into a wall of solid muscle. His scent hits me first — woody, and clean. I inhale deeply before stepping back to look up at him.

“Irene,” he rumbles low in his chest, his hands rubbing up and down my arms. “Where you off to?”

It takes me a moment to realize that he heard my end of the conversation. We aren’t a couple, hell, I’m probably not even the only woman warming his bed, and I see no reason to lie.

“Meeting Preacher for coffee.” I smile before moving away from him.

“Preacher?” he asks, his voice dropping even lower.

“Yeah, he called. It’s quiet here and Justice should be back any minute, so I see no reason why not.”

“You don’t know him,” Beast says as he follows me upstairs.

“That’s why we’re having coffee.” I laugh as I enter the room I’ve been using for almost a month. “It’s how normal people make new friends.”

“So, you want to be friends with Preacher?” he asks, brow raised and his voice dripping with skepticism.

“Yes, Beast.” I sigh as I change out of my t-shirt into a flowy green top. I’m not going out of my way to look pretty for Preacher, but I’m not going out for coffee with him dressed in a shirt that has the sleeves torn off. Besides, this sounds like it may be a job interview.

Beast molds his hands to my hips and tugs me into his muscular form. Goose bumps rise over my arms at the feeling of his hands on me again and I draw in a ragged breath to center myself. I can’t get caught up in this man. The sex may have been the best of my life, but I’m not looking to get my heart involved in whatever is going on here.

“You shouldn’t get involved with someone like Preacher. Not even as friends.”

“And you need to mind your own business,” I say. I move out of his grasp again trying to put as much space as possible between us. “Who I am or am not friends with is not your problem.”

“Irene,” Beast starts.

“No.” I hold out a hand. “We slept together, and it was great, but that doesn’t give you the right to tell me how to live my life.”

He studies me for long moments before nodding. “You’re right. It’s not my place to tell you what to do with your life. You’re not my woman.”

Turning on his heel he leaves my room, closing the door softly. I was expecting my words to piss him off, get him to show his temper. Instead, I’m left standing here with a strange hollowness in the center of my chest. He is right. I’m not his woman, but I can’t help wondering what it would be like.

Chapter Seventeen

To Push Or Not To Push

Beast

It takes every ounce of self-control I have not to slam the damn door when I walk away from Irene. I want to rage at her that she has no business meeting with someone like Preacher. He doesn't have any friends, so why the fuck would he suddenly be interested in making friends with Irene?

No. He isn't. He wants more from her and she's too fucking blind to see it.

Stomping down the stairs I see my younger brother behind the bar, stocking the shelves. His head lifts at my footsteps but I don't stop to chat with him. I need to get the fuck out of here before I do something I'll regret.

Striding across the gravel parking lot, I head toward my Harley but get stopped halfway by Mad Dog.

"Hey, Kelly..." He clamps me on the shoulder. "Where you headed off to?"

"Fuck knows," I reply in a snarl. "I just need to get the fuck away."

"How about we go to the gun range? We could both use something to help us blow off some steam."

Glancing at him from the corner of my eye, I can see he's smiling brightly. Since he and Kaiya got together, he is seldom without a smile. Even though I feel like being alone to wallow in my emotions, I nod. Straddling my Harley, I gun the engine and head out of the compound with Mad Dog following behind me.

I take the scenic route around Gypsy Falls. It may take longer to get to our destination, but it gives me time to clear my mind and center myself. Before Mad Dog caught up to me in the compound lot, this is exactly what I was going to do.

The rumble of the machine between my thighs always has a way of calming me. The open road, even if it's not a lot, is enough to have me feeling like I can breathe again.

I love the MC lifestyle, and I love my brothers, but this is the main reason I joined the Gypsy Bastards MC. The freedom I get while driving my bike to wherever the road may take me. Having them at my side just makes it that much better.

We reach the gun range on the outskirts of town and roll down the gravel road. This is probably one of my favorite places, ever. I don't have to pretend to be something I'm not, I can just be a guy with a gun, working on my shot.

Mad Dog and I sign in at the counter and then move to the outdoor range. We shoot at targets, reload, and do it all over again. Neither of us is being competitive about it, just enjoying the mindlessness of the task. After an hour I feel like I can breathe enough to finally have the conversation I know Mad Dog wants to have.

"Finally." He laughs as I holster my weapon and walk over to a picnic table in the shade of a massive elm tree. "I thought you were never going to stop."

"Just needed to clear my head," I reply as I take a seat.

"Wanna talk it out?"

"Not really."

He watches me closely, trying to determine if he should push the subject. "It might help."

"When did you become my keeper?" I ask with a harsher tone than I was planning. "Sorry, I just mean that I don't need you to take care of me, man. I'm all grown up and can do that myself."

"Everyone needs someone in their corner eventually." He looks out over the range. "You are always there for everyone else. I know you raised both Justice and Trinity and that you carry the weight of the world on your shoulders."

“It is what it is,” I grumble not wanting to talk about that either.

“Yeah, it is. And I know what that can do to a man if he doesn’t have a support system. Look what I was like two years ago.”

Thinking back on what Mad Dog used to be like has me chuckling. “I get what you’re saying.”

“Now tell me what’s going on so we can get out of here and grab a cold beer.”

“Fine.” I sigh. “It’s Irene.” I hang my head.

“What about her?” Mad Dog asks with a smirk.

“Don’t act like you don’t know.” I frown.

“I don’t know shit. So, why don’t you tell me.”

“I like her, all right?” I exclaim throwing my hands into the air. “And I thought there may be something there, but she’s going out with Preacher. So, that’s a dead end.”

Mad Dog is silent for long moments. I can see him working through the information I just laid out before saying anything. “Have you talked to her?” He raises a brow.

“There’s no point.”

He laughs. “Brother, one thing I learned from the two years I wasted with Kaiya, is that if I had only manned up and talked to her in the beginning instead of keeping her at arm’s length, I would have been a better man a hell of a lot sooner. Believe me, just talk to her. What’s the worst that could happen?”

Nodding, I smile before we both head back to our bikes. Mad Dog has a point. I don’t know what she wants or where I stand with her, and I won’t if I don’t talk to her. On the drive back my mind is swimming with thoughts of Irene. I already know what I want, now I just have to find out if she wants the same thing.

Chapter Eighteen

What the Future Holds

Irene

When I get to the coffee shop, Preacher is already seated in a back booth waiting on me. When he spots me, he stands and gives me one of those lopsided smiles. Everyone has their attention focused on us and it grates on my nerves. I can't believe people treat him this way on a daily basis. When I reach him, I stand on my tiptoes and draw him in for a hug. I kiss him on his scarred cheek and smile brightly.

"Thanks for inviting me," I say as I pull away and slide into the booth.

Preacher has a frown on his face and a slight blush coloring his unscarred cheek. "Why did you do that?"

"Because you are my friend. And because it pisses me off that people stare at you like some monster that escaped from a black-and-white horror movie."

"Don't let it bother you." He makes a dismissive gesture with his hand. "I'm used to it."

"But you shouldn't have to be!" I exclaim.

"It is what it is, Irene, and you hugging and kissing me isn't going to change that."

"Why don't you just leave me to do whatever I want, and we won't have to have this argument every time we meet each other somewhere?" I sass at him. "Besides, you didn't ask me to meet you here to complain about how I choose to greet my friends."

"You're going to be a pain in my ass, aren't you?" he says and sighs.

"I don't know. Depends on what kind of job you want to offer me." I smile as innocently as I can.

A waitress puts two cups of coffee on the table between us before hightailing it away from us. Preacher already knows how I take my coffee and must have ordered when he came in. She doesn't even try to look at Preacher and I feel my blood boil. People can be such assholes. Taking a deep breath, I reign in my anger and wait for Preacher to tell me about the job he has for me.

"I need a manager down at Dusk. My dad isn't getting any better and it's too much for me to do on my own."

"It's a wonderful gesture, Preacher, but I don't know a damn thing about running a strip club," I reply. "I would be more of a hindrance than anything else."

"You would be perfect." He chuckles. "I need someone who can take charge, isn't going to take shit from the girls, and doesn't want to get in my pants."

"But — "

Preacher cut me off. "You'll be perfect. I'll still deal with the day-to-day, I just don't want the drama that goes along with all the females that work for me. They can be a lot to handle sometimes."

"And you think I can do it?" I arch a brow at him.

"The moment I saw you corral those three women you call friends, I knew you would be able to do it. Did you know the last time they went on a ladies' night, Pope and Wolf ended up sleeping in jail for kicking the shit out of a guy?"

"What?" I ask a little too loudly. "You can't be serious!"

"Every time those three go somewhere and alcohol is involved, something bad happens. All of us know it, that's why the guys only let them go to Dusk now. We can control the damage they cause." He chuckles. "You kept them in line, even if you were very subtle about it."

It wasn't something I was doing on purpose but thinking back on our night out, I realize that I did steer them away from anything that may have caused trouble. Shit, I didn't even know I was doing it.

“All right.”

“So, you’ll do it?” Preacher looks hopeful as he watches me sip my coffee.

“Why not?” I smile at him. “Just give me a couple of days to sort everything out.”

“You can start on Monday,” he replies.

