



IRON OUTLAWS MC

**THE VOWS
WE KEEP**

S. COLE

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To You

*The ones trying to push your own ribs apart so you can burst free.
Just like Catalina*

CONTENTS

Note to Readers

1. Niro
2. Catalina
3. Niro
4. Catalina
5. Niro
6. Catalina
7. Niro
8. Niro
9. Catalina
10. Niro
11. Catalina
12. Niro
13. Catalina
14. Niro
15. Catalina
16. Niro
17. Catalina
18. Niro
19. Catalina
20. Niro
21. Catalina
22. Niro
23. Catalina
24. Niro
25. Catalina
26. Niro
27. Catalina
28. Niro
29. Catalina
30. Niro
31. Catalina
32. Catalina
33. Niro
34. Catalina
35. Niro
36. Epilogue: Niro
37. Epilogue Two

[Who want's King & Rae's Chase Scene?](#)

[Acknowledgements](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Also by Scarlett Cole](#)

NOTE TO READERS

Content Warnings

As with any motorcycle club (MC) romance, the typical themes apply: language, violence, use of misogynistic language.

But within this book, there are some specific themes that may not be for all:

- Kidnapping

- Anti-social personality disorder (ASPD) representation

- ADHD representation (based on my own experiences which will not be the same for everyone)

- Physical violence and drugging

NIRO

Love sucks balls.

That's all I can think as I blow up another balloon in the Iron Outlaws' clubhouse. King, my president, and Saint, the brother who betrayed the club, are standing talking like old friends reunited. Proof that love makes men do fucked-up shit they wouldn't have even considered until some chick comes along waving her pussy in their face and they find themselves cunt-struck.

Suddenly, you find yourself turning the clubhouse into a party palace instead of chasing down the enemies of the club. Instead of hustling with the flow to make more cash or getting hammered with your brothers while some heavy rock plays in the background and some chick blows out her throat while you blow down it, you find yourself blowing up a birthday balloon banner.

Only four weeks ago, someone tried to take out our president, but it's hard to believe because we're acting like it's okay to crawl onto our turf and let off semi-automatic rounds like corn popping. Sure, there was no ID on the bodies left in King's house, but we're assuming the Righteous Brotherhood. Vex, our tech wizard, is going to ruin their lives using their digital footprint.

Personally, I'd rather ruin their lives using my bare hands.

While they're tied to a chair.

Which makes me think of the stools in my kitchen that I like to sit on while I drink my coffee.

Which makes me crave Mom's gingerbread because it tasted so good when I was young.

Which makes me wonder if Halo is going to watch *Shrek* with his baby half-sister at some point.

Another pack of balloons hits the side of my head, and I turn to see Halo, our road captain, grinning. “You run out of hot air finally?” he asks.

I flip him the bird, mid-blow, on balloon seventy billion.

Sometimes my brain swirls, not clinging to anything. Some days, it focuses the motherfucking shit out of one thing. Today, it’s swirlier than one of those tie-dye T-shirts I saw Wrinkle, Halo’s dad, wear once.

Worse, I’ve been sharing that energy with everyone. Needling them, saying random shit that confuses them—because they can’t keep up with the conversation happening in my head.

My old high school teacher had this whole meditation thing she used to try and get me to do.

Ninety percent of it was useless, but there was one thing she taught me that I still remember. To blow all the breath out of my lungs and hold it there. It’s the opposite of taking a deep breath. But somewhere in that desperate place where your lungs burn for oxygen, your head starts to settle in a blessed silence.

I wonder what Mrs. Wicks is doing now. I bet she’s a hundred and thirty, still boring kids about icebergs.

I suck in a gasp of air, then blow it out into the balloon.

Then I hold it there for a second.

“Fuck,” I mutter, then suck in air before blowing again, feeling the balloon grow in my hands.

This time, no thought fills my head.

Six of those exhales, and I tie it up tighter than a used condom.

Halo’s ridiculous man bun wobbles as our Navy SEAL veteran ties the balloons to a rope he’s hung hooks for. It’s a ton of purple and gold. Saint teases the shit out of King for picking his sister’s favorite color.

“They’re on their way,” King shouts suddenly.

Ahh, the big reveal. There’s a new crowd of old ladies. They’re funnier. Less reverent. Mouthy. *Feisty*, Spark likes to call them. Gwen works in a hotel, Iris is a teacher, Briar runs her own graphic design firm, and Rae, the birthday girl, is a psychologist. They’re all about women’s liberation. I heard Rae talking with Iris once, calling something “feminist as fuck.”

Honestly, they’re not as useful as the OG old ladies. The older generation knew their place. They’d cook for us. Clean up the clubhouse when we

needed it. Turned the other way when the brothers start dipping their wick in club whores.

This lot are . . . changing the fabric of the club.

Not sure I like it.

Not sure any of them like me either.

Some of the OG old ladies stayed away from the group in solidarity with Tessa and Track, after Track went inside for six months because of Saint.

Everyone else starts dashing around. Saint hurries the caterer along. Switch, our studious medic, is setting up a fancy champagne station with glasses that came out of the club budget. And Prez told us all to get Rae gifts because she'd never been given anything but a beating on her birthday or some shit. Like the rest of us haven't had hard lives.

I want my cut of our income in cash, not in crystal glasses that our earnings bought for Rae's party.

So, I carry on. Six puffs of air, tie it up, throw it by Halo's feet.

Six puffs of air, tie it up, throw it by Halo's feet.

Lather, rinse, repeat.

"That's enough balloons," Halo shouts from up the ladder, and I let the last balloon go, watching it whizz through the air and land in Switch's pint of beer.

I leave it there, just for fun.

I head back to my room, wash my face, and take a breath. Ironic timing for me to have had enough of people, just before the party begins. I take my cut off and throw it down on the bed.

The slamming of Clutch's truck doors is the sign I'm needed in the bar.

When the girls walk in, there's more cutesy PDA than I can stomach.

Clutch, our long-haired vice president, kisses Gwen, King's twin sister, like he's trying to impregnate her right here in front of us.

Then Rae steps in, her eyes wide. "What did you do?" she asks, glancing around the room.

Prez grabs her. "The words you are looking for are *thank you*. Happy birthday, Duchess."

There's gushing and champagne and more kisses.

King leads Rae to the table of gifts, and she acts like she can't see the motorbike at the end of the table. "Oh my God. I've never had so many presents. Dad always said money was required for ministry."

It's so sweet my teeth hurt. In my experience, people's pasts are never as

bad as they make out. It's simply that they've found benefit in their lives from playing the victim. I run a finger down my scar, feeling the jagged lines and uneven surface. It's the reason I never explain what happened. I'm no victim. And I'm no glory seeker, either.

"Yeah, well, I'm always going to spoil you," my prez says, as if it's of no concern he's lost his balls for this girl.

When they get to the bike, King fails to mention that I did all the artwork. That was my gift to her. He doesn't say a word about how I came up with a concept. Because Rae is a psychologist, I researched Rorschach tests, picked the patterns I found most interesting, and colorized them before decorating her bike with the design.

Now I look like the loser who didn't get her anything.

And she doesn't say anything about recognizing the Rorschach.

What a waste of my fucking time.

"You going to keep her serviced, Prez?" Bates, our model-faced enforcer asks, and I realize I've gapped out.

Everyone else laughs, and I try to figure out what was just said.

"Yeah," Prez says. "You bet your ass I'm going to keep her serviced. Forever."

Got it. Innuendos.

Rae slaps Prez on the arm.

"What?" he says. "It's the truth. I'll take care of your bike same way I take care of mine."

"Forever?" she asks.

"About that."

And that's when our club's relationship with King changes forever. Because when he unravels that cut with the road name Duchess on it, officially asking her to become his old lady and be his property for the rest of their lives, I know deep down he'll never really put the club first again.

It will be Rae.

The club begins to cheer. I force a smile on my face.

King grabs a piece of paper. "Thou hast me, if thou hast me, at the worst; and thou shalt wear me, if thou wear me, better and better." He looks down at the words and continues in that weird-ass Shakespeare language that gives Rae a lady boner. "And therefore, tell me, most fair Duchess, will you be my old lady?"

It's good that they're happy; guess I just don't like change.

Makes me remember things best forgotten.

“You quoted *Henry V*, gave me a bike, and gave me a cut with your name on it. But more than that, you gave me my brother back and a life I want. How could I say no to that?” Rae says.

I get jostled by Bates, who throws his arm over my shoulder in excitement. He’s probably the closest thing I have to a best friend.

“I promise to keep you safe, hold your heart gently, and fuck you hard when you need it. You’re my life, Rae,” King says.

She throws herself at him and almost topples the bike. The bike with all my fucking artwork on it that no one gives a shit about. I dive for it, but Halo gets there first and catches it.

I miss the rest of what’s said.

When everyone crowds King, I feign enthusiasm. I’m fucking tired yet revved. I’m all out of patience for other people.

I claim a spot at the bar and order a beer and double Jack. I chug both down, listening to snippets of conversations.

I hear Vex tell Clutch how he just hacked a Righteous Brotherhood member’s social media profile.

Switch advises Bates on a shoulder injury he picked up working out the previous weekend.

I hear Iris confide to Briar that the party is overwhelming her, that there are too many people.

Briar tells her she should go grab Spark and tell him she needs five minutes with him in his room.

My room is a mess. I should tidy it.

My room was always a mess as a kid.

I remember when Lacey, my sister, used to—

I cut that thought off.

Thinking of her never leads to anything good.

I grab another beer with a double Jack chaser.

Then another.

People sit next to me. Sometimes my life feels like everyone else is on fast-forward, blurring by me while I just sit here. Like I’m in the very eye of the storm. Other times, I feel like I move and think twenty times faster than the rest of the world, like *I’m* the blur. One thing I know for sure: I’m never quite at the same speed as anyone else.

The party is bullshit.

King actually taking a woman he held as a fucking hostage to be his old lady is bullshit.

I tap my fingers on the top of the bar. I need some action.

Movement.

A fight.

Anything to burn some energy.

If I stay here, I'm gonna pick a fight or say some shit I shouldn't. Instead, I decide to go home. I glance around for King to tell him I'm leaving, but I don't see him.

The night air is cool and the hit of nicotine potent as I stand in the club's yard and look up at the clear night sky. There are a billion stars.

I roll my neck from side to side.

I'm hopeful we'll get back into real action soon. The Righteous Brotherhood deserves to be buried. While it's great that Vex is fighting them from afar . . . a one-man electronic war . . . I prefer to meet my enemies head-on. Mano-a-mano.

Truth is, I'm bored. Always have been. Hyper focused on something one minute, ten thousand things flying through my brain at the speed of light the next. Sudden urges that demand I learn how to do something new, then I'm bored rigid by it five days later.

I remember the summer I became a *Titanic* expert. The following year, it was snow camping. I found I was good with my hands. Art. Carpentry. Building things.

I touch where my scar crosses my lip. A permanent reminder of what can happen when I'm distracted.

Only two things stuck: Drawing became my outlet, and then led to my career as a tattoo artist. And baking. Yeah, unexpected, I know. But nothing rights the tilt my brain sometimes goes on than sifting flour.