“Where have you been, woman?” Justice asks the moment I walk back into the clubhouse. I raise a brow and glare at him. “Sorry, that came out wrong. What have you been up to?”

I know he didn’t mean to sound disrespectful and it’s the only reason I let it go. He is a good guy, he’s just picking up bad habits from the growly guys around him.

“Job interview,” I answer and smile.

“But you have a job.” Justice frowns.

“Sweetie...” I pat his shoulder as I round the bar. “This isn’t a job. I need something that will earn me money. I can’t stay in the clubhouse for the rest of my life.”

“Why not?”

“Because I’m a grown-up?” I laugh. “This is great, and I’ll always be grateful for everything the guys and the club have done for me. But I need to get back on my feet.”

Justice studies me for a moment before shrugging. “Did you get the job, at least?”

“Yeah.” I smile widely. I’m giddy at the prospect of starting this new chapter in my life. “I start on Monday. You are looking at the new general manager for Dusk ‘til Dawn.”

Justice pulls me in for a hug. “I’m happy for you.”

“The fuck?” A roar interrupts our moment.

Justice releases me instantly as we both turn to face his brother. Mad Dog has him by the arm, holding him back. Beast looks about ready to murder someone.

Chapter Nineteen

Little Green Monster

Beast

I swear it's like a red mist descends over my vision when I walk into the clubhouse to find Irene wrapped in my brother's arms. I'm mostly sure that it's innocent, but my jealous streak is not listening to logic. Glaring at Justice, all I can think of doing is ripping his arms from his sockets and beating him bloody with them.

Mad Dog is holding me back but it's a fucking joke. The only reason I allow it is because I respect the man and I know he's trying to keep me from making an ass of myself. Taking a deep breath, I try to find my inner calmness.

Justice watches me closely as he steps away from Irene. She catches him moving from the corner of her eye and grabs his hand, pulling him back to her.

"Stay right here," she says. Her gaze stays glued to me as she walks around the bar. "We need to talk."

She doesn't wait for my reply as she heads out the back door and into the afternoon sunshine. Mad Dog releases me and I follow her, watching her ass sway with every step she takes. When I get outside, she closes the door behind me with a glare.

"What the fuck is your problem?" she shouts with her hands thrown in the air. "You're acting like a goddamned lunatic."

Her attitude helps ramp my anger back up again. "Excuse me?" I ask through clenched teeth.

Her breathing is labored as she faces off with me. "You heard me. Is this why they call you Beast?"

"What the fuck is that supposed to mean?" I tower over her, glaring down.

“Don’t try to intimidate me, you asshole!” Irene pushes at my chest. “I don’t have time for your shit.” I catch the hand flying at my face just in time to stop the slap from landing.

Grabbing her by the hips, I pull her against me while lifting to crush her against my chest. I crush my lips to hers and let all my frustration bleed through into the kiss. She doesn’t try to push me away. No, she wraps her legs around my hips and opens her lips to allow me access. I take the opportunity to deepen the kiss. Walking across the grass I pin her to the wall before pulling my lips away from hers.

Resting my forehead against hers I take a deep breath. “I like you,” I say gingerly. “I don’t want us to be nothing more than a one-night stand. I don’t want to walk in on you embraced by another man, especially my brother. And I sure as shit don’t want you going for coffee with Preacher.”

She wriggles in my grasp, and I gently put her down on the grass. Her gaze stays locked with mine as she processes everything I just said. She swallows visibly before running a hand down her face.

“We talked about this last night,” she says softly.

“I know.”

“And you didn’t think to mention any of this?”

“I was a little caught up in the moment,” I reply sheepishly.

Irene tries to hide her smile but fails miserably. “What do you want from me?”

“A chance. I know you had a bad experience with the last guy. I just want an opportunity to show you that not all men are like him.”

“I know that.” She rests her forehead on the center of my chest. “But I can’t see us working.” The last part of her sentence is so soft I almost miss it.

Fisting my hand in her hair, I tip her head back so I can look into her eyes. “Why not?”

“I would drive you nuts.” Irene smiles sadly. “I love hugging the guys, it’s part of who I am. I won’t be stripped of my independence again.”

“That’s not what I want to do. I only want to be along for the ride, doll.”

She looks at me for the longest time, trying to figure out if what I’m saying is actually true.

“I’m sorry.” She won’t look at me, instead looking over my shoulder into the distance. “I knew sleeping with you would cause problems.”

“Irene,” I start but she cuts me off.

“We are too different. I’m too independent, too abrasive, too *me* for this to ever work,” she says while stepping away. “If we do this and everything turns to shit, it won’t just impact us. I’m not willing to take the chance.”

“So, that’s it?” I ask. I want to rage at the situation, but I know it’s her choice.

“You are possessive and violent. You barely have any control over your emotions. Those are all the classic markers for someone who’s likely to become abusive,” she says softly. “I can’t ignore the red flags this time. I won’t put myself in that situation again.”

I balk at the idea of ever hurting her. “I would never hurt you.”

“I actually believe you.” She smiles sadly. “But it’s not a chance I’m willing to take.”

I watch her as she walks away, her shoulders hunched. I know everything she said is true, but I also know that I’m not just going to give up. Irene is special. I just need to convince her to give us a chance.

Chapter Twenty

Moving Out But Not Moving On

Irene

It has been almost a week since I left Beast standing outside the clubhouse. I felt like the biggest bitch in history. Hearing him say he wants me almost had me giving in to the insanity that would be us. But I couldn't do it.

What Gerald did to me has clearly fucked with my head. I know in my heart that Beast would never hurt me, but just the thought of being in a relationship with someone capable of violence the way he is, is enough to send me running as fast as my short legs can carry my ass.

My cell phone rings loudly in the motel room, drawing me from my thoughts. I've been staying here since I walked away from Beast. I couldn't bear to be around him any longer and staying in the clubhouse would have ensured that we run into each other.

But that hasn't stopped him. He shows up at Dusk to bring me coffee and every day has flowers sent. He is slowly chipping away at my resolve, and it scares the shit out of me. I have all these reasons not to be with him and they all make perfect sense, but I also know he is a good guy, and my heart is begging me to ignore my head and take a chance.

"Yes, Hadley," I answer after checking the caller ID.

"Don't 'yes, Hadley' me," she says loudly over the music in the background. "Where the hell are you?"

"Where should I be?" I ask, confusion coating my words. I can't remember making plans for tonight, even if it is a Friday.

"Don't tell me you forgot?"

I remain silent knowing now that I clearly did forget something.

“Justice and Bishop are getting patched over from prospect to full members tonight. You promised you would work the bar.” She has moved outside by the sound of it.

“Shit. I am so sorry.” I rush around looking for my bra. “I’ll be there in twenty minutes.”

“Are you sure? I know there’s something going on that you don’t want to talk about,” Hadley starts but I cut her off.

“Justice is my friend and I made him a promise. My personal issues aside, I’ll be there in no time.” I sigh loudly. “Or at least I will be as soon as I can find my bra.”

Hadley chuckles before ending the call and leaving me to crawl around on hands and knees until I find the damn thing hidden under the bed. I dress quickly and do my makeup before grabbing my keys and hopping into my car. I have a nagging feeling of being watched but I don’t see anyone. I also don’t have time to figure this out right now.

I’m about a block away from the clubhouse when I realize that the same car has been following me since I left the hotel. For a moment my mind blanks and I don’t have an idea what to do, but then I remember all the training I have gone through. I need to continue driving. The best thing to do when you think you’re being followed is to head to the nearest police station or to your original destination if you’re certain there will be people around.

I head directly to the clubhouse. After all, I would never go to the police station. Not because of my affiliation with the Gypsy Bastards, but because I know full well that the police are not always the good guys.

My car skids to a stop on the far side of the parking lot. I have no idea whether the other car followed me, but I do know I won’t be taking the chance. Instead, I jump from my car and bolt toward the side door of the clubhouse.

A shriek escapes me as arms band around my body from behind and I instantly go into full-on fight mode. My elbow comes back and connects with the side of the head of

the person behind me. I then bring down all the force my little legs can muster and ram my heel into their foot.

“Fuck,” I heard groaned as I’m released.

I know that voice. Turning, I see Sparrow holding the left side of his face while balancing on one leg.

“Oh my God,” I gasp before covering my mouth.

“That will teach me a lesson,” he says.

“Shit. I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t be.” He laughs as he slings an arm across my shoulders and starts walking toward the clubhouse.

I keep turning to look around, checking for the car that was following me. As we reach the clubhouse, he pulls me to a stop beside him.

“I thought I scared you and that’s why you defended yourself, but it seems like something else may be going on here.” He raises an eyebrow in question.

“It’s nothing,” I start but he cuts me off.

“Chica, I may not know you very long, but I do know I’ve never seen you like this. What freaked you out?”

I take one last look back even though I told myself I wouldn’t do it. “I think someone was following me.”

Sparrow’s entire demeanor changes. He guides me behind him as he scans the parking lot and all the vehicles gathered. It takes him a moment to assess the situation. He nods as if he is satisfied that everything is okay before turning to face me.

“Let’s get inside and then we can work out a plan to keep you safe in the morning. I’ll let Pope know what’s going on,” he says.

“That’s not necessary. I may just have been overreacting. Maybe it’s nothing.”

“We take care of our own and you are one of us. It’s as simple as that,” he says. He opens the door and the full effect

of the music hits me like a physical blow.

“Thank you.” I hug him before going inside.

Chapter Twenty-One

Safety First

Beast

I watch as Sparrow walks in after Irene hugs him and already I know something isn't right. His posture is stiff, and he makes a beeline for Pope. Instead of keeping my nose out of it, I head over toward them.

"We may have a problem," Sparrow says to Pope.

Storm kisses his cheek before walking away, knowing if this is something that concerns her, Pope will share.

"What's going on?" Pope asks as soon as she's out of earshot.

"Irene thinks she's being followed," he says. Before Pope can say anything, he continues. "I know she had some issues in Louisiana and it could just be her imagination, but after the shit we've been through these past couple of years, I think it's worth sticking to the side of caution."

I want to go to her. Check that she's okay and make sure she never leaves my side, but I can't. Not yet at least. She has made it perfectly clear that she isn't my woman. But I can't stop the protective instincts from rising in me.

"What do you think, Beast?" Pope asks.

"It may all be her imagination." The words taste bitter as I say them. But I also know that logically, it is a real possibility. "But I agree with Sparrow. We have had enough shit to know better."

"What do you suggest?" Sparrow questions.

"She's here right now so there isn't any need for action right this minute. But we should get Wolf and talk this through with him too. He's better at this shit than I am."

“She starts working at Dusk on Monday,” Pope points out. “I know that none of us like or respect Preacher, but he won’t let anything happen to her while she’s there. I’ll update Wolf and then we can formulate a full plan tomorrow.”

I nod at his assessment and walk away to find my brother. She may not want me around taking care of her, but she loves Justice like a sibling. He needs to be the one who looks after her until she can accept me.

I find him sitting at a table with Bishop, a relaxed grin on his face and beer in his hand. He is wearing his brand-new cut with the full Gypsy Bastards MC patch on his back and I take a moment to just smile. Pride swells in my chest at the fact that my brother is now one of my *brothers*.

“You look like a proud papa.” Bishop laughs.

“He’s the closest thing I ever had to one.” Justice tips his beer at me.

“Whatever,” I mumble as I take a seat beside him. If my skin wasn’t so dark, I swear I would be blushing.

“What has you frowning like that?” Justice asks effectively changing the subject and reminding me of why I came here.

“I need you to keep an eye on Irene.”

His smile fades as his gaze zeroes in on where Irene is working behind the bar, a smile on her face as Viking laughs loudly.

“What’s the problem?” Bishop asks.

“Nothing in particular,” I say. “But she was a little spooked tonight, so we’re just being safe.”

Justice nods. “The two of us can take shifts for now.” He nods at Bishop as he pushes his beer aside.

My brother has always been overly protective of the people he cares for, and it’s only gotten worse in the years since our mother passed. He got so bad with Trinity that she threatened to move across the country, and then actually did.

“That would be great.”

Turning, I head toward Irene. She smiles when she sees me and for a moment the world melts into the background and all my worries disappear.

“Can I have a minute?” I ask.

She takes me in from head to toe. “Sure.” She drops a rag she was using to wipe down the bar to follow me into the little storage room. “What’s up?”

“I want to make it clear that I heard you the other day. But I want you to hear me now.” I crowd her back against the shelving that holds beer and other booze. “I want you. I want your problems to be mine and I want to be the one you turn to when you need something. I want you to be my woman and I’m not going to let you simply slip through my fingers.”

“Beast,” she says with a sigh. “This isn’t going to work.”

“You’re not ready to give me a chance yet, and I get it. But know that I’m here, and I will do everything in my power to keep you happy and safe.”

Grabbing her behind the head I slam my lips on hers and kiss her until she is pliant in my arms, making sure she knows I mean every word I say.

“See you soon,” I say before walking away and leaving her on her own.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Irene

One Week Later

“Jasmine, I couldn’t give a shit,” I say as I face the half-naked blonde woman who’s trying to make her problems mine. “Rules are rules. And you signed a contract. Your boyfriend lost his mind in here last night because you were giving a lap dance.”

“But...”

I cut her off with a raised hand. “He caused thousands of dollars of damage, not to mention what he’s done to our reputation. You’re fired.”

Tears stream down her cheeks as she runs from my office. I hate being the bad guy but there are rules in place for a reason. No boyfriends or husbands are allowed in the club because they can’t handle seeing their women doing the job they’re being paid for.

“That was harsh,” Sparrow says as he walks in. “Can’t you give her a break?”

I roll my eyes at him so hard I fear they might get stuck in the back of my head. “That’s why you don’t have the big desk. You are too nice.”

My words have him laughing maniacally. “No one has ever called me soft.”

“Just calling it as I see it. As it stands, the damages are being shared half and half by Preacher and the Gypsy Bastards. If you want to keep her on the payroll the Gypsy’s can pay the full amount and have any further damages billed to them.”

He glares at me as he takes a seat on the other side of my desk. “I hate when you get all logical about shit,” he grumbles.

“Now that we have that settled, what brings you to my corner of hell?”

A smile pulls at his lips. “It’s the big guy’s birthday tomorrow.” I nod. “And we want to have a party.”

“I’m not his wife or his mother. You don’t need my permission.”

“I know that. But he would be happy to have you there, and the rest of us would love to have you too,” he says. I appreciate the gesture, but whatever they decide to do doesn’t have to be run by me first.

“I’m on shift tomorrow night. Preacher is going to see his dad,” I explain. “I can drop by after I’m done.”

Sparrow tilts his head to the side as he considers me. “You really don’t mind, do you?”

Taking a deep breath, I try to explain as best as I can. “I love spending time with all of you. I just can’t give him what he wants.” Sparrow nods and I watch the sadness in his eyes that he tries to hide from everyone.

“You really have adapted well to us assholes, haven’t you?” Sparrow smiles.

“It was easier than I thought it would be.”

“Meaning?”

“You guys are better than most civilians I know, and I wasn’t expecting that. You all welcomed me with open arms and didn’t ever make me feel like I was a burden. Most other people would have shown me the door.” I shrug.

“You have a very dark view of life.” He chuckles as he stands to leave. “I’ll save you a piece of cake.”

“Thanks.”

For hours I sit in my office interviewing new dancers, waitresses, and even a bouncer. The day wears on and before I even realize it. Beast is standing in my doorway looking fine in his dark-wash jeans and a t-shirt.

“You look stressed,” he says.

“Wow. A compliment.”

Beast and I have come to this weird standstill in our non-relationship. We are friendly enough with each other but that’s all. We don’t hug and we never spend time alone. He still sends me flowers every day and brings me coffee when he can, but he doesn’t ask for more. I know he will eventually, and I honestly don’t know if I have it in me to push him away again.

I don’t know if I even want to. The memory of our last kiss in the storeroom is seared into my mind.

“I just meant that you need a break,” Beast says with a shrug.

“I have a week off next month. I’m going to visit Lane.”

“That’s great. You’ve been working hard since you started here.”

“What are you doing here, Beast?” I ask.

He chuckles. “Is it really that bad to see me?”

“You know that’s not what I meant.” I frown at him.

“Yeah, I know. Anyway, everyone else is busy planning my surprise party so they decided I would be your ride tonight.”

“You know about the party?”

“Of course, I know. I do all the security for the clubhouse. Nothing gets in or out of there I don’t know about it.”

I want to smack that smug smirk off his face. But it’s also the same look that makes me want to throw caution to the wind and jump him. Beast tilts his head to the side, studying me before stepping into my office and closing the door.

The air is stifling, his scent overwhelming me. My heart starts to beat faster, and I know this is going to be another situation between the two of us that would be better left alone.

“What are you doing?” I ask when he circles my desk.

“Taking a chance.”

“Beast...”

“Just listen. I know I’m not the type of guy you want to be in a relationship with.” He cups my cheek gently. “But I hate this. I don’t want you to stay away from the clubhouse, or me, anymore.”

His fingers skim from my jaw and down my neck, an involuntary shudder working its way through my body. A small smile curves the side of his mouth.

“I can’t give you what you want.” My voice is soft, almost inaudible, but no one could miss the sad undertone.

“I want you in any way I can have you,” he says. I see his facial expression change before he speaks again. “Friends with benefits.”

“What?”

“It’s perfect,” he says and grins. “We can be friends and stop avoiding each other. You don’t need to commit to me and if I’m lucky, I can convince you to give me a chance sometime in the future.”

“It won’t work...” I start to explain all the issues.

“Yes. There are a million reasons why we shouldn’t do this, but I’m tired of trying to convince myself of them. I see the way you look at me and I know I want you.”

“Can you really do this? No strings attached?”

“It’s better than the alternative.”

“Which is?”

“Whatever the fuck this is.”

I don’t get a chance to agree to his plan, which is pure, unadulterated insanity before he slams his lips down on mine and every rational thought leaves my mind.

Our hands and lips are everywhere. It takes mere moments for us to strip me out of my clothes and his. I know

this is a really bad idea, but I can't find a single reason not to do this. Sex with Beast is the *best sex of my life!* And I am not going to stop him.