The bottle of Jack sloshing around in me provides a bearable alcohol blanket, given I left my cut lying on my bed. It gets colder as I walk. Jersey in July is the best place in the world. I love the sweltering heat. Jersey in February is hell month.

I wonder what the temperature is right now. And if it's this cold here, I wonder how hot it must be on the opposite side of the world. Which makes me wonder where the actual opposite side of the world is to Asbury Park, New Jersey. Is it somewhere in Australia? Or the middle of the ocean?

I've got the urge to bake. Chocolate chip cookies. Don't even know if I

have flour, but it suddenly feels imperative that I make cookies tonight.

I'm still imagining the taste of chocolatey sugar when a bag is pulled over my head and I'm knocked out cold to the sound of a woman's voice.

CATALINA

I 'm mad.

No. Scratch that. I'm pissed.

I look at the man currently tied to a chair and debate slapping his face to wake him up.

“Hey, Cat. You want a sub?” Neva, my best friend and literal partner in crime, never lets anything get in the way of food—even something as inconsequential as having the president of a motorcycle club tied up in the kitchen of this grim, abandoned house. The splintering white cabinets, one hanging off its hinges, the water running down an interior wall, and sticky tile floor are probably the reasons no one lives here. It being isolated and having a deep burgundy carpet in the living room that won't show blood are all bonuses.

I was five when I met Neva. Barstow, California, seemed so intimidating after moving from Tonalá, Jalisco. Even my young eyes saw the wide stares on white faces when we moved into our new home.

But Neva, a year older than me, took one look and decided we were going to be best friends. We've never deviated from this path.

When allowed, we've hung out at the *unofficial* Los Reyes clubhouse as Los Reyes is officially a Mexican bike club and isn't supposed to exist north of the border. So, the Barstow chapter of Los Reyes isn't officially a sanctioned club, but it runs like one, smoothing the supply of drugs into the US and providing aid to brothers from the Mexican chapters if they need assistance. It's where club members now living around Barstow congregate.

My father, who worked his way to vice-president, called us El Dúo.

Always together.

We worked out together, learned to shoot together. Realized I was good with knives while Neva is good with drugs—the growing and dispensing, not the using.

And as we grew into adults, we became Los Reyes' dirty little secret.

Because for a club that proclaims only men can be members, they don't mind leaning on the two of us when it comes to subterfuge, disguises, honey traps, and anything else a man in a cut can't do. As the chapter's president, Perrito, said, with tits like mine, I should put them to good use.

I told him with a road name that meant *little dog*, he should stop acting like a bitch.

Dad stepped in. Told me to stop mouthing off at Perrito and told Perrito to watch how he spoke about his daughter.

I don't really want the sub Neva is offering. I'd give anything for my mamá's tostadas instead of a thick lump of bread, but I take it because I'm hungry. "Sure thing. What am I eating?" I ask as I pick it up and sniff it.

"Spicy Italian with a ton of vegetables."

"Thank you." I put my boots up on the table in front of me and take a massive bite.

"Did you hit him too hard?" she asks.

We both look at the man. He's attractive. Dark hair flops forward over tanned skin and high cheekbones. It hides the gnarly looking scar that runs down the side of his face. No one mentioned King, the president of the Iron Outlaws, having such a scar. It gives me pause for a moment, but it must be him.

He has strong, broad shoulders and a firm ass that looks good in worn denim, both of which made it tough to wrangle him into the van.

But he holds the answers we need. And once he tells us, his life will be of no value to me.

"Possibly," I mumble with a mouthful of sub. "It's not like there's an exact science behind pistol whipping someone. I wanted to make sure he went down."

Neva hops on the bar stool by the kitchen counter. The leather is tattered, as if a dog chewed it up. "I hope we get to be creative in how we persuade him to talk to us."

We are of the same mind. "I noticed you'd already laid down tarp. Thoughtful girl, but I'm not using knives. At least, not yet. We just need

information.”

Neva licks mayo from her fingers. “You sure you know what you’re doing?”

“Nope.” It’s true. I don’t. “But the club wasn’t giving me or Mamá the answers we needed. Papá rode north on business and never returned. It’s not enough to know he came here for the good of the club. And it’s not enough to know he was killed here, and the club had to leave the body behind. We need to know why, and this is the best option we have.”

“Maybe then, you’ll realize Los Reyes had nothing to do with your father’s death and we can go back to our lives.”

I sigh at her comment. I want to be like Neva. I want to believe the club I’ve called home is innocent of any wrongdoing. But I’m struggling to believe that whatever they ran into was so bad they left my father’s body behind. “I hope you’re right.”

“Are you sure this man is King?” Neva asks. “Because Perrito wouldn’t be seen dead without his cut.”

“Again, nope. All I had to go off was a verbal description. Tall. Black hair. Blue eyes. To get it, I had to sleep with Felipe again. Now he’s hinting at a permanent seat on the back of his bike.”

I think through the horny messages I’ve received since I’ve been gone. Ones that promise all kinds of sexual satisfaction I’ve not seen evidence he’s capable of delivering. But they’re still better than the drunken ones at three in the morning that promise a life of love and protection if I become his old lady.

Neva wrinkles her nose as if it’s cute. It’s the only thing we disagree on. She thinks we should each marry one of Perrito’s sons. “There are worse seats to ride on. I’ve seen him in gray sweats, and you know he prefers commando. His dick celebrates its size as it embraces its freedom.”

I can’t help but laugh. “As I embrace mine. I’m not made for the back of someone else’s bike when I’m perfectly happy on the front of my own.”

Neva almost chokes on a bite of food. “Last time you said he gave good oral.”

“I mean, he’s very generous with that mouth of his in bed. Plus, it’s the only time he’s quiet. But he’ll be dead within two years because he’ll also run that mouth of his off somewhere he shouldn’t. All it took was a blow job to figure out Papá came to visit the Iron Outlaws’ territory. Perrito would be appalled at how easy it is to get information out of his son.”

“I’m . . . gonna kill . . . you all,” the man tied to the chair says between grunts.

He takes two deep breathes, winces, then lifts his head. I can only imagine how badly his head aches.

I place my sub back on its napkin and wipe my fingers. “Calm yourself.” I move to crouch in front of him. “We need some answers. Whether or not you walk out of here or are carried out in pieces is wholly dependent on your answers.”

“Who the fuck are you?” He tries to fight against the rope tying his arms to the chair. The veins in his neck pop with effort.

“It doesn’t matter who I am.”

A line furrows between his brow. Then he blinks a few times. “You think I’m telling you shit, you’ve got another thing coming.”

“King,” I say.

He looks at me, does a double take, then looks confused for a moment.

“King. President of the Iron Outlaws. Right?”

“Wha—yeah. That’s me. And you are—?”

“Looking for someone.” I pull up the picture of Papá on my phone. It was taken at my cousin Mini’s quinceañera. Mamá forbade him to wear his cut to it. “I need you to tell me if you’ve seen him.”

I hold the phone in front of King and let him study it. “Never seen him,” he says.

“Look more closely.”

King sneers. “Got a memory for faces. Suck at names. Don’t know who that is.”

I huff. “That’s a shame. For you, I mean. Because I don’t believe you.”

His eyes meet mine, so blue they’re glacial. “I honestly don’t give a shit what you believe.”

I step away from him, find my stance, and before he knows what happened, I curl my fist and punch the side of his face. Generally, my hands, with their impeccably polished short nails, wouldn’t do too much harm. But the large ring with small spikes does the damage for me.

King grunts, but that is the only sound he makes.

I pull up another picture, this one of Papá in his cut. “Now do you recognize him?”

My father is an imposing man. Tall, with broad shoulders. Thick black hair that I used to curl my fingers in when I was a toddler. Dark skin with

darker eyes and a thick moustache. He used to say to me, “You might have the pretty looks of your mother, but you have the dark heart of your father.”

He also told me he’d moved to California for Mamá and to give me a better chance in life. I believe him because he made me promise that when he died, we’d return his body to Guadalajara.

King looks up at me. His eye is swollen from the pistol whip. The ring added a cut along his cheekbone. Maybe his orbital bone is shattered. Who knows. The scar that runs down the other side of his face tells me he’s dealt with worse. “Is this your idea of foreplay? Because I’m getting turned on,” he says, then laughs.

“For a man tied to a chair in front of two women who honestly don’t give a shit if you live or die, you’re extremely confident.”

“For a woman who clearly knows fuck all about me and my club, I could say the same about you.”

“You’d be surprised how much I know about you and your club.” Especially having grown up in one.

I pull up a kitchen chair and sit right in front of him. He’s even more handsome up close. Perhaps I should have played the long game here. Slept with the guy, become a girlfriend. In spite of Felipe’s big dick, he’s not great at holding off. There’s a reason I call him Five-Minute Felipe.

I have a feeling the man in front of me might have more stamina.

And as a woman who has always had a healthy love of sex, I appreciate that.

“Let’s start again. I need to know what happened to my father. Vice President of Los Reyes, Barstow chapter. He came on a ride north to do business or fight with the Iron Outlaws. He never came back. I’m not here to start shit with your club. I just need to know what you did with him and if there’s any chance of bringing what’s left of him home.”

King frowns. “Does your club know you’re here?”

“No. This is completely unsanctioned.”

“You realize how much shit you’re starting?”

Behind King, Neva raises an eyebrow, as if to say she agrees with him.

“I want to understand what happened to my papá and bring him home. Don’t underestimate what I’m willing to do to extract this information. Either you will tell me, or I will ransom you back to your club in exchange for the information.”

King leans back against the chair, as much as the ropes can hold him.

“Well, you better get started. Because I can’t tell you a goddamn thing, seeing I don’t know who the fuck your dear *papá* is.”

I sigh and stand. “Fair enough. Neva?”

Neva opens the case on the table. This is her specialty, and she’s so dramatic about it. There are syringes and vials. A mixture of chemicals designed to send King on the ride of his life. We can make him hallucinate until he wishes for death. We can kill him. And the first vial is designed for something utterly different.

King’s eyes go wide for a fraction of a second, the black dot of his pupils taking over the ice blue of his irises. Then I see this shift in his breathing, slowing it down. It all happens in a minute.

“Sodium thiopental,” I say, as Neva eases the needle into the vial. I rip into the packet of an alcohol wipe and clean a spot on King’s arm. Neva will insert it.

“Drugs are a coward’s way,” King says, his right knee bouncing.

“By whose measure? Yours? I find them clean and effective. Sodium thiopental has many uses. A barbiturate. A general anesthetic. It can induce medical comas and also stop epileptic seizures. Oh, and of course it can be used for euthanasia. It’s also drug one of three for lethal injection in about thirty states. So, you have to be pretty certain of your dosage.”

I’ve killed many men. The first because my father asked me to. The second because the president of the club realized I could be useful. And the third because he molested Mini in the bathroom of a fast-food restaurant.

The first, I prayed novenas for nine days for his soul.

The second, I placed a vase of *cempazúchitl*, flower of the dead, next to my bed.

The third, I did nothing because that fucker deserved every bullet.