He flips me and bends me over my desk, scattering papers everywhere. His fingers delve between my legs, testing my wetness.

"So ready for me," Beast mumbles.

I swear I have a smart retort but my mind short-circuits when his big dick bottoms out in me. A loud moan is all that escapes as his hips piston into me. I don't even have a moment to catch my breath before the first orgasm hits me.

"Fuck, yes," Beast gasps loudly fucking me harder.

It's quick and dirty, and perfect.

The words *I love you* are on the tip of my tongue as he holds me close, both of us trying to regain our breath, but I hold them back. Now isn't the right time to be making any big declarations.

Chapter Twenty-Three

A Not So Surprise Party

Beast

My birthday has always just been another day of the year to me, but the guys always like to make a production of someone's birthday. I mean, we are outlaw bikers and any reason for a party is a good reason. So, every year I go along with it, joining in the festivities and the debauchery that goes along with a party thrown by the Gypsy Bastards.

This year is a little different, though. After I fucked Irene over her desk at Dusk, I drove her back to the motel she's staying at, and we went at it three more times before passing out. This morning she woke me up with what she refers to as "birthday head." This means I woke up to her sucking me off like it was the last thing she would ever do, before we showered and I dropped her off at work.

Best.

Birthday.

Ever.

We only decided to try this friends-with-benefits thing last night, but I don't regret it. I would rather have her in my life a little than not have her at all.

The ringing of my cell phone pulls me out of my daydream. My sister's name flashes across the screen and a smile blooms across my face.

"Hey, Trinity. What's up?"

"Not much. Happy birthday, Kelly," her soft voice carries down the line.

"Thanks, girl. It would be better if I could see my little sister, though." I miss her like crazy.

I've been her guardian since she was twelve years old, when our mom passed away. She is twenty now and away at college. But the last time we spoke she hinted that she might show up here around this time.

"I'm so sorry, Kelly. I wanted to surprise you and be there tonight. It was all planned. But these midterms are killing me."

"Don't beat yourself up about it, Trinity," I reply. "I know if you could be here, you would. But you'll be home for Christmas?"

"I wouldn't miss it for anything," she replies enthusiastically. "I need to meet this woman you and Justice keep talking about. And find out how I can convince her to give you a chance." She laughs.

We talk a bit more before she has to run off to class. I miss her like crazy, but she's getting the education she needs to make a better future for herself. Trinity worked her ass off in high school to get a scholarship because she didn't want to burden me. I'm so proud of what she has already accomplished.

"Where's Irene?" Justice asks as he carries a case of vodka behind the bar.

"She working," I reply as I help him stock the bar.

"The whole day?"

"Yeah," I reply. "Maurice isn't doing well so Preacher is going down to Florida to see him."

"Shit. That sucks."

"It does, but Irene told him she's closing at two no matter how busy they are, and he agreed." I smile. "She may miss most of the party, but she will join us as soon as she can."

The music is pumping through the speakers and laughter fills the room. All the guys are here with their

women. It's just past one in the morning and all the children have already left with their respective babysitters so the PG rating has been lifted.

Some of the guys have women on their laps, while others have disappeared deeper into the clubhouse to get their freak on. Sparrow and Mad Dog are playing pool and taking money from anyone willing to challenge either of them.

Hadley has secluded herself into a corner where she is working on a piece of ink Pope wanted on his chest. Storm and Kaiya are smiling and dancing. Everything is falling into place.

"When are you going to make an honest woman of that girl already?" Viking asks as he takes a seat beside me at the bar.

"Don't you think it's a little soon to be talking about marriage, old man?" I chuckle. "I can't even get Irene to date me and you're planning our whole future already."

"Fuck marriage. A ring doesn't mean shit and you don't need a piece of paper to prove you love someone." He grumbles. "What I wanna know is when you're going to put a patch on her back."

"Not sure it's something she would want," I reply. "Not all women are open to the idea of wearing a property patch."

"Why would you say that?"

"I heard a couple of civilian women talking about Hadley's property patch when I took her to the grocery store last week," I explain. "Apparently, they found it archaic. Said they couldn't understand why any woman would want to belong to a man. The one woman actually said she wasn't a horse and couldn't be owned."

With every word out of my mouth, I can see the frown on Viking's face deepen.

"You should have told them," Storm interjects from behind. "A property patch doesn't mean she belongs to a man. It means she belongs with him. My property patch means

family and security. And for someone like me, like Kaiya and Hadley, who didn't grow up with everything, it means home."

"Sorry." I feel like shit. "I didn't mean for it to come out like that."

"Don't worry about it." She smiles as she pats my back. "I know what those stuck-up bitches in town say about me. About us. But I have a family and a man that isn't fucking his secretary behind my back, so the joke's on them."

"Fuck the civies." Viking lifts his bourbon in a toast which has Storm laughing out loud.

"Do you think Irene would want to wear my patch?" I ask Viking after Storm walks away. "She has a family, she's independent as all get-out, and she doesn't seem the type, to be honest."

"I know that things between you two haven't exactly been simple," he replies rubbing his beard. "But I fully believe she would be happy to be an official member of the club."

"I don't know," I start to say, doubt creeping in.

"It's up to you, brother. But if you never ask, you'll never know."

With a smile he walks away, leaving me with my thoughts. I would love to see Irene wearing my patch, hell, I would be ecstatic. I've had it in a box in the bottom of my cupboard for weeks. But I need to give her time to make peace with the fact she is my woman now, not just some piece of ass.

I may have said friends with benefits but that was only to get her to lower her guard. What I meant was, forever.

Chapter Twenty-Four

The Past Never Stays in The Past

Irene

I wish I was with Beast and everyone else down at the clubhouse celebrating his birthday instead of here working. But I offered to take this shift for Preacher. His father, Maurice, has lung cancer and it hasn't been going well for him. If my father was still alive, I would have given up anything and everything to spend time with him. Even if he was sick.

I know Preacher well enough to know it's killing him that he can't be there to take care of his father, even if he doesn't say it.

The only silver lining is that there's only an hour left before closing time. I'm counting the minutes, praying for time to pass faster so I can get the hell out of here.

A knock on my door draws my attention.

"Kevin," I say, seeing one of our bouncers standing there. "What can I do for you?"

"Sorry to interrupt," he replies. "There's a girl out here asking for you."

"I'm not doing interviews at one in the morning." I sigh loudly.

He frowns. "I know. And I told her that. But she says she isn't here for a job. Said her name is Trinity."

"Shit." My expression must show my shock because he straightens up immediately. I stand and move to the door. "Don't worry. I'll see to her."

I pat Kevin's shoulder as I walk past him and down the hallway to the main floor. At the bar stands a willowy black woman with a raucous head full of curls.

“Trinity?” I ask as I reach her.

“Oh, thank God!” she exclaims wrapping me in a tight hug. “Justice mentioned you worked here so I took a chance that you’d be here. I hate showing up at the compound alone. And I really didn’t feel like driving down that damn dirt road with my car because I swear it’s on its last legs, and Kelly will have to look at it before I go back to school.”

I watch her as she verbally vomits in front of me, barely taking a breath before moving onto the next sentence.

“Sorry.” She giggles before covering her mouth with her hand. “I tend to talk a lot when I’m nervous.” She takes a deep breath and squares her shoulders while holding out her hand. “Hi. I’m Trinity. It’s so nice to meet you.”

I feel a smile spread across my face before I pull her in for a hug. “Hi, Trinity. I’m Irene and I’m happy as fuck to have you here. Kelly is going to lose it when he sees you.”

She smiles as I release her and nods in agreement. She opens her mouth to speak but quickly closes it again. A hand clasps my elbow and turns me around.

“Irene?”

That voice sends chills down my spine. Why the fuck is he here? This isn’t right. My eyes travel up from the center of his chest to his face. I look at him, carefully. Trying to find what attracted me to him in the first place. He is an attractive man. Dark-blond hair, cropped close to his head. Light-grey eyes and a nice smile. But, what I see when I look at him now falls short on everything I didn’t know I wanted. Everything I have in Kelly.

“Gerald,” I say with a nod.

“What are you doing here?” he asks.

I can hear from his tone of voice that he’s finding it hard to figure out just what is going on.

“I could ask you the same,” I reply watching as the tips of his ears turn red. Now that I know who he really is, I can

see the signs of his anger more clearly. He hates when people don't answer his questions.

"I recently transferred to the GFPD," he says lowly. "I live here now. The guys brought me out as a welcome to the force."

I nod before plastering a fake smile on my face. "I'm happy for you, Gerald. Sorry, but I can't chat. I have things to attend to."

Turning, I take Trinity's hand in mine and start to walk away. A strong grip wraps around my arm and pulls me back.

Kevin is beside me in a heartbeat, but I smile and shake my head before turning around to face Gerald again. I glare at the hand that still has ahold on me.

"I suggest you take your hand off me," I say with deathly calmness. "You're not in Louisiana anymore." I bare my teeth at him.

"Are you threatening me?" His face starts to darken to a color I remember vividly.

"What? Are you going to hit me again?" I ask loudly. I see Chief Barker walk up behind him with a genuine smile.