From the fourth on, I stopped caring. Killing at this point is just rounding numbers.

“You’re going to kill me?” King asks. There isn’t so much as a waver in his voice. If anything, there’s something that sounds like relief.

I smile. “Oh, no. This is the best bit. The right dose of sodium thiopental acts as a truth serum. It stops you from being able to . . . what’s the word . . . *ensor* yourself.”

“Given what you said, it has the power to stop everything, including your heartbeat. Hope you know what you’re doing with that chemistry set,” he says, looking over at Neva, who rather dramatically flicks the syringe to get

the air out.

“Chem major. You’re safe,” she replies, and I smirk. If by chem major, she means the woman who runs her father’s weed grow op and his opium supply chain.

“Don’t do this,” King says looking up at me.

“Then tell me what I need to know.”

NIRO

She thinks I'm King.

She's about to hit me with some fraction of a lethal injection.

She's looking for a dead Los Reyes we didn't kill.

I don't know how you prove a negative. I'm shit with names, but great with faces.

We didn't kill the man in the photograph because I was there that day in the Pines. I watched those motherfuckers arrive. I watched their formation. And if that patch on the photo is to be believed, that her dad was the VP, then they drove into the clearing in the wrong formation. Because at the front was some punk with half the build and brown hair, not black.

"You can put that in my arm, but I'm going to tell you the same story. I don't know who that man is."

"I guess we'll find out if that's true or not."

The woman looks down at me. Still don't know her name. But she's hot as fuck. Reminds me of those Russian secret agents in *James Bond*—all doe-eyed but holds herself like a killer—except Latina. Hispanic, maybe. With richly tanned skin, thick dark hair and equally dark, intense eyes.

And lips that would look great sucking my cock.

I also need to stall her while I figure out what the fuck I'm gonna do. Or give my brothers a chance to notice I'm missing. Maybe Vex caught the capture on video monitors.

"Don't I get a last meal?" I'm sobering up fast and can still taste the thought of those chocolate chip cookies on my tongue.

"We're not killing you."

“Yet,” Neva adds.

“You know my name. I know your dad’s name. I know Neva’s name seeing you said it earlier. Why don’t you tell me your name?”

“If I thought for a millisecond you needed to know it, I’d tell you.”

I think about Vex’s skills. “I’ll find it out on my own.”

“Good luck with that.” She nods at Neva with the syringe.

Fuck me. My heart starts to race. I wonder if this is how Saint felt when we hung him from cables in the shed and beat him. The closest thing I’ve ever felt to guilt ripples through me, but it’s quickly replaced with the thought he deserved it.

I hope Neva has the dose right. A medically induced coma does not sound appealing. I like the words *lethal injection* a fraction less.

I hope I don’t shit my pants.

I think about the time I did that when I was eight years old at school and had to ditch my undies in the garbage. First day I ever went commando.

Fuck.

The needle is coming closer. I blow out a breath. I hope this isn’t it. I thought I’d be ready for it when my time came. Now that it’s in sight, I realize I’m not.

Fuck.

She’s pressing on my skin. Aiming for a vein.

I can’t watch. When I look up, I see the ringleader of whatever this is, studying me. There’s a calm to her eyes. “Don’t worry, she’s first rate at finding veins.”

“The veins aren’t what I’m worried about. It’s what she’s putting in them.”

She crouches in front of me and puts her palms on my knees. “It slows the speed of messages within your brain. It gets hard to concentrate on things that require higher functions . . . like lying. You’ll feel stuck between being wide awake and asleep on a bit of a downer.”

“Sounds like a fucking trip.”

She smiles at this.

There’s a pinch in my skin, and I suck in a breath as I wait for whatever the effects are to hit me. I cycle through different facets of my body. I wiggle my toes. My breathing is even. My heart is racing, but it’s more in line with excitement than a heart attack.

Can I still do math? I try to multiply twenty-six by thirty-seven. It takes

me a minute to get to nine hundred and sixty-two. Was that too slow?

The woman watches, but she's assessing. I don't think she wants me to die either. "You're pretty," I blurt, then seal my mouth. Because I'm certain that was not the kind of truth either of us was expecting.

"Thank you," she says.

Neva packs the needle away. My head hurts from the pistol whip and the hit to the side of the face. I'm not even pissed about that. I'd do the same in a heartbeat, probably worse, if she were sitting in this chair and I thought she knew where Bates's body was.

The two of them move to the corner of the room and start talking in Spanish.

I'm not going to tell them I can understand. Although the translation in my head starts to feel loose. I can't remember what *que falta* and *la búsqueda* mean. But I get the general idea. Neva is worried for my main captor. That someone will be unhappy and make her pay.

But she's . . . what's the word . . . when they've got fight . . . shit, begins with a *d*.

Why can't I think of the fucking word?

I cycle back through my body.

Toes. Yup, can still move them, but it takes a second.

Breathing. Feels slower. Okay, calm is good.

Heartbeat. Also slowing.

Can I still do math? I try to multiply nineteen by seventeen. Nineteen by ten is . . . Jesus, this should be easy. One ninety. Seven by nineteen is . . . wait, why am I multiplying seven by nineteen. Is it by ten and then by seven? What?

The main woman returns in front of me. "I'll ask again. Do you know this man?" She lifts her phone in front of my face again.

I shake my head. "He wasn't one of them."

"One of who?" she asks.

"Fuck." I shouldn't have said that. I need to keep my answer to the minimal . . . minimum. Words are weirdly confusing. She doesn't need to know that even though I don't recognize her father, I helped kill the rest of them.

"You saw some of the Los Reyes bikers, didn't you?"

I nod, unable to stop myself. More like my head falls forward of its own accord.

“And my father was there, wasn’t he?”

“No.” I look up at her. “What’s your name?”

“My papá was the most senior member on that ride out, he should have been at the front.”

“Guy with brown hair.”

She looks over her shoulder.

Man, I feel like I just did forty consecutive Tabatas with Bates.

“What happened to them?”

What did happen to them? We ambushed them because they were coming

...

Why were they coming?

It’s starting to blur.

“We killed them. They came for us. They came for King.”

“Yes, they came for you. How many of them were there?”

I stare up at her. “Babe. I can barely remember my name right now. Is it meant to make your tongue feel thick?”

“How much did you give him, Neva?” she asks.

“Enough to keep him alive,” Neva says. “People can react differently. You know this, Cat.”

“Cat, Cat, Cat.” The name swishes around on my tongue. “Is that because you have a cute pussy?” I can’t help but laugh, but the chuckle comes out on a cough. “Fuck, I’m not kidding, it feels like my tongue is growing.”

I stick it out and try to look down at it.

“You ever see this kind of reaction?” Cat asks Neva.

“Maybe it’s all the alcohol in his system. Perhaps the drink and drug in his system are having a meet and greet.”

That makes me laugh too. There are worse things in life than finding yourself partying with two girls.

Wait, why are my arms tied to the chair?

I lean over to look at the legs of the chair, and as the chair tips, I’m unable to stop it. I hit the floor, slamming the other side of my head on the floor. And I need a concussion right now like a fucking bullet to the skull.

“Motherfucker,” I gasp. Air leaves my lungs in a whoosh.

“Help me get him up,” Cat says.

With a bunch of grunting and groaning, they manage to grab hold of the chair. The position means my head is right near Cat’s stomach. I take a deep breath. “You smell good,” I say. She does. Something citrus. Oranges.

With a grunt, she manages to get the chair back onto four legs. “Too bad you reek of booze.” The two of them right the stool.

“We could shower together and fix that problem.”

“Or”—she taps the case of liquid narcotics—“we could give you the second injection.”

“Fuck, no,” I say. “My head’s a fucking mess right now. I need to lie down.” My eyes feel so heavy. “Get some sleep.”

“Maybe a night thinking about what you remember might be good for you.”

I look around the kitchen for the first time. Wherever I am is a shithole. “Is there a bed?”

“Not for you. Neva, take first watch. Wake me in three hours.”

The thought that I get to live for another day whooshes through me as Cat leaves. Three hours means more time for my brothers to find me. I just need to hold on long enough.

My mind jumps to death row inmates. Perhaps instead of flying through the three stages of lethal injection, they should let this first stage sit a minute and ask them to confess. Those who can’t confess didn’t do it and shouldn’t move on to steps two and three.

As I’m thinking about how that could work in practice, I pass out.

CATALINA

“**T**he obvious answer is usually the right one, Neva,” I say as we make coffee four hours later.

I glance at our hostage. King’s sleep is fitful and uncomfortable. His shoulders rise and fall with momentary ease.

“Usually, I’d agree with you. But it makes no sense that your papá left with the club and never arrived at the destination. The club would never ride out and leave a man behind unless they faced dire trouble.”

“But look at what we know. Eight of them left, with Papá at the front. Felipe and Mateo made it back. *Both* of Perrito’s sons made it back okay. We all just accepted that, that six men died.”

“You’re assuming that King isn’t lying to us. Of course he’s not going to admit killing your father. He’s playing with you, Cat. Don’t let him cloud your feelings for the club.”

I shake my head. “But why confess to everything else but not that part?”

Neva scoffs. “If there were something weird going on, why would Felipe tell you they came to the Iron Outlaws’ territory? Surely he would only tell you if Los Reyes has nothing to hide.”

“Because, as you said, that guy wants me as his old lady so badly, he can taste it. He loses his sanity whenever I’m around. The rest of the guys talk about how I’ve only slept with him when I’ve needed something.”

She reaches for the cup and pours some coffee for me. “Catalina, men do that all the fucking time in the clubhouse. My dad. Your dad. Our mothers just deal with that shit. Sex is a currency. They didn’t call you a cocktease when they sent you out to steal the details of that weapons shipment from the

Volkov brothers.”

I grin. “Yes, but I didn’t sleep with Ilya Volkov because you provided me with the perfect sedative to drop in his whiskey.”

“Yes,” Neva says, repeating my answer. “But the men don’t know that because you took the papers home and delivered them in the morning.”

“Because I was wearing a full face of makeup, the shortest dress, and a push-up bra that made my boobs look three times bigger as a disguise. Can you imagine Felipe’s face if I’d shown up in that to the clubhouse?”

Neva takes a deep breath. “Well, I think it was genius. Keep them all on their toes. None of them know just how far you’re capable of going.”

I look over at our captive. “I haven’t thought this through. I hoped the Outlaws would be responsible for his death, so I could make my peace and go home. If Los Reyes really are involved in his death, I don’t think I can go back to the club after this is done. I’ll tell Mamá I’m going with the wind for a little while.”

Neva rolls her eyes. “They’ll never know about this unless you tell them. The club doesn’t even know we’re here. They think we went on vacation.”

I hide the feeling of vengeance that sweeps through me. There won’t be a place they can hide if I find out the club is to blame. Instead, I paste the smile Neva expects on my face. “This is more exciting than vacation, no?”

Neva pulls me in for a hug. “Always. I’m going to get some sleep.”

I grab the coffee mug and sit on the chair opposite King. The first sip burns as it always does, and I wish it were Papá’s recipe. It would have piloncillo, the unrefined whole sugarcane, instead of this nasty white sugar. And it would be flavored with cinnamon and orange. But given it’s four thirty in the morning and I need to stay awake, I’ll take this.

As the caffeine works its magic, I think through the conversation yesterday. If Papá wasn’t there to ride up front, Mateo should have been up front as road captain. And he has a shaved head, not brown hair. So Mateo wasn’t there, and he survived. It makes no sense . . . unless I start to think up conspiracy theories. What if Perrito had Papá taken out by his sons and led the rest of the group to a slaughter to cover it up?

But then, why not just let Dad drive out up front so he would get killed with everyone else? Unless they weren’t told what they were riding out for. Or they didn’t know they were driving into an ambush. Maybe they thought they could take out a club president and return in one piece. So they had to get rid of Papá on the way.

Urgh . . . this is all so confusing. There are so many possible scenarios.

In hindsight, it only felt like a solid crew because of the strength of Papá, Felipe, and Mateo. The rest of the crew was a combination of sidelined older members who were capable of the duration of the ride and a handful of brand-new prospects. Perhaps they were just collateral.

How do I find the stories of dead men?

How do I figure out what the hell happened?

One thing I know for sure, the man in front of me can help me figure it out, once his head is clear. I want him to help me piece together what happened. Starting with their meeting and backing up from there.

Because if Los Reyes had my father killed, there are no lengths I won't go to to make this right.

Snow falls outside, illuminated by the moon. I've only experienced snow a handful of times. Through the glass it's pretty, but the cold is the enemy to my sun-warmed bones. The thought of it makes me shiver.

Time passes. I sip my coffee. I listen to King snore. I want all the information he has. And given what I already know about him, it will be easier to get that from him by playing nice.

More snow falls as I figure out what that means.

I finish my coffee.

The urge to go back to sleep is strong. But an hour later, King starts to stir.

He sucks in a deep breath, as if forgetting he's here, then flips his head up, blinking.

"Fuck me. I thought this was a dream." He winces. "My head's hammering."

I grab two painkillers from my bag and get a glass of water from the kitchen. "Open wide," I say.

"How do I know that's not step two of the lethal drug combo and you're just luring me in to kill me?"

I raise an eyebrow. "One, if we wanted you dead, we would have done that last night. Two, we have a million other weapons at our disposal—we didn't have to wait until you woke up. Just open your mouth and let me help you fix that headache because I need your help."

King eyes me suspiciously, then does as I say. I pop the pills in his mouth, then press the glass to his lips. He surprises me by drinking most of the water. "You'll need to let me piss soon, unless that's what the tarp is here

for.”

“Not while Neva is sleeping. Can you be a big boy and hold it?”

He grins, and his eyes light up. “You could hold it for me, and I could pee into a bowl. Perhaps give it a stroke or twenty.”

“Te voy a lavar la boca con jabón,” I mutter. My mamá always threatened to wash my mouth out with soap when I would curse. She’d blame my father for not watching his expletives around me. I thought she was going to have a heart attack when I berated my cousin at mass one day. Apparently calling someone a fucking idiot in a holy building at age seven is a big no-no.

King drops his head.

“When I said I needed your help, I meant it.” I put effort into softening my tone.

“This how you usually ask for favors?” His eyes meet mine again. There’s something utterly captivating and . . . dark, about them. Even though they’re the kind of blue I associate with arctic ice.

I run my middle finger over my lip as I think of where to start. “There’s no reason for us to trust each other. But I promise you, I’m not here for revenge. I don’t care what you did or didn’t do. My father had strong morals and an even stronger dislike of authority. He knew the life he was in. But he was also a good father. Fiercely protective. He truly believed everything he did was for us. Moving us to California. Doing what was required to build some wealth. Giving me an American education.”

“You and Neva are sisters?”

I shake my head. “No, but I don’t have any siblings, so she might as well be.”

“If your dad wanted this other life for you, why are you mixed up with a girl who can mix up barbiturates?”

I think about the times Papá confused me with his double standard. Encouraging me to study as a girl while asking me to whore myself out for the good of the club as an adult. That I should be tough and strong and independent—yet do as he says, respect Perrito, and give everything to a club that offers me nothing in return. “That’s a story for a different day. I just want to know what happened to my papá and keep a promise to him to return his body back to Guadalajara. I’m not here with the club. I’m here with my friend, and yes, we’re not utterly innocent ourselves. But what you said last night, it doesn’t make sense.”

King frowns. “What exactly did I say last night? When you grabbed me,

I'd already done a bottle of Jack. Then, with all that funky shit you popped in my veins, I kinda lost the plot with what was going on."

I pull up the photograph of my papá. "This is my father. He was vice president. You told me the club came for you, but he wasn't one of the ones you killed."

King hisses air in between his teeth, as if he's disgusted by what he revealed. "You know I can't be confirming or denying that shit."

"I really don't want to hurt you again," I say, surprised to find I actually mean it. I brush a finger across the bruise blooming where the butt of my gun hit him hard. "I need to understand. I . . ." I debate telling him what I suspect, but how can I expect him to be honest with me if I'm not honest with him? "I watched that group of eight men leave. My papá was at the front, with Mateo, the road captain, to his left. You said my papá wasn't there. Even if we don't answer why my father wasn't, Mateo should have led the crew to your meet. But the description you gave of the man up front doesn't match Mateo or the third guy, Felipe."

"You think some funky shit went down?" he asks.

"I came to understand what happened to my father. To bring him home if that's possible. Now I want to understand why he didn't come back. I need your help. Please."

NIRO

The way she says *please* reverberates through my chest.

I owe Cat nothing. She took me by force. Put drugs in my system.
And tried to force information from me.

And yet . . .

I'm as confused by this whole fucking Los Reyes thing as I am by her.

I thought we'd put this to bed months ago.

"How do I know this isn't a trap? You could have been sent here by your club to get information from me about a hypothetical meetup. Your club could be camped a mile from our clubhouse, waiting for some signal from you that it's time to go wreak havoc on my brothers."

Cat sighs. "I can't prove to you that I haven't. All I've got is my word."

Hope is a funny fucker. And for all I don't know about Cat, I can see the moment when it starts to ebb out from her. It's in the slump of her shoulders, the way she leans forward, resting her elbows on her knees as her fingers tangle with one another.

Usually, it's the sweetest moment, to have someone capitulate in front of you. To know you have them right where you want them, so you can manipulate them at your will. Maybe all those drugs in my system have done something no one else has been able to. They make me feel the slightest sting of regret for causing her to feel . . . sad.

"Tell me shit I shouldn't know," I say. "Cut me from this chair. Give me my phone back. You want me to trust you and tell you shit I shouldn't . . . you need to trust me and do the same."

Her eyes narrow. "You know no club trusts the club women with their

secrets.” I can hear the disdain in her words. This woman yearns for the life but isn’t allowed to be a part of it, unless they need her to be. Knowing someone’s weakness is good intelligence, and I file it away.

“You strike me as a woman who might be good at collecting secrets, Cat. Tell me what you know.”

She leans back in the chair. “I’m Catalina Maria Flores. I’m twenty-five. I do contract work for the Los Reyes Motorcycle Club based in Barstow, California. I ride a Street Glide Classic for long rides, but I prefer my Sportster 1200 Custom when I’m home. My father, Eduardo ‘Pensa’ Flores is vice president of the club. His road name is short for *el pensador*, the thinker. He’s known as a great strategist for the club. When the past president died, it was a very tight vote to replace him between my father and Daniel ‘Perrito’ Moreno.”

We’re close in age. I have a couple years on her. Bet she looks hot on a bike with that fine ass clad in leather. Would I fuck her on her bike if I’d met her in a bar?

No, I’d fuck her on mine.

It’s hot she rides. Even hotter that she’s a bad girl.

And I’d call her Catalina the whole time I was fucking her because I like the way the name rolls on my tongue as I discretely test it out.

Cat-a-lee-na.

Cat has a hard edge to it. But Catalina . . . That’s a soft name.

Wait. It was a tight vote?

“Tell me more about the vote.”

“Four years ago, when the old president died, some felt my father should be the next president. He was sergeant at arms at the time, but he was so much more than that. He was full of ideas and understood the finances of the club. Should have been treasurer really, but the role bored him. He knew how to create opportunities. Under my father’s eye, the club finances flourished. In the reshuffle, he became vice president.”

There’s pride in her tone and a wistful look in her eye. She clearly looked up to this man. And as the actual treasurer of our club, I understand his views on the role. It’s boring as fuck. Crucial, but so mind-numbingly dull. And the worst form of punishment for someone like me who often struggles to focus. “So how did Perrito become president?”

The softness in her features hardens. “He’s aggressive, brimming with patriarchal machismo. That aggression was compelling to some of the club.

He wouldn't shy from violence and created a reputation for Los Reyes as a club that would handle dirty business for a price. Becoming hitmen for other organizations was a lucrative gig. I suspect that's why they came here, but I'm hoping you'll tell me what you know."

"I'm . . ." Shit. I was going to introduce myself. My knee starts to bounce, and I will it to stop. I've been tied up too long.

Telling her she doesn't have King is a really important piece of information. If there is something more subversive at play here, my president needs to be protected at all costs . . . just like I protected his father when I was fifteen. But for some reason, I don't want the next thing out of my mouth to be a lie. "Was there bad blood between them?"

Catalina leans back in the seat and purses her lips. "I never thought so. There was banter about it occasionally. But once, I stayed over at the clubhouse when no one knew, and I heard Perrito remind Papá that he'd hadn't won the vote, so he should back off from trying to lead the men behind the scenes. So maybe there was more bad blood than I want to admit."

I sift through fragments of memories of everything that had been said since Cat took me. I was awake long before they realized, but I kept my head down to gain information. "You were with Felipe? The president's son?"

Her eyes meet mine unwaveringly. "Only when it was useful."

There is no hint of shame. Nor does there need to be. But I catch within myself the first feeling of jealousy that he's slept with her, and I haven't. Yet.

"Playing both sides. Clever. Were you getting intel from Felipe for your dad or passing info to Felipe to enable him to take over the VP position from your father?"

Catalina stands up so fast, she kicks the chair down behind her. "Who I slept with and why I slept with them is none of your business. I answer only to myself. I don't care about the politics of a club that won't accept me as a member. I answer to myself, and occasionally to my family."

"Was just asking the question. No need to freak the fuck out."

She takes a breath and walks behind me. I can't see what she's doing, but I hear cupboards close and a cutlery drawer open. When she returns, she's got a coffee, and it smells so fucking good, I start to salivate.

Coffee always tastes great with the gingerbread I make.

Can't remember if I turned the coffee maker off at home before I left for the club yesterday.

Which reminds me I need to piss.

I could overwhelm this chick and get the fuck out of here.

But I'm intrigued by Catalina Flores and her problem. I want to know what happened that day too. I don't like loose ends for my club. I can feel the problem sucking me in. In my head, I'm already organizing all the moving pieces.

"I just remembered something. Doesn't help locate your dad, but changes what we know. That day, three riders broke off and chased one of my brothers and his old lady. But all three of them died. We buried eight. But not your dad or the two that never showed. So, who were the other three fill-ins? And could I please get one arm free and a cup of that fucking coffee before I die from this hangover?"