"Is there a problem here, Irene?" Barker asks me.

"Not at all. Just a misunderstanding with your new detective." I smile. Looking down at my watch I make an executive decision. "But it is last round, Chief. Sorry, but we're closing early tonight."

"No worries," he says and smiles back at me. "I know you want to head out for the party. Tell Beast I said Happy Birthday."

He pulls Gerald away from me even though that doesn't stop him from glaring in my direction. Nodding at the bartender, he rings the large brass bell behind the bar, signaling to all the customers that we are officially closing in the next fifteen minutes. Some grumbles can be heard but everyone knows how it works here and I know that Dusk will be empty soon.

“What was that?” Trinity asks as she walks into my office behind me.

“Urgh...” I run a hand through my hair in frustration. “Stupid ex-boyfriend. Nothing to worry about.”

“Are you sure? Shouldn’t we call Kelly or Justice?”

“Don’t worry about it. And not a word about this today,” I tell her sternly. “I’ll tell him tomorrow, but I want him to enjoy tonight. Gerald has fucked up enough in his useless life, I’m not letting him screw up your brother’s birthday too.”

“Okay.” She nods even though I can see she doesn’t agree with me.

I start shutting down my computer and the bartender brings in his cash drawer for me to lock up in the safe. Sparrow will be around before opening to do the cash-up. I hate working with money, so he just fell back into his role as the accountant here when he came back. When everything is shut down and locked up, Trinity and I make our way out to the main floor.

I breathe a sigh of relief when I see that Gerald isn’t still seated in a booth, waiting to confront me. Smiling, I wave at everyone as Trinity and I walk outside.

“We can leave your car here,” I tell her. “Kevin locks the lot after everyone leaves, so it will be safe. And I have Kelly’s massive truck.”

Trinity giggles. “He must really like you. He doesn’t let anyone drive his truck.”

I press the button for the central locking and my phone starts to ring in my bag. Digging around to find it, I miss the man coming up behind me. I don’t miss the pain from the shot that takes me down to my knees.

“Fucking whore,” Gerald roars and I hear Trinity scream. As he rears back and kicks me in the ribs, my only thought is that she stays safe in the truck.

Gerald grabs me by my leather jacket and hauls me to my feet before hitting me again. I can feel the sticky heat of the blood from my split eyebrow dripping down my cheek. He pulls back to hit me again but doesn't get the chance.

“Fucking asshole!” Trinity yells loudly before the smell of pepper surrounds me.

I can feel my chest constrict as the noxious scent only gets worse.

“Fucking bitch,” Gerald roars, releasing me. My knees give out and I crumble to the harsh asphalt. “You may get away from me this time, but I'll be back.” It only takes a moment for him to disappear into his car and haul ass out of the lot.

“Oh my God,” Trinity gasps when she falls to her knees beside me. “Are you okay?”

I groan as I sit up, knowing I must look fucking terrible.

“I'll be fine,” I say as I look at her through the eye that I'm not holding. “Can you drive this truck?”

Chapter Twenty-Five

Out Of the Loop

Beast

I've tried calling Irene twice and she hasn't answered. She could be driving, which would explain not answering, but it's half past two and I'm starting to get antsy. Pulling my cell from my pocket again I find the number to dial. But the frown on Justice's face pulls my attention to him.

He says something to Bishop before leaving the bar and heading to the kitchen. I don't know why I follow him, but I do. Standing outside the door I wait a moment, straining to hear what might be said.

"Fuck!" I hear something crash to the floor.

"Will you calm down?" I hear a feminine voice.

"Calm down. Look at her!" Justice roars. "I need to get Beast."

"Don't," Irene says. "Just get Sparrow. Leave Kelly to enjoy his birthday."

"That's fucked up," Justice says. "He'll never forgive any of us for hiding this from him."

"If Sparrow just answered his fucking phone, you wouldn't even know about this," she bites back. "I know he's your brother, but I need your help."

My heart is beating a mile a minute as I listen to them argue. I can't just stand out here anymore but before I can push the door open, Sparrow is beside me.

"What's going on?" He looks a little frantic. "Irene sent me a message saying to come to the kitchen 911."

"No idea," I rumble. "But I'm about to fucking find out."

I wasn't prepared for what was on the other side of the door. Justice has his hands in his hair, his face contorted in anger. Trinity is standing beside him, rubbing circles on his back, trying to calm him down. But the thing that nearly has my knees giving out is Irene. Sitting on the kitchen table with a bag of ice wrapped in a tea towel pressed to her face. Blood stains her lavender button-down shirt and even though she has it covered with the makeshift ice pack, I can see a bruise blooming on her face.

"What the fuck?" I mutter as I move to her.

I wedge myself between her thighs and gingerly lift the pack from her face. There's a deep gash through her brow that's going to need stitches and her cheek, jaw, and eye on the left side are already swollen and turning a mottled blue-black color.

"Who did this?"

My gaze is locked on Irene, but I can already see she's not going to tell me. Silence envelops everyone in the kitchen.

"Someone better start talking before I lose my shit," I say with barely contained rage.

"Gerald," Trinity says from beside me. "That's the man's name."

"I'm going to call Doc to come take a look at her," Sparrow says before leaving the room.

I'm still trying to process everything I'm seeing. Who the fuck is this Gerald character? I'm racking my brain trying to think if I know someone with that name. Maybe he's an enemy of the club, and she's being targeted because of me?

I do hear the music cut out and the entire clubhouse falls silent before we are swarmed by more people. Pope, Wolf, and Mad Dog are beside me in quick succession.

"Irene," Wolf says softly. "Are you okay?"

Before I can smack him in the head for asking stupid questions, she turns her gaze to him.

“I would be better if everyone stopped making such a big deal about this.” I hear her tone change and take on a somewhat hysterical quality. “I would be fucking great if Sparrow answered his goddamn phone when he gets called.”

And then she does the one thing I have never seen her do before. She starts crying. Her body is racked with sobs as tears spill down her cheeks. I pull her head to my chest and gently cradle her against me as she cracks wide open. Seeing her in the condition she’s in is scary but seeing this strong woman break is fucking terrifying.

“Babe, you need to tell us what happened,” I whisper in her ear.

She shakes her head before pulling away. “No.” She lifts her chin in defiance.

“Babe,” I start again, trying to coax the truth from her. But I get cut off.

“Tell him,” Trinity says glaring at Irene. “Or I’ll tell him what little I know and probably make everything worse.”

“You don’t understand.” Irene sniffles while looking at Trinity. “He’ll kill him.”

“It’s the asshole who hit you last time, isn’t it?” Viking asks from the doorway.

The look on her face is confirmation enough. He’s right. I’m going to kill him. Not saying another word, I stalk out of the kitchen. I don’t go too far because I need to know that she’s being taken care of, but I need to breathe. Keeping calm and controlling my anger is important right now.

Grabbing my cell phone, I stab at the screen angrily until I pull up Preacher’s details and hit “call.” It rings for long moments before he answers.

“What?” he grumbles.

I’m not sure if I woke him up or if he’s busy but I couldn’t give a flying fuck.

“I need the security footage sent from Dusk to Justice. Starting at opening tonight,” I reply.

“I’ll get it to you in the morning when there are actually staff to get it for you.” He’s irritated at being bothered and if I could, I would kick his ass. But it’s not his fault, he doesn’t know what’s going on.

“Get someone to go in,” I say calmly. “Irene was attacked.”

“Jesus fuck!” Preacher exclaims. “Is she okay?”

“She’s alive. Bruised, battered, and pissed off, though.”

“I’ll call Kevin. You should have what you need within the next hour,” he replies.

“Thank you.”

I end the call, knowing that even though I don’t like or trust their friendship, Preacher has a soft spot for my woman and will do whatever needs to be done to help us sort out this fucking mess.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Time to Leave, Again

Irene

Fuck!

I should have had Trinity drive us to the motel. I should have had Sparrow meet us there. But I wasn't thinking clearly after the fucking shot I took. Now I'm sitting here with everyone staring at me, and Beast is probably out there somewhere looking for Gerald.

Fuck!

"Will one of you just go after him?" I ask brokenly not making eye contact with anyone.

I can't face any of these people. I swore when I got here that my problems wouldn't follow me. Now look at me.

"Bishop already locked the clubhouse down," Pope replies. "Sparrow said it may be necessary."

I nod but still keep my gaze downcast.

"You need to start talking, Irene," Pope says sternly. "I know you're hurting and probably in shock. But we need to know how to handle this before it gets any worse."

My gaze finally snaps to him. "My problems followed me. Just like everyone was worried they would."

I jump down from the table and cry out at the pain in my hip and ribs. Wolf tries to assist me, but I swat his hands away.

"But you can believe I won't be making the same mistake twice," I say with finality.

I turn on my heel and head toward the back door with as much dignity as I can muster.

"Where do you think you're going?" Beast asks.

“Leaving,” I whisper.

It’s going to kill me to leave the club behind, to leave *him* behind, but it is what’s best for everyone. Now that I know Gerald is here, I can head home to Louisiana. Maybe I can even get my old job back. I’m holding back tears at the thought of losing these people, this family I have fallen into, but I won’t put anyone here in jeopardy.