She eyes me carefully.

I huff. "You want trust? Then trust me, I'm better after caffeine."

"You're right-handed right?" she asks.

"I am."

She reaches forward with a knife and frees my left arm.

"Clever girl. Free my weakest arm." I roll the wrist joint around, then my elbow joint, and finally my shoulder. I've no idea what time it is, but the sky is losing its darkness. The sun's up around seven thirty this time of year. Let's say I was unconscious for an hour, then drugged for an hour, then Cat slept . . . it must be at least six hours since I was taken. Maybe seven.

"This isn't my first rodeo," she says before heading back to the kitchen. I shimmy the chair around so I can watch her as she pours me a cup. "You take anything in it?"

"Not a thing. Stiff and black is how I like it."

She places it on the round kitchen table next to me. The first sip is heaven. It's hot and burns my throat as I swallow it. But seeing my mouth feels as though someone filled it with sand overnight, I'm utterly grateful for it.

"Better?" she asks, before taking a sip from her own mug.

"You have no idea."

We drink in silence for a moment, but my brain starts whirring with questions. I went on a true crime rampage last month. Every waking moment, I binged those fuckers. Podcasts. Shows. I'd stay up until four in the morning because I couldn't rest until I knew the ending. Loved guessing. Loved trying to figure out the clues they might have missed. Went on a road trip to North Carolina to kill a guy who went on the run with club money for a shipment

not delivered. Listened to the podcasts all the way there and back.

“What if we draw out the timeline? Who left, who came back, how long they were gone. Felipe and Mateo have obviously already spun a version of what happened. Los Reyes already know it was us who took them out. We thought we’d cleaned everything up tight. And I’d swear we did. Even down to the number of bikes we sold. So, let’s map it out.”

Catalina looks surprised. “You’re going to help me?”

“Sure. On one condition.”

“What’s that?”

“You let me out of this fucking chair for a piss. Look. You can keep a gun on me the whole time. You can even come in and watch me. Just don’t be getting ideas about giving me a blow job, because I’ll take you up on that in a heartbeat.”

Her nose wrinkles. “That’s gross.”

I shrug. “Maybe. But it’s the best hangover cure I know of. And I do my best work when I’m not hungover.”

“I gave you painkillers, water, and coffee.”

“Are we negotiating, or was that a definite no?”

Catalina rolls her eyes. “That was a most definite no. When I said you reek of booze, I wasn’t lying.”

“So it’s just the smell of me. If that’s the dealbreaker, I’m sure there’s a shower in here somewhere. I’ll even air dry if there are no towels.”

“Stay focused. Fine. Toilet break. But first I’m going to wake Neva so there are two of us and only one of you. Just so you don’t think you could overwhelm me.”

“Oh, Catalina, I have lots of ideas how to overwhelm you.”

“Stop with the flirting too. It’s obvious and unhelpful,” she says, but I see the twitch of a smile.

She wakes Neva, and with two weapons on me, we navigate the narrow hallway to the bathroom. It’s ugly. Worn and dated. It also has a large window, big enough for someone to escape from.

“Keep the door open so I can see you,” Catalina instructs.

“You want a look at my cock, all you gotta do is ask.” I unzip and do what I have to do, which includes groaning in relief.

“Any wild moves and I’ll shoot that cock clean off,” Neva says, calmly. I don’t trust her with a gun any more than I trust her with a goddamn needle.

“Feel better?” Catalina asks.

I shake off my cock and tuck it back in my pants. "So much better."

The water pressure is low, but I wash my hands and then bend forward, splashing frigid water on my face, before running some of it through my hair to push it back off my forehead.

There's a small towel on the rail, and I dry myself off.

"Can I?" I hold up a tube of toothpaste.

Neva frowns, but Catalina nods. "As long as you only use your finger and not my toothbrush."

I do as she says, just grateful for something minty. "Coffee's gonna taste like shit after this, but my mouth tastes like something died in it."

When I'm done, we do the same shuffle down the hallway back to the kitchen. I consider attempting to escape. I feel like I could take out Neva in front of me, but I don't know how Catalina would respond. I'd like to think she's softening and wouldn't pull the trigger. But that's not a wager I'm willing to make. "You know, I like a threesome as much as the next guy," I say. "If the two of you want to put the guns down, we could have a totally different kind of fun."

"You're a pig," Neva says.

Catalina nudges the nozzle of her gun between my shoulder blades. "My experience is most guys don't have enough stamina for one woman, let alone two."

We reach the kitchen, and I sit back in the chair. "Then allow me to prove you wrong because you've been fucking the wrong men."

"Tie your legs to the chair," Catalina says.

She's a clever girl. Because if she'd come anywhere near me fully untied, I'd have taken her weapon and run. When I'm done, Catalina hands her weapon to Neva.

"Maybe you should only talk when it's something to do with my father."

I place my arms on the armrests, and Cat crouches next to the chair to tie one of my wrists down. "Where would the fun be in that?"

"Don't make me regret not giving you the second shot when I had the chance." She looks up at me.

I like the look of her down there, and I widen my knees a little before tipping my chin to my cock. "I mean, while you're down there."

CATALINA

I hate to admit it, but King is entertaining. And crass. Hotter than any man has a right to be.

And my only hope in figuring out what happened to my father.

Staying alive as a member or associate of an MC is tough, but American bike gangs have nothing on Mexican cartels and their levels of brutality. I was raised to be hypervigilant at all times, just in case.

No amount of cuteness will prevent me from pulling the trigger if I need to.

My father has been missing for five months. I've hung around the club, biding my time, to find out where my father went. Five months of pretending I actually like Felipe in the hope that he would finally crack and give me something to help me find out Papá's location.

Now that I have King, I have no reason to go back to Felipe for information.

"He has an arm free," Neva says.

"I know, but I'll see the minute he tries to reach for his other arm to free it." I take my weapon from her hand. "And I have this. We need to get rid of the van. The sun is coming up soon, and we'll be spotted if we ditch it any later."

"Are you sure, Cat? I don't like the idea of leaving you."

"Then make me up a syringe before you go. I swear if I see him even reach for the ropes, I'll stick it in him."

"I have a better idea for ropes and needles that's a lot fucking hotter than our current setup," King says.

I glance over at him. “Needles?”

He shrugs. “Needles. Knives. Since when did a bit of blood play hurt anyone?”

“Me! It would hurt me,” I say.

King laughs. “Not the way I do it, it wouldn’t. I’m a tattoo artist and scarification practitioner.”

“Enough. Or I’ll drug you up just to get some peace.” I say, but it’s clear I don’t mean it.

“Cat? A word,” Neva says as she heads to the door.

I follow her.

“What are you doing?” she hisses. “You’re taking risks with this guy.”

“You catch more flies with honey,” I whisper. “He seems to respond to that.”

Neva huffs. “I suppose that make sense. Just . . . temper your faith in what he’s saying and remember our loyalty to the club. Stay on guard.”

I nod and open the door. “Stay safe.” I hug her as she leaves, but I realize there’s a scenario in the future where Neva is with Mateo, and the club has killed my father. That divides her loyalty.

When Neva’s gone, there’s a heavy feeling that settles on me. It’s intuition. And I’ve learned to listen. I need to be careful about what Neva knows. I’m not sure what she’ll tell the club if she goes back to them and Mateo. I hope nothing. But her life is entrenched with them. She runs the club’s grow op for her dad. Her salary is from the club. Her house is on club property. Her father, Nudillo, the club’s enforcer, has made it known he’d like her to end up with Mateo, who is on the path to replace his father as president eventually.

He was voted vice president three days after they returned to the clubhouse without Papá.

Women make their own lives as best they can if they live in the orbit of a motorcycle club. I won’t ever blame Neva for her choices. But I hope they don’t lead her to Mateo. He’s cruel like Perrito and uses Neva when it suits him.

And I wouldn’t put it past Mateo to use dirty tricks to get information from her. If I go back and she snitches on me, my life would be over. Hers might be too if she can’t explain why she came with me.

My insides churn. What I learn here will affect so many lives. I don’t want it to hurt Neva. Or Mamá. All I can do is commit to the truth. Neva’s

right, I need to keep whatever King tells me in context.

“Draw out the eight who left and where they’d normally sit on the formation,” King says suddenly. “You got pictures of them, show me. Let’s see if we can piece together who was where and when.”

“Why were they there?” I ask. “Can we start with that, King? As president, you must know all the details.”

Something akin to discomfort crosses his face. It must be to do with what I’m asking. King takes a deep breath. “Internal conflict. Old wounds. A club member made a deal with Los Reyes, as far as we know, to take care of business so there would be no links back to them. But we thought they came across the border. Didn’t know Los Reyes were now in the US.”

“They’ve always existed. Just never officially recognized. The charter is to remain a Mexico-based club. But time, situation, and opportunity has meant members have drifted north of the border to join family, for work, whatever. My father was pushing for that to change. Wait. Perrito was against it. He said he didn’t want the official oversight or to have to pay the club dues. Said it would cut the income for members. They aren’t a formal motorcycle club, even though they use the name.”

King leans back in the chair. “It feels like the club is on shaky ground.”

I grab a notebook from my backpack, then shunt his chair so he’s facing the kitchen table. I take the seat next to his restrained arm. “I’ll need to burn anything we write, but let’s make a start.”

“Gimme names, ranks, and photos.”

Opening my phone, I do as he asks. “Okay, so this is my dad. Eduardo Flores. He was vice president, right at the front. He led out.” I show him the image.

“You have the same mouth. And your eyes are the same shape and color.”

“Thank you. I think. This is Mateo, Perrito’s other son. Road captain.” The picture I show him is from a barbecue we had. “Have you ever eaten slow-cooked barbacoa . . . lamb or goat? My grandfather was from Hidalgo, which is known for it. He taught my papá. It’s so good.”

“You reminiscing or showing me Mateo?” King asks.

“Sorry.”

King shoulder checks me. “No need to be sorry. You can tell me about Hidalgo and barbecue and whether you’re any good at grilling later. But I’m guessing there’s a reason you wanted your friend out of the house while we talk this through.”

“I have my reasons.”

“Good enough. So, Mateo?”

I zoom in on the picture until Mateo is clear. His bald head is a giveaway. And the tattoo of a serpent curled up on the back of his skull means he’s easy to identify. He’s laughing, but I also notice Neva watching him.

I was wrong to doubt my friend. She backed up my lies that we were headed out on a girls’ ride out. She may not think I’m right, but she was willing to come on the ride while I find out.

“He definitely wasn’t there.”

I turn to face him; his face is inches away from mine. His scruff and lips are a delectable combination, and it would take nothing to lean into him, especially when he’s looking at my lips as if he’s hungry and I’m breakfast.

“How do you know?” I say, conscious that the words might have a breathy edge to them.

“Because I was on cleanup that day. I know every body that went to ground.”

“I admire your style of leadership.”

King’s brow furrows. “What do you mean?”

I shrug. “Perrito wouldn’t have anything to do with cleaning up bodies. He’d just give the orders and watch while someone else did the grunt work. I think being hands-on with the men as a president is the sign of a good leader.”