I don’t turn to look at him. Seeing him will hurt too much. It’s better to just get it over with.

“Don’t make me pick you up,” his voice rumbles in my ear. I didn’t realize he was so close. “I don’t want to hurt you any worse.” A full-body shiver works its way through me. “And Doc is here to check you out.”

He turns me around and takes my hand, leading me through the people watching us. I want to take the comfort he’s offering and fall into the safety he represents, but I can’t do that to him. I love this man too much to watch him fuck up his entire life because of me. It took much too long for me to realize I was already in too deep with him. Now everything is all fucked up and I know when he says he’s going to kill Gerald that he means it. Literally. He is going to do everything he can to avenge me, and I need him *not* to do that.

I was going to tell him tonight. I wanted to let him know that I’m ready for us, and that he is the man I want to spend the rest of my life with. Now, all of that has gone to shit and I will leave Gypsy Falls without ever letting him know that I love him.

The Gypsy Bastards may have connections in Gypsy Falls. And the chief of police may be friendly with the club, but when his newest staff member turns up missing, I can guarantee this will be the first place he looks. The little tiff Gerald and I had in Dusk earlier just pointed the finger more firmly in the club’s direction.

These people have been nothing but good to me and I won’t allow my problems to tear their families and lives apart. Fuck that noise.

Walking through the main bar area is painful for different reasons. All the women turn their gazes in my direction. Storm and Hadley look pissed enough to spit fire and Kaiya is crying. I wish I could go to her and assure her I'm fine. But I'm not and I won't lie to my friend like that.

My body hurts but it's the fact that my heart and soul feel like they're being torn apart that is killing me. I know the moment I leave Gypsy Falls I will never return. It will all hurt too much to be here again.

Beast nods in the direction of my friends before leading me up the stairs and toward the room he uses. Inside, an older, white-haired man is waiting.

"Irene, this is Doc," Beast introduces us. "He is a friend of the club, and he will take care of your injuries." Beast releases my hand before gently pulling me closer. "I'm going to give you some privacy, but I'll be just outside."

I nod in acceptance. Knowing these people, they won't let me off the hook as easily as they did the first time. I'll be accepting medical assistance whether I want it or not.

"But know that the moment Doc is done, you and I are going to discuss this shit."

I want to argue but he kisses me passionately, cutting off my words, before turning and walking out, the door closing softly behind him. I turn to face Doc only to find he has a soft smile on his face.

"Let's see what I can do for you this evening," he says.

"It's really not that bad," I reply trying to smile but failing miserably.

"If nothing else," he says opening a leather bag that's placed at the end of the bed. "You need stitches above your eye. I also want to check your ribs. I can hear your breathing is labored."

Shaking my head, I take a seat on the edge of the bed and allow him to work through my various cuts and bruises.

“I think you have a cracked rib or two. If it gets any harder to breathe you need to come to the hospital, but I can’t see it being a problem right now,” he says as he starts putting stuff back in his bag. “Here’s a script for pain medication, although I doubt you’ll fill it.” He hands me a piece of paper.

“Thanks, Doc,” I say as he opens the door and walks out.

I wish I could just go to sleep but I don’t have that kind of luck. The moment Doc leaves, Beast takes his place and I know this conversation won’t go the way I want.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Tell Me the Truth

Beast

My blood is boiling, rage firing off every synapse I have. I want to tear out of here and find the asshole who dared lay hands on Irene, twice. But she needs me to be here for her now and I need to think about this rationally before just going off.

“Tell me what happened,” I say to Irene after Doc checks her out. Justice is standing in the doorway watching us like a hawk. He hasn’t said a single word since he walked out of the kitchen but I can read him like a book and he is furious.

“This isn’t...”

“Cut the shit,” I say with a glare. “You are one of us. You are family to every person in this club and we take care of our own.”

“Kelly,” she moves toward the bathroom with a groan before continuing. “I know you all just want to take care of your own, but this isn’t something you guys can get involved in.”

In my periphery I see Justice pull his phone out of his pocket, glaring at the device before stepping over and handing it to me. I watch the security footage from Dusk, and I feel like I might pop a vein when I watch that asshole hit her.

“I already know what happened.” I show her the clip.

“He’s a cop. You can’t go after him. He is the newest GFPD detective.”

“The fuck I can’t!”

“Calm down, man,” Justice grumbles from his spot beside the door. “We’ll get this prick.”

I glare at my brother before stomping out of the room. I don't need him to tell me how this will go. I need him to watch my woman, because that is exactly what she fucking is, while I go and take care of this shit.

“Church!” Wolf calls out loudly.

My gaze swings to him, ready to defy an order for the first time since I joined the Gypsy Bastards, but I nod instead. Having the support of my club is one of the main reasons I joined, and I need them right now. Taking out a cop isn't going to be easy.

“All right. This isn't how any of us planned on spending the night, but we have a situation,” Pope says once everyone is gathered. “We all know Irene came here after some bad shit went down and even though we aren't exactly sure what happened, it seems the past has caught up to her.”

“What do we know?” Sparrow asks.

“He's a cop,” I say, anger lacing my words. “Apparently, he recently transferred to the GFPD.”

“That complicates things.” Wolf rubs a hand along his chin. “Are we calling in a favor to the chief?”

“Favors won't work on one of their own,” Viking interrupts from the end of the table. “You know all that shit about having blue blood and always sticking together. He could have killed her tonight and he probably would have gotten away with it with the help of his buddies.”

My blood boils at the thought of losing Irene. Every word Viking has spoken is true, bitterly so. I have no idea what the rest of the meeting is about or what decisions get made. I am planning. In my mind, I have the perfect plan to get away with taking out this dirty fucking cop.

Pope draws my attention back to the gathering when he pounds his fist on the large wooden table. “Everyone knows

what they need to do. Get to it.”

The guys exit the room, but Sparrow stops me before I can leave.

“Let’s talk for a minute.” His expression is somber and I’m not sure I want to hear what he has to say.

“What’s up?” I try to keep a calm outward façade but by the look on his face, I am failing miserably.

“You need to put a claim on Irene. Or let one of the other guys do it. She needs to be protected and the best way is for her to wear a property patch.”

I laugh loudly. “Have you met her? She won’t let anyone take care of her.”

“You need to make her understand. You know what I went through when Luna died, I don’t want that for you.”

His shoulders slump with the weight of the world and his sadness is palpable in the air. It breaks my heart to know that he’s hurting and there isn’t anything I can do for him.

“I’ll have a talk with her,” I say hoping he finds some reassurance in my words.

“Make her understand, Kelly. If something happens to her it may be the last straw, the thing that finally tears this club apart.”

He turns and leaves me alone in the conference room with my thoughts, but I don’t stay there for long. I need to find Irene and set this shit straight. Turning the corner, I can hear the raised voices before I even make it to my room.

“Because you are my fucking family!” Justice yells, getting right in Irene’s face, his breathing heavy.

She doesn’t back down from him. “It’s not your goddamn problem. I can take care of myself!”

Justice chuckles harshly. “Yeah, I can see that.”

Color suffuses Irene’s face as her anger spikes, and I know I need to step in before either of them say something they will regret.

“Enough!” Both turn to glare at me but I don’t care. “Justice, find Wolf. He is bound to need some help.”

My brother wants to argue but I level him with a look he knows means business and he leaves us alone. I close and lock the door behind me before hanging my cut over a chair in the corner.

“Let’s grab a shower,” I say holding my hand out to the woman I have fallen in love with.

There’s a split-second when I think she is going to push me away before she allows me to help her up and lead her into the bathroom. It takes some time to get her undressed while trying not to hurt her any more but I get it done. The darkening bruise on her rib cage has my vision clouding with anger but I contain my reaction.

Once Irene is undressed and beneath the spray, I quickly shuck off my clothes and join her. My heart breaks seeing her shoulders shake as she cries beneath the spray. I want to fix this for her, but the situation is a complete clusterfuck, so I do what I can.

I wrap my arms around her battered frame and hold her while she lets out all the emotion she’s been holding in.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

You Belong

Irene

Standing beneath the warm spray of the shower, I finally crack open. Beast holds me in his strong arms as emotions that I have been holding in for the past few hours come pouring out of me. He is probably thinking that I'm crying because of what Gerald did, and in a way I am, but that's not all of it. It's the pain of finally having everything I want and having to give it up that's shredding me but there isn't much I can do about it.

Beast shuts off the shower once the water starts to cool before helping me dry off and dress in one of his big ass t-shirts. We are both silent, each lost in their own thoughts as we lie beside one another in his bed. He holds me close to him like he knows I plan on leaving and my heart hurts all over again.

We lay like this for the longest time before he moves, pushing my thighs apart as he hovers over me. Even with the pain in my body and my heart, I want him. But Beast has other plans.

“I said we would talk but I want you to listen.”

His voice is soft but stern and I nod in the darkness, waiting for him to continue.

“You're not leaving and I don't want to hear a damn word about it. We are going to figure this out together.”

“How are we supposed to do that? Gerald will never let me be.”

“Everyone is working on finding a way to sort this out without making matters worse. I just need to know you're not going to run off in the meantime,” he says.

“It would be better...” I start but he cuts me off.

“For who? Not either of us, and not for any of your friends.” He runs a finger along my bottom lip. “How do you expect me to just act like you were never part of my life?”

“Kelly,” I try to interrupt but he continues talking like I didn’t say a word.

“I’m in love with you,” he says with a soft smile. “No. That’s not right. I love you, Irene. I have since that first night you showed up here. You were so fucking beautiful in your strength that I couldn’t help it. Yes, I said I could keep emotions out of this but I fucking lied. My feelings have been involved since the start.”

I stare at him in shock. His words are exactly what I wanted to hear but his timing is shit.

“If you can look me in the eyes and honestly say you feel nothing for me,” he whispers before wiping away a stray tear, “then I’ll get you away from here, from me, tomorrow. And you’ll never have to look back.”

I shake my head harshly, the words stuck in my throat, clogged up by emotion.

“I love you, Kelly,” I croak out before clearing my throat. “I have for a while. But I was scared so I kept pushing you away.”

He kisses me softly before smiling like a lunatic. “That’s all I need. The past is the past and we can face the future together.”

His erection presses against my thigh and I tilt my hips up. I’m not wearing any underwear and he is only wearing sweatpants. It would be so easy for him to take me. I don’t care about the pain, I want to feel connected to him.

“You’re hurt.” The words leave him in a ragged whisper.

“You’ll just have to be gentle.”

A finger sweeps through my sex before I feel the head of his cock nudge at my entrance. Slowly, inch by thick inch he enters me. His finger rubs circles against my clit, ramping

up my need. Kelly draws back before slowly spearing me with his erection. This is different than any of the stuff we have done before. He watches me for any sign of discomfort, his gaze never leaving mine as he rocks in and out of me.

My orgasm catches me by surprise, stealing my breath. This is what it feels like to make love. Kelly bottoms out inside me once more before his entire body goes taut with his own orgasm. I can feel his cock twitching inside me as he fills me with his cum.

“You’re going to wear my patch,” Kelly says with a grin.

“Like the one Storm has?” I ask feeling giddy at the prospect.

Beast nods before kissing me. No more words are spoken because everything that needs to be said has already been said. I’m with a man that loves me and anything that happens from this moment out is something we can deal with together.

After long moments of peaceful quiet, Beast slips from the bed. He rummages around in his closet before producing a large, flat, white box.

“This is yours. I had it made a couple of weeks back when we did the others for Bishop and Justice.”

With shaking fingers, I lift the lid. My eyes tear up as I stare down at the cut that reads “Property of Beast.” My fingers skim over the stitching before I face him again.

“I don’t know if this is the right thing to do,” I say softly. “Maybe we should wait until this mess is sorted out before we officially commit to anything.”

“Has anyone ever told you why Sparrow left?” Beast asks softly and I shake my head. I know his wife died but that’s it. Beast takes a deep breath before he speaks. “Sparrow was married to a woman named Luna. She was his entire world. But she was a nurse at a hospital and could never fully be part of the club. She never wore his patch and that didn’t matter to either of them. But it left her unprotected. When shit

went bad with the club, she was killed and Sparrow blames himself for not fighting harder for her to wear this.”

His hand rests on mine, over the words embroidered into the leather.

“Does wearing your patch really make that much of a difference?” I ask.

“There’s a code that most outlaw bikers stick to, babe. This is part of that.”

“Okay,” I say on a whisper. “But I want you to take me somewhere. Now.”

“Where?” He looks confused.

“The police station. We have the footage and you all have pull with the police chief. Let’s try to get rid of Gerald in the right way. I don’t want anyone to try and get rid of him and put the club or anyone else in any danger.”

Beast nods. “I think that’s the best idea I’ve heard so far. Why don’t you get dressed and I’ll fill Pope in on what’s happening?”

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Confronting Demons

Beast

Irene is wearing dark jeans, a Gypsy Bastards supporter t-shirt, and her patch as we pull up to the police station. She isn't wearing a stitch of makeup, making her bruised face stand out even more prominently.

Pope and Wolf flank us as we stop in the parking area, revving our engines, letting the entire force know we are here before cutting out. The sun is barely rising over the horizon as we step into the station. A young deputy is working at the front desk and his eyes grow to the size of saucers when he sees us. Irene steps toward the desk with a smile.

“I would like to press assault charges.”

“Yes, ma'am,” the deputy replies when he finds his voice. “I'll have one of the detectives come out and take your statement.”

“I'm actually here to see the chief,” she says in a friendly tone. “I called him before we headed over so if he isn't here yet then I'll just wait.”

The man nods before gesturing to the waiting area. Irene and I have barely taken our seats when the door swings open. Pope, Wolf, and I immediately recognized the man from the surveillance video.

His glare bounces from Irene to me, and then to my brothers.

“What are you doing here?” he addresses Irene. I want to step in front of her and protect her, but she is calling the shots right now. We are just here to back her up. I watch her stand, head held high as she faces him head-on.

“I'm here to press charges.”

“What? Did one of your criminal friends rough you up?” He chuckles.

Her gaze turns sharp before she smiles serenely. Behind Gerald is the chief of police.

“Hello, Chief. Thank you for agreeing to meet me here so early.”

“Let’s head to my office,” he says before leading the way. “Gerald, you can join us here.”

“What the fuck are you wearing?” Gerald asks loudly once Irene walks after the chief, his voice drawing the attention of everyone in the station.

“A real man’s mark,” I say, taking her hand when she smiles at me.

I know I’m pushing his buttons but I would really like to see him snap where everyone else can witness it, perhaps do something to dig himself deeper into a hole.

“Please sit,” the chief says and motions to the chair in front of his desk.

“I’ll stand,” Irene says. “I don’t want to take up too much of your time.” The chief nods and she continues. “I’m here to press assault charges against one of your men.”

The chief’s full attention is riveted to Irene, taking in her bruised face before skirting over her patch. “That’s a serious allegation.”

“I have footage from Dusk showing the attack and you can see the rest of the evidence on my face.”

“One of my guys did that?” His face turns red, anger bubbling beneath the surface as he glares at her face.

Gerald tries to leave the office, but Wolf is firmly planted in front of the door.

“Move, criminal,” he demands.

“You should stay,” Irene says. “Seeing as you’re the one I’m pressing charges against.”

You could hear a pin drop in the silence that envelops the office.

It takes us more than two hours to get all the paperwork done. Gerald is taken from the office kicking and screaming. He has been locked up, awaiting arraignment. This is a small town, not a city, and if the chief of police wants to be re-elected for his next term in office, he knows he needs to keep the police force under control. He also needs to make a big production out of this, showing that behavior like this won't be tolerated.

When we get back to the clubhouse everyone is awake, and breakfast is being made. The roar of applause that goes up when we walk into the kitchen and everyone sees Irene's patch, is perfect.

In that moment I love my brothers and their women more than I can ever explain. I needed Irene to see and feel the force of love and affection everyone here has for her to help me cement this.

Irene leans into my side and I place a kiss on her forehead. I don't know where the situation with Gerald will end up and I'm sure this won't be the last bit of hardship we face as a couple or a club. But I do know that as long as we have each other we can face whatever life throws at us.

Epilogue

How Did We Get Here

Irene

A Week Later

We all sit together at the massive counter in the kitchen, laughter and food being shared. It still hurts a little when I laugh but it's also helping me heal. I thought I would have to give this up, that I would not only lose this family I have built with the Gypsy Bastards, but Beast as well. Now I'm sitting here, enjoying a cup of rich coffee, and wearing a patch that proclaims me to be one of them. I couldn't stop smiling if someone paid me.

"Has anyone seen Justice?" Pope asks when he re-enters the kitchen. "I went to grab him for breakfast, but he isn't in his room."

That's strange. Usually, Justice is a late sleeper and it's barely after eight. A little shiverer of apprehension skitters up my spine.

"Last I saw him he was tinkering on that bike of his in the garage. But that was late last night," Beasts says while everyone else shakes their heads.

"Why?" I ask already worried.

"He cut out of here late last night and I haven't been able to get ahold of him since," Pope replies.

Just then, my cell phone rings, and I pull it from the pocket of my jeans. Preacher's name flashes on the screen and I feel like a bitch for not calling in sick.

Pressing the unit to my ear, I start apologizing immediately. "I'm so sorry. I should have called you."

"Stop. Beast called," Preacher says. "Club's closed until I get back."

A breath of relief leaves me. It's not ideal for Dusk to be closed but at least this way, we can control the situation. Leaving the staff on their own is a recipe for disaster.

"Is he there?" Preacher asks, clearly talking about Beast.

"Yeah," I say hesitantly. "Why?" I know they've never really gotten along so this is weird, to say the least.

"Who else is there?"

"Pope, Sparrow, and almost everyone else. What's going on, Preacher? You're freaking me out."

"Put me on speaker."

He doesn't answer my question, but he didn't tell me I need to leave for him to have this conversation with the guys, so I do as he says.

"Preacher," Pope says with a frown. "How can we help you today?"

"You know I used to be a lawyer in a previous life?"