He looks away from me and back to the phone. The compliment makes him feel uncomfortable. I guess that’s another thing to like. Humility. “Who’s in the third position?”

“Felipe. Sergeant at arms. There’s grumbling that Perrito is stacking the deck with him at the top and his two sons in prominent positions.”

King shakes his head. “It’s not that uncommon. Our club . . .”

“Our club what?” I really want him to finish that sentence.

Because the look on his face is one of shock.

“Our club what, King?”

“Do you know what my real name is?” he asks.

“No. Just your road name, King.”

“I’m fed up with you calling me King. My real name is Colton.”

“You ever shorten it to Colt?”

Colton nods. “My mom used to all the time. Unless she was pissed. Then I got the full version.”

It reminds me of my youth. “Papá would do that too. You were about to say what your club would do?”

“We actually have a long history of fathers and sons taking key positions. But I get how it’s troubling if one family occupies too many. Makes voting harder. Makes decisions lean one way. Starts to feel more like a *Godfather* movie than a motorcycle club.”

I scroll through my photos. “This is Felipe.”

“This the guy you slept with? I hate that he’s a good-looking fucker.” He rubs his fingertip over the ridge where his scar crosses his upper lip. “Pretty obvious why you slept with him.”

A sigh escapes me. “Are you proud of everyone you’ve ever had sex with?”

Colton laughs. It’s rich and full. “Fuck no. I’ve made some highly questionable decisions.”

I tap my middle finger on the tabletop gently. “Yeah, well. I’ve made some of those too.”

“Heard you talking, when I was coming around. All it took was a blow job to get the intel on King—me.”

“Yes and no. The club knew I wanted my father home, but they kept dismissing my questions as confidential club business. They did that for months. I felt there was something a little off about it. Intuition maybe. There’s been a little voice that told me it wasn’t all as it seems. And Felipe seemed to be the only way to get answers. He’s wanted to get me into bed for a long while. I capitulated to find out what I needed.”

“I know that feeling, of listening to your gut. Pretty certain if you gave me a blow job, I’d forget my own name too.”

“Guess we’ll never know.” I redirect attention to the image. “You’re sure you never saw Felipe?”

“I am. Which is a shame because I suddenly have the problematic territorial urge to slice his dick off and feed it to him.”

His words catch me off guard, but I focus on finding the next photograph.

Fifteen minutes later, we’ve gone through the eight men who left the Los Reyes clubhouse, and I’m no closer to understanding what happened to my father.

“What about the other three?” Colton asks. “Who could they be?”

“Can you describe them to me? Maybe I’ll recognize them.”

“Can do one better. If you let me untie my other hand, I can draw you a

sketch.”

Neva isn't back yet. But even though I have the advantage of weapons, I know he's not going to hurt me. “Fine,” I say. “Just, don't give me a reason to kill you, Colton. Because I will if I have to.”

A strong hand with *IOMC* tattooed across the knuckles unties the other. I move to the other side of the table, out of his reach. If he tries anything, I'll be far enough away to react before he gets to me.

He stretches his hands over his head, and his dark hoodie lifts, revealing tight abs covered in ink. I can't make out the design, but it's all black and grey.

“You want me to take the whole thing off so you can have a better look?” Colton asks.

Heat hits my cheeks at the embarrassment of being caught staring. “No.”

He does anyway, and I see text across his ribs that says *We Found Wonderland*. I want to ask him what it means.

“Do you want to take *your* top off so *I* can have a better look?”

I shake my head quickly and look away. “Most definitely not.”

“Why not? You've already told me you don't have a problem with no-strings sex. I bet we could have some fun. And we have the house to ourselves.”

I clench my thighs; thankful he can't see because of the table. “What I need you to do is draw the three men you buried.”

Colton chuckles. “I'll win you over eventually. I'd bet a hundred bucks that my dick will meet your pussy before our little interlude is over.”

“Can you just focus on the drawings?”

He leans forward, his chest up against the table. “Little hard to focus, because now I'm totally thinking about all the things they'll have to say to each other.”

Despite my best efforts to bury my smile, I know the corners of my mouth twitch to give me away, and I hate that I am softening against my best survival instincts. “Genitals don't talk.”

Now he folds his arms across his chest and leans back, farther away from the pen and paper in front of him. “See, that's where you are wrong, Catalina. If my cock gets hard, it's saying to the pussy standing opposite, ‘Hey, I see you and you're fucking hot.’” Dramatically, he dropped his voice an octave lower to impersonate his penis. “And then the pussy responds, getting wet, which says”—he speaks with a shrill voice—“‘Hey, I see you too, and I'd

really like you to get in here.’ And then—”

“Okay. Stop. No pussy and cock hookups. No interpretive conversations of everything they’re going to say to each other. Just you and that pen. Drawing pictures.”

“For the record, you’re no fun, Catalina. And I’m getting really hungry.”

“You’re right. I’m no fun. Remember that. We have no food. Just draw.”

Colton pushes up his sleeve, picks up the pen, and starts to draw.

And it’s . . . mind-blowing.

He’s so talented.

The three men take shape on the page, and he calls out ink details beautifully.

“You’re so good at that,” I say.

He looks up, as if surprised by my presence. “I’m a tattoo artist, remember?”

I’ve only ever met Los Reyes club presidents, but they never work. He also told me he was on cleanup duty that day. It’s something they would never be caught doing.

Something skitters down my spine that this man is not who I think he is.

I keep my thoughts to myself as he works. But now, I’m looking for other details. Does any of the ink I can see tell me anything about who he is? There’s a hyperrealistic pomegranate on his neck. He couldn’t have done that on himself though.

On his forearm is a nautical themed sleeve of tattoos. An old diving helmet, a compass. I run my fingers over the frothy blue waves that splash in-between.

Colton glances my way, and I remove my hand. “Sorry.”

“Don’t be.”

Heat simmers between us until Colton continues with his sketches.

When he’s finished, he slides the artwork across the table to me. “You recognize any of these guys?” he asks.

I study the first one, but I don’t recognize the wide eyes, square chin, and faux hawk. The same with the second picture.

“Might have a couple of details wrong,” Colton says, “But that’s the general idea.”

“I don’t know either of the two.”

The third one though. To say I recognize him would be too strong. But there is something vaguely familiar about his face. He definitely wasn’t a

recent member of Los Reyes. Neva and I spend too much time around the club to have not noticed him hanging around before Papá went missing.

“I’ll send these to Mamá and see if she knows who it is.” I grab my phone and take a quick picture.

“Your mom won’t find it weird to get photos of strange men?”

The question makes me chuckle. “My mom is the ultimate old lady. Nothing is ever strange to her because she’s probably seen it a million times with Papá.”

“You said your grandfather was from Hidalgo. And your dad and you were born there. Is your mom from Mexico too?”

“If my dad were here to tell the story, he’d tell it like this: She was a virginal girl on spring break, and he utterly corrupted her.” I smile at the memory of that story being told over and over. The way Papá’s eyes would soften when he’d look across the table at Mamá. The way he’d reach for her hand and kiss her knuckles.

“Is that the truth?”

“God, no. She was already corrupted. But there is a hint of truth. She returned to California from Hidalgo, determined to chalk my father up as a holiday romance, but found she couldn’t forget him. She began arguing with her parents. They’d moved to the US before she was born and wanted her to stay in college, but she hated it. She was old-school. Wanted a home and a family. Wanted a man to take care of and to have that man take care of her too. When she was on the brink of dropping out, my father turned up on his bike for her.”

Colton smiles. “How did he find her?”

“You want the slightly less romantic truth?”

“Sure. I’m here for it all.”

“He slept with the front desk manager of the hotel my mom had stayed at. Told her that my mom had skipped out, owing him money. She gave him my mom’s address in California so he could go chase her.”

Colton’s laughter barks through the silence. “Nothing says ‘I love you’ like sleeping with another woman to find you.”

“It’s just the way my parents were. They had an understanding, not one I would ever want, but they were enough for each other.”

He runs his hand over his jaw. “My club is going down like flies. Four in the last year finding old ladies.”

I glance down at the drawings again. “You don’t want an old lady.”

“Definitely not. But if you asked nicely, I might reconsider.”

“Dios, no. I don’t want to be anybody’s anything.” When I look back up, his gaze is on me. It would be foolish not to acknowledge the heat between us.

The front door bursts open, and Neva hustles inside, letting in an icy blast of cold air. “Van’s gone; supplies are here. I grabbed some breakfast.” Neva comes over to the table and eyes Colton’s free hands carefully. “Did you guys figure it out?”

I sigh. “We made progress. There are some new players. There were three more men involved. Do you recognize any of them?”

I push the papers in front of Neva, who studies the first two, then moves on to the third. “That looks like . . . God, what was his name? He went nomad. You remember . . . he was the son of one of Perrito’s cousins, maybe?”

Tipping my head, I look at the image again. “I don’t remember him.”

Neva lifts the paper and takes a closer look too. “You do. He was a bit of a pervert. Always sitting in the corner watching the women. Did you ask your mamá? She’ll know.”

“I messaged her, but you know how she is. She won’t pick her phone up until at least ten.”

And as I contemplate ringing her, everything implodes around me. A window is smashed in the kitchen, the back door is kicked in, and as I look at the two bikers forcing their way in, guns raised, I hear the front door crash open too.

Knocking my chair back, I leap onto the breakfast bar and kick one of the men in the head. He flies backward, hitting the fridge before slumping to the ground, but I don’t have time to watch as the other man tries to drag me from the counter. I let my weight go heavy, falling to the floor until he loosens his grip. I bring my knee to my chest, then fire my foot out, nailing him in the balls.

“Motherfucker,” he curses, reaching for his weapon.

But over all of it, I hear Colton shout, “Bates, don’t shoot her. Don’t kill them.”

The man by the fridge finds his feet and grabs me tightly around my arms and lifts me into the air. I try to throw my head backward to headbutt him, but he manages to dodge.

I let him take my weight and use both my legs to plant my feet in the

chest of an attractive blond in front of me. The momentum sends the man holding me backwards into the wall with a huff.

“Easy, banshee,” a rough voice says in my ear.

A man, tall with dark hair, rushes over to Colton, and on his cut is the road name *King*.

“Who the fuck is this?” The real King glares down at me, his dark eyebrows narrowed on his tan skin. I notice that while he drops his weapon, the two men over his shoulder don’t.

Neva has been captured too. We’re outnumbered, literally outmanned, and will be lucky to get out of this alive.

NIRO

I struggle to process what's happening. Halo was cutting me free with his knife while Catalina just took on my whole club without missing a beat.

Fucking ballsy.

"What's your name?" Catalina says, looking straight at me.

"It's none of your fucking business what his name is," my president says.

Catalina eyes King's patch with his road name carefully, then turns to me with a sneer. "Is it really even Colton?"

I step into her space, and she pulls her neck back, like she thought I was going to attempt to kiss her. I'm not. But I'd be a liar if watching her kick Bates like that hadn't gotten my cock excited.

Instead, I grip her hands behind her back and tie them together.

"What . . . ? You don't need to tie me up," she says, wrestling against me.

"I didn't lie to you. My real name is Colton. Colton Brewer. My road name is Niro," I say, lowering my lips to her ear. I drop my voice to a whisper. "And I know I don't. I just wanted to see if it turned you on. I wanted to see how red your skin gets when you pull against the ropes. And I see you like it."

A flush of anger hits her cheeks as her eyes narrow. "Back up, *Niro*."

"No can do. Watching you fight like that gave me a boner."

"Fuck you."

My grin probably isn't helping the situation.

"What's the story, Niro?" Clutch asks.

I wink at Catalina, then step back from her a little, enough so she can breathe. "Catalina is the daughter of a Los Reyes chapter vice president."

“What the fuck?” Halo says. “She got a good reason for being all up in your face?”

“I happen to like her up in my face. Or on my face. Whichever,” I say.

Catalina growls. “I told you to stop flirting with me.”

“And I *also* happen to like the fact you’re angry, babe. For the record, we haven’t even started flirting yet.”

“Perhaps you should just fuck her and get it over with,” Bates says with a smirk.

Catalina turns slowly to eye Bates. “Perhaps I should take that knife whose handle you keep jerking off and shove it into your throat.”

Bates releases his knife in its holster, and I hear a couple of chuckles.

“Steady, Catalina,” I say, taking her chin between my thumb and forefinger. She entertains me, but her situation with my club is precarious. “You know better than to threaten a brother.”

She looks up at me with defiance written all over her face. “I threatened you.”

I grip Catalina’s chin. “You did. And I’m going to punish you for that.”

“Need any help?” Bates says.

Normally I’d find a comment like that funny as fuck. Bates is my partner in crime. Literally. We do everything together, but one thing we won’t be doing together is Catalina.

So, I ignore him and keep my eyes on her. I should probably explain to King what’s happened. Or come up with a comeback for Bates. I glance over at Neva, who is struggling against Switch’s grip. But Catalina has a certain kind of energy that my own responds to, and I look back at her. There’s no other reason to explain why I sat in that chair for as long as I did without losing my mind.

I’m usually a mess on hideouts . . . anything where we have to sit and wait. Especially when I’m hungry.

Which, fuck—what I wouldn’t give for whatever breakfast food Neva picked up. I’m starved and still dealing with a hangover from—

“Niro.” King’s voice is a shout. Loud. Like he’s been trying to get my attention. But my eyes are still firmly on Catalina. And I kind of like the fact her eyes are on me.

“Sorry. What?”

“Why did two women associated with Los Reyes abduct you from outside the club?”

I let go of Catalina's chin, even as I wonder if she keeps that kind of eye contact when she fucks.

Bet it's hot.

"Catalina's dad was a rider in the party that came to visit with us when Cue Ball had put that hit on your head. Eight men left their clubhouse. Five showed up in the clearing. Her dad wasn't with them, and neither were two others who made it back to their clubhouse. We never saw any of those three that day. Yet we buried eight."

"Fuck," Halo says. "Why you telling them all this shit?"

"We know most of that shit," Neva shouts from behind me, and Halo glances in her direction.

"Yeah? How's that?" he asks.

"Fuck you," she replies.

"Drugs," I say, answering Halo's question. "The reason I told them shit is the fact Neva pumped the closest thing to a truth serum that's two steps away from being a lethal injection into my veins. I dare any of you fuckers to try it for the ride."

"Weirdest fucking rescue," Clutch mutters under his breath.

Vex shrugs. "Things have been weird in this club for a while."

"Can we all just focus for a fucking minute?" King asks. "So these two show up why?"

"Because I can't just accept my father died on a run with no explanation. I need to know what happened to him. And I made a promise to him that I'd take him home and lay him to rest there," Catalina says.

King shakes his head. "Makes no sense now though. It's months since anyone was here. Hate to sound like a dick, but if your dad did die, he's probably a puddle of liquid and bone by now."

The color drains from Catalina's skin, but she scowls at King. "Lovely visual. Thanks for talking about my fucking father like that. *Estás pero si, bien pendejo.*"

I chuckle. Not many people get away with calling my president a fucking idiot, but given King doesn't speak Spanish, we're all good.

King glares at me. "Something funny?"

I ignore the question.

"What do you want to do with them, Prez?" Bates asks.

"I'm keeping Catalina for a little while," I say.

I'm not sure when I made the decision. Maybe last night when she stood

her ground. Maybe this morning when it was just the two of us and we talked. Maybe it was when she turned all *Street Fighter* on Bates and Clutch.

I wasn't lying when I said it made me hard.

Until approximately three minutes ago, when I saw a red dot appear on the kitchen cupboard behind Catalina's head, I wasn't sure when my club would arrive.

I'm glad to see them, but there's a small twinge of disappointment that it's not just the two of us anymore.

"Like fuck you are," Catalina says. While her words are harsh, her tone is utterly civil.

"Awww. Sweet cheeks. Come on. We were having such a good time."

"Tied to a chair?" Spark says, and Bates chuckles.

"Hey, if Catalina wants to take it in turns with the rope, I'm down with that."

"We can't just take women because we feel like it," King says.

"We can't?" Saint asks, his eyebrow raised, and everyone else chuckles.

"Not sure why this is so fucking funny," Neva says from over my shoulder. Switch has her hands in cable ties.

Switch grins. "Long story."

I touch Cat's cheek with my knuckle. "One day I'll explain it to you. But come back to the clubhouse with us."

"We aren't coming back to your clubhouse," she says.

"They aren't coming back to our clubhouse," Spark says at the exact same time.

"Why the hell not?" I ask.

"Because they are members of an enemy club, because we don't know what their motives are, and we don't know if they have any reinforcement backing them up," Spark replies.

Neva strains against Switch, wriggling out of his hold. "Let go of me. You've made your point."

"Tell your friend to chill the fuck out so we don't have to bury her. And let's see if we can't figure out what happened to your dad together," I say to Cat.

"If you mean that, untie my wrists."

"Can I tie them back up later? When it's just you and me?"

"No."

"If I say *please*?"

She shakes her head. “The answer’s still no.”

“You heard of consent, Niro?” Clutch asks.

“Of course. This is how me and Cat do foreplay.”

“It’s not,” she replies and turns so I can untie her hands.

“Spoilsport.” I put my hands on her elbows and slide my palms down her arms until I reach the rope. She shivers, and I wonder if it’s from my touch or pure adrenaline rush. Her eyes meet mine as she glances over her shoulder, holding my gaze for a beat longer than is healthy.

The rope drops to the floor once I’ve untied the knot.

Catalina shakes her wrists and turns. “So what happens now?”

Spark steps forwards. “We need to question you both. Understand why you are really here.”

“Let me. I’ll get the answers we need,” Bates says.

Switch laughs, and Neva fights against his hold. “Despite the way this one is behaving, they’re still women. We need to treat them with a little bit more respect than you are capable of showing them, Bates.”

Halo has his nose pressed up against the glass, looking out down the driveway. “I’m thinking that even if we don’t take them to the clubhouse, we’re going to need to get out of here. We’ll have drawn some attention on the ride in.”

“Do a search for weapons, then we’ll take them back to the clubhouse,” King says.

“We have some things to pack,” Catalina says.

King turns her way, his intense glare focused on her. “I don’t give a shit about your *things*. All I care about is getting to the bottom of why you are here and understanding the exposure to our club. When you’re done, depending on what you say, you can come back here and get your stuff then.”

“You can stay with me,” I say. “I’ll loan you a T-shirt.”

King’s stare leaves her and finds me. “She’s staying with no one until we understand what’s going on. Remember, she came looking for me. Not you.”

“I’m taking responsibility for her,” I say.

“She’s not a lollipop you licked, Niro,” Vex says.

My eyes meet Catalina’s. “*Yet*. I haven’t licked her *yet*.”

Catalina takes a deep breath; I assume to calm herself. “I don’t need to be anybody’s responsibility. We’ll come with you.” But I see her discretely grab the drawings and stuff them into her back pocket.

“Can you control yourselves enough to ride safely?” King asks.

“Of course,” Catalina says.

“Fine. Let’s go,” King instructs.

“There is no way in hell I’m letting someone else ride my bike,” Catalina says when I climb onto her bike, which I picked out based on the description she gave me earlier. Spark hands me my cut and my leather jacket.

“Considering you kidnapped me and brought me here without my bike, I think it’s only fair that you let me ride back on yours,” I say.

“Fine. But I’ll ride it and you can be my passenger.”

Vex laughs. “Don’t let him ride up front, Cat.”

“Fuck that,” Spark says. “Niro, ride the bike, in case she gets any ideas of driving off mid-column, and so we won’t have to ride after to you. Nothing says staying under the police radar like a highway chase.”

“Stop bickering like a bunch of old women. Cat, get on the back of the fucking bike. Switch, take Neva,” King says.

“Well, this is going to be utterly joyful. If I end up off the road in a ditch somewhere, you’ll know why,” Switch complains.

Bates suddenly lifts Neva up and puts her on the back of Switch’s bike. “Hold on here.” He taps the back of the seat.

“Wait. That’s unsafe,” Neva says.

“Better sit still and not cause any drama then,” Switch says.

“Halo, if Catalina won’t get on with Niro, you take her on your bike.”

Halo grins at me. “My pleasure.”

I throw a punch at Halo, who ducks and manages to dodge the worst of the throw seeing I’m seated. “Fuck you. I’ll take Cat. On her bike.”

“Fuck me,” King mutters.

I lean the bike toward her. “Hop on, cariño.”

“Unless you want me to back up that request with a gun, I suggest you do as the man says,” Spark says. I hadn’t realized he’d come to stand next to me.

“Don’t threaten her,” I say.

“I’ll threaten any motherfucker I think might bring harm to our club. And if you had your head screwed on straight and weren’t thinking with your dick, you’d do the same.”

“He’s right, Niro,” Catalina says with a huff. “You have every reason to be wary of us.”

I shift in my seat and look back at her as she climbs on. “Not you, I don’t.”

“And why’s that?”

“Because we’re the same person. We’re fearless. Strong. Don’t follow the usual script.”

“What’s going to happen to me?”

I hold her gaze for a moment and for the first time, I see the smallest flicker of fear. “Nothing, Cat. I won’t let it.”

Engines rev, and some of my brothers begin to pull out.

Catalina places her hands on my waist, but I reach for and tug on them until they are wrapped around me, her tits up against my back.

“You feel good on the back of my bike,” I say.

“Technically it’s my bike.”

I can’t help but think about how much I like her snark as I pull away.

It takes twenty minutes for us to reach the clubhouse, and as we walk to the fortified building, Bates and I have Catalina between us as Clutch and Switch bring Neva in behind us.

“You wanna be the meat in our sandwich?” Bates asks.

“Asshole.” Catalina’s one-word answer cracks through the cold.

“Not sharing,” I say. “She’s more like the salami on my pizza.”

Catalina shakes her head. “You’re both gross.”

“Separate ’em and question them,” King says.

“I’ll take Cat,” I volunteer.

King huffs a laugh. “You’ll take a shower. You stink. Halo will speak to Cat.”