Preacher's voice fills the room. I'm surprised to hear this because even though we've become close friends he rarely if ever talks about his past.

"Yes," Pope replies.

"I just got a call from the county lockup."

"All right." Pope frowns at my phone.

"Justice is down there. He got picked up for second degree murder."

The End

Gypsy Bastards MC—The Beast Playlist

Gabrielle – “Out of Reach”

The Red Jumpsuit Apparatus – “Face Down”

Zach Bryan – “Something in the Orange”

Lee Brice – “One of them Girls”

Bailey Zimmerman – “Rock and a Hard Place”

Ashley McBryde – “one Night Standards”

Shinedown – “Simple Man”

Three Days Grace – “Animal I have Become”

Simple Plan – “Welcome to my Life”

Linkin Park – “My December”

Marren Morris – “Rich”

Clay Walker – “Need a bar Sometime”

In Flames – “The Quiet Place”

Warren Zeiders – “Ride the Lightning”

Jason Aldean – “Trouble with a Heartbreak”

Halsey – “Sorry”

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BONUS SAMPLE CHAPTER

THE WOLF

Gypsy Bastards MC, 1

Jade Marshall

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Sample Chapter

Hadley

I hate my job.

It isn't something I say to get people to pity me. I genuinely hate working at Mary's Rib Shack. I hate the mauve one-piece uniform, made of an awful, itchy fabric. I hate that the owner likes us to show off our assets, which means our uniforms are short around the legs and low around the neck. I don't particularly enjoy showing off my barely-there B cups, especially not to *our* clientele. I hate that Mary's is in downtown Gypsy Falls and the people who show up here are sketchy at best, but most are completely creepy. But Mary pays in cash and I need to stay off the grid.

This isn't something I've done out of choice but more out of necessity. Growing up around an outlaw motorcycle club, which I then managed to piss off—through no fault of my own, might I add—means running and hiding to stay alive. If King were to ever get his hands on me, I wouldn't survive. Knowing that death chases me daily and could catch up with me at any moment ensures I always keep my head down.

The area where the diner is located is far from ideal, with drug dealers on every second corner and a nonexistent police response rate. From the linoleum flooring that's cracked and peeling in places, to the faded leather booth seats, and the god-awful music, there isn't a single thing about Mary's Rib Shack that I don't hate.

I work the evening shift until closing time, from four in the afternoon until around midnight. I want to be able to work my way out of this hellhole and provide a better life for myself. I have aspirations and being a waitress isn't one of them.

One day, I want to be able to open my own tattoo parlor. For as long as I can remember, I've loved drawing and through the years, I've honed my craft. Add to that the fact I did an apprenticeship at a tattoo parlor, learning from one of the best, and you have my dream. The only thing I want to do for the rest of my life.

“Hey, can we get some more coffee over here?” the man with the biker's cut sitting in my section all but yells at me.

Earlier, I saw them enter and a chill ran right down my spine. My first instinct was to run, to get the hell out of here as quickly as my legs could carry me. After catching a glimpse of their patches and not recognizing their club, I was able to calm myself.

My hands shake, and my legs feel weak as I make my way to their table. Bikers terrify me. Not some bikers, but all bikers.

The three other guys with him seem rather normal-looking although anyone with eyes can tell that's not the case.

One blond and two with dark-brown hair, all of them with protruding beer bellies. The fourth man, the one who just spoke and whom I'm assuming is the leader of this merry band of misfits, gives me the straight-up chills.

He's large, burly, and bald, with a snake tattoo running down his arm to his wrist. It's garish and badly done with absolutely no detail. The man looks me over with eyes the color of mud as I refill the cups. There's no depth to his eyes, just a flat deadness, and I try to avoid eye contact at all costs. I refill all four cups and start to move away when a large hand clamps around my wrist and pulls me back. Again, I feel this crawling sensation running over my skin. It takes everything I have within me not to pull away from his grip.

"Why don't you sit down with us for a minute, darling?" the leader drawls at me.

"I can't. I'm on shift and have to get back to my customers," I reply while trying to pull my arm from his grip.

My breathing becomes shallow and a shiver works its way through my body. The need to get his hands off me is almost overwhelming.

"Well, now, Mary won't mind, and the other waitress can see to your customers while you have a seat with us."

He uses a tone that's supposed to be reassuring but simply serves to creep me out even more. He yanks on my arm and I lose my balance, toppling forward and pouring half the remaining coffee down the front of his pants.

"You stupid fucking whore," he bellows.

Before I can react, he backhands me across the face, causing me to fall. My head connects with the counter and then the floor with a resounding thud. Lying on the floor, all I can think is this is it, my last day at Mary's. I would rather live on the fucking street than work here one more day. Regaining my senses and opening my eyes, I find complete chaos around me. All the guys from the table are on their feet. The two dark-haired men are holding back the guy who just slapped me.

He's doing his best to pull away from their grip and has his eyes trained on the front door to the diner.

Storm, my best friend, stands in the doorway. She's a petite Asian woman with long black hair streaked with purple, full sleeve tattoos—courtesy of myself, a small waist, and an awesome set of all-natural C-cup breasts. Storm knows how to defend herself from the time she spent living on the street. She may be a stripper, but she will never let a man get the upper hand again. Apparently, she learned a painful lesson and quickly found someone to teach her how to defend herself.

In three-inch stilettos with her gun pointed straight at him, she stands her ground in front of this monster of a man.

“Viper, why don't you take your little cronies and leave?” She's deadly calm in the face of this man and for a moment, I envy her confidence. I haven't moved from my spot on the floor and simply watch their exchange like the coward I have become.

“You know good and well that your kind isn't welcome around here. Or do I need to make a call?” She appears calm while taking her phone out of the back pocket of her jeans.

Viper tries to charge at her again but the blond man steps between them.

“Time to go,” he says, and the other two men start pulling Viper toward the door on the other side of the diner.

“I'm gonna get you. You and your little waitress friend. You're gonna pay. You hear me, Storm? You and that little cock tease!” he bellows as he's dragged out. “That pussy club ain't gonna save you.”

As soon as they are on the motorcycles and roaring into the distance, Storm puts her gun back in her purse and rushes over to me. “Oh, sweetie. Are you okay?” she inquires while pushing my hair from my face to inspect the damage.

“Hurts like a bitch but I'll live. Gonna be blue tomorrow and I'll probably have an egg on my head later, but I'll be fine,” I assure her as I push up from the floor. “Thanks for the help.”

Storm looks at me with sympathy in her eyes, something I despise more than I can ever explain. I hate being seen for the weak, broken, scared little girl I become once I am faced with something that triggers my past. My past affects me more than I would like to admit, even to myself. So many things can trigger me and have me turning back in on myself. For years, I have secluded myself from people except for a select few. My friendship with Storm often pushes my boundaries and I feel like she is helping me rejoin the world again, one little push at a time.

As she opens her mouth to respond, Mary comes shrieking around the corner.

“You stupid bitches. Do you know what you’ve done?”

Her face is blood red from the lack of oxygen during her rant and her over-styled, bleach-blonde hair flies all over the place.

“Those assholes are gonna burn my place to the fucking ground because of the two of you!”

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” Storm turns a glare on her. “One of your staff members was just attacked, and all you can worry about is your business? What kind of person are you?”

Mary stares daggers at Storm as I pull myself to my feet.

“What’s wrong with me?” Mary continues shrieking. “Do you know who the fuck those guys were and how bad it can get when you fuck with them?”

“Yes, I do,” Storm says calmly. “Those are the limp-dick Mongrels MC and ain’t shit gonna happen to anyone. Pope is gonna lose his shit when he hears they were in his territory.”

Mary pales when she seems to realize Storm actually knows what she’s talking about.

“Now,” Storm says, looking back at me over her shoulder, “I am gonna take Hadley home and get some ice on her face. You’re gonna cover her tables and still pay her for the

hours she's missing. Because that's what a good boss would do."

"Oh, go choke on a dick, Storm. You won't be telling me how to run my goddamn business. Why don't you and Hadley just get her shit and get out because I don't need to draw any more attention."

She calmly turns to me and, looking me in the eyes, says, "You're fired."

Before I can think it through or contemplate my actions, my fist flies out and connects with Mary's nose.

She gives an undignified shriek as she cups her nose. "You cunt! You broke my fucking nose."

I stare at her before regaining my footing. Today may have been my breaking point. I have never—and I mean never—in my life laid hands on another person. "Oh, bite me, Mary. You're a fucking bitch and I quit."

Between hitting Mary, telling her to piss off, and quitting my job, I feel like I'm on top of the world. For the first time I can remember, I stood up for myself.

With what I'm sure is a seriously crazy smile on my face, I turn away from her. I head to the back of the diner where my personal effects are in a locker and change out of my shitty uniform. Taking a deep breath, I realize what I have just done. I stood up for myself but in the process, I've quit the only job I have. How am I going to pay rent, buy food, or pay for my damn car repairs? I am so fucked.

Instead of lingering on that, I square my shoulders and walk out to the front. People are crowded around Mary while Storm is smirking from her spot at the front door. Looking back at Mary, I smile. As I walk out of the diner, I give a single finger salute in farewell, light up a smoke, and walk home.

End of sample chapter

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