“Fuck that.”

“We get it,” Halo says. “Cat’s yours.”

“I’m not anyone’s,” she snaps.

“Babe, that’s such an insult to the precious time we already spent together,” I say, then I turn to Halo. “She tells me you got rough with her, I’ll have no problem kicking your ass.”

NIRO

I get to my room and strip. The sooner I'm showered, the sooner I can get back to Catalina.

I dump my clothes outside the bathroom door with every intention of dealing with them once I'm out. The clubhouse is basic in its conditions—when it was built, Venom, my treasurer predecessor, was even tighter on the purse strings than I am. Simple, white shower cubicle, with a toilet and sink. I pay one of the club girls to clean the bathroom for me because I usually don't remember.

When I do, I go on a massive cleaning binge. Tidy my room from top to bottom, but within a week, it's a mess again.

The hot water sluices over me and eases the aches in my body. It chases away the last of the headache, from the booze or the drugs they gave me, I'm not sure. My lower back hurts after all that time tied uncomfortably to a chair. And my dick aches because of Catalina Flores.

While I should just get shampooed and get the fuck out, I slide my palm around my dick. The water from the shower isn't lubricating enough, so I tip some conditioner in my palm.

"Fuck." I hiss as I start to slide from root to tip. My dick is thick, and I like to squeeze it as I jerk off. I let my mind wander to Catalina. The way she spun on that counter to nail Clutch in the side of the head was spectacular. She's wearing leathers and solid black boots with a thick low heel. I switch the details out. Leggings, high-heeled boots.

Can visualize her ass better.

I speed up my strokes as I mentally undress her. I imagine her on her

knees, sucking my cock. I imagine her mouth taking me in. When I imagine her throat closing around me, I tighten my grip. Nothing better than deepthroat. My lower body shudders in response to the visual.

I imagine her standing up, sliding her wet body against mine. I let go of my cock for a minute and slide my palms up my chest, over my nipples, and back down either side of my balls. The finger I run over my asshole feels illicit, the pressure I apply just behind my balls feels so fucking good I almost come without holding my dick.

I grip it again, thrusting into it instead of jerking my hand. Feels more like I'm fucking Catalina than masturbating.

I bet she grips her tits when she rides on top. Bet she doesn't have body hang-ups that would get in the way of an all-day fuck-fest. My breath comes out on a gasp.

Bet she would be down for some no-strings sex before she heads home.

Home for her makes me think of Felipe.

I imagine her fucking him.

It makes me burn. Anger. Fury. Vengeance.

And yet . . . it's hot because it's her.

I imagine I'm behind her, fucking her hard. Her cunt drips for me. I see trails of her cum along my dick. I spit on her asshole and slide my thumb over it.

She groans as I dip my thumb inside, as I press through the thin sheath separating my thumb from my cock until I can feel myself.

"Fuck," I gasp.

It's feels so fucking good, I don't want it to end. I screw my eyes closed, focused on the sensation and my imagination.

When I come, it's with my whole body. Sensations hammer down my spine as my balls throb and cum snakes out of me. Sucking in air, I slam a palm to the bathroom wall to hold me upright as my legs shake and shudders rattle through me.

Jesus. If thinking about Cat and sex makes me come this hard, I can't imagine how fucking good it's going to be when it happens for real. I need to persuade her that we should.

Or maybe I should just show her.

Fuck.

No.

I reach for the shampoo and wash my hair. As I go about my routine, I

think about simply keeping Catalina whether she wants me to or not. I'm lucid enough to know I'm not gonna do that. But here's the thing with having antisocial personality disorder, at least, so I've been told: Failure to conform to societal norms, unbounded arrogance, and difficulty to keep violent tendencies at bay are all normal.

Here's the other thing about ASPD. I don't really care about how I behave or what I do so long as I don't get kicked out of the Outlaws. It's why I'm drawn to this life. It's why I'm valuable to this club. I can kill and clean up without a drop of empathy. I can be who I am without compunction.

And therein is my reason for not having relationships.

I'd do more harm than good. I can manipulate anyone. I'm feared.

When it comes to Catalina, I wish none of those things were true.

I run my hand over my face as I wash it, feeling the long line of the scar that I got the day I saved Camelot, King's dad. The day I involved myself in a knife fight that saved my former president but cost me my sister.

She's dead because of my lack of self-regulation.

I have no family who will talk to me because of my choices, which started long before my sister was killed.

I'm grateful Camelot took me in, helped me out with a place to live when I needed it, as thanks for saving his life.

Otherwise, I would likely have been a homeless minor. But he cleaned it up for me with ultimate discretion, I could never explain to the rest of the club why I'm here.

Because I was young, he didn't even fully entrust me with the truth of how he did it until I was older.

I'm the dirty secret no one understands.

The Iron Outlaws give me an avenue to ease the beasts that rage at times. Fighting with my fists, killing those who deserve it, enough structure that I don't descend into negative spirals.

They even tolerate me when I'm an annoying dick because my mouth runs ahead of me, when I lose my filter and say the shittiest things.

I finish getting cleaned up, wrap a towel around my waist, and step into my room. It's a fucking disaster. My laptop is open, and I realize I didn't finish wrapping up the accounts for this month because I couldn't find two receipts. They're probably at home . . . somewhere. I'm pretty sure I tried to look for them here but found some dirty dishes and took them to the kitchen instead. And once I was in the kitchen, Halo was talking about the game,

which made me decide to look up the next few matches, but there was an email from one of the club's suppliers.

I always leave a half-finished trail behind me.

There's laundry. Two piles. Dirty and clean. I meant to fold them and put them away, but the clean pile is now dwindling as I pull things from it to wear. I've tried setting a weekly reminder on my phone to do shit, but then I'd just switch it off when it beeped.

Maybe I should get one of the girls to do my laundry and put it away.

I'm sure splitting my time between two places, the clubhouse and my home, makes things even harder for me. I leave behind things I need at one place as I head to another. Once, I lived at the clubhouse permanently. Moved in six days after my sister was killed, when I was still a kid myself. I was the only prospect allowed to have a room here. Camelot vetoed every single person who tried to complain. When anybody said a word, he would tell them he didn't give a shit what they thought.

When Camelot's dad, King's grandfather, passed away, he owned two properties. Camelot gave me the smaller one of the two. Just like that. He gave me a fucking house. And if anybody ever wondered why my loyalty to the man was so great, it was because of that. It's why I'll always do whatever King needs. I feel like I owe it to the man who looked after me to look after his son, even if his son doesn't know why.

I stare at the mess. I can't bring Catalina back in here with it looking like this.

I toss the dirty clothes into a large basket, then tug the sheets off the bed. Think I fucked Penny in them two days ago, and no way is Catalina sleeping in that.

I toss them onto the laundry pile.

Piles get tackled one at a time. Financial papers get shoved into folders, cables get organized, I pair up my shoes and line them beneath my bed, which . . . shit, my sneakers have a hole in them. I should buy some new ones. Should have done it at Christmas when all the sales were on. Why are all the big sales clustered around Thanksgiving and Christmas? Why not give us a sale in March for no reason?

I open my phone to check if there are any sales.

Shit, I'm meant to be tidying.

I get back to it.

Halo is with Catalina, and I suddenly feel territorial as fuck. Halo with his

long flowing hair like the hero of some old-school romance books Mom used to read. I wonder if she still reads them.

Halo, the good guy, the veteran, the sensible one. I need to get her away from him.

I pull on some clean clothes . . . jeans, a black T-shirt, my cut.

I need to go to the tattoo studio. We're closed today, but I have some drawings to catch up on for a loyal client coming in this week. Now I'm regretting agreeing to an appointment—usually I make them walk in and take their chances. But he's flying in from out of town just for this.

Urgh.

My brain is on fire right now. Stressful situations can make it worse.

I'm pretty certain getting a shot of truth serum is enough to make anyone feel like a space cadet.

Halo.

Catalina.

I add my belt and pull on my black boots and head out of my room.

Clutch is talking to Neva by the bar. Talking is too polite a word. Clutch asks a question, and Neva replies in a hiss like a trapped cat. Halo has Catalina seated next to him at the long table in King's office. Our church. Her back is to me.

Things seem calm.

My cock, which had been nicely pacified two minutes ago, twitches when I realize she's seated in my chair.

"Don't think about going in there," King says over my shoulder.

"If I think for one second he's being a dick to her, there won't be anyone you can send after me that will be able to stop me."

King huffs. "You realize you sound like a wild man?"

"Says the man who kidnapped Saint's sister to teach him a lesson and is now shackled up with her. She got a magic pussy?"

"Watch how you talk about my old lady," King warns.

"Gotta be the only way you would put up with that mouth of hers."

King cracks his neck from left to right. "Don't test my patience. The sudden caveman routine from you is weird. What's she to you?"

I wish I could see more of her, wish I were in a position to read her body language instead of only seeing the top of her head over the back the chair.

"She's a riddle," I say. "She came here to bring her father back, and she kidnapped me because she thought I was you. Similar descriptions."

King huffs. “We are nothing alike.”

I turn to face him. We’re almost nose to nose. “We’re both about six foot four, both about two-twenty. Both have dark hair. Both have blue eyes. We’re more alike than you wanna admit.”

“Fine. There are *some* similarities. Continue.”

“I already told you. The truth serum. About the mystery of eight men leaving, us burying eight men that didn’t include her father, but two men making it home. You don’t have to be a genius to know that math doesn’t add up.”

“It doesn’t.”

“So, can we help her?” I ask.

“No.”

“No? Why not?”

“Because she’s not our problem, Niro. Los Reyes needs to be filling in the gaps for her. Not us. We’ve got enough shit to worry about.”

“You and I both know it’s not the same. The club is barely telling her anything. She had to sleep with the president’s son to get the intel to come here. And it’s not like she can go back and ask them. If her club did kill her father, for whatever reason, her asking more questions is going to tip someone off that she’s making inquiries. How is that going to work out for her?”

King places his hand on my shoulder. “It’s still none of our business. I don’t want to get in a cross-country pissing contest with Los Reyes. And I’m surprised this all means so much to you. You normally don’t give a shit about how anyone feels.”

“I’m surprised too,” I admit. The words just blurt out.

“Magic pussy?” King asks.

“Fuck you.”

He laughs.

“Fine,” I say. “I want the chance to find out before she heads back.”

“So it’s just about sex?”

I look down at the floor. My thoughts are scattered. I have too much energy again. The tops of my thighs start to itch. “No,” I force out.

“You like her.”

“Fuck. I don’t know. Yes. Maybe.”

“At least admit to what you’re feeling. Halo said the same thing to me when things started to change between me and Rae. What is she to you?”

“I wish I knew. Is she a puzzle I want to solve? Do I want to fuck her? Do I want her to leave? I haven’t got answers for you. When you grabbed Rae from her living room and told her she was going with us, did you know . . . didn’t you want . . . fuck. Can’t even form a sentence. Did you feel anything for her in that very first meeting?”

King smiles. “How could I not? I’d never met anyone like her. But the need for vengeance was greater than anything else. She grew on me really fucking fast though.”

She grew on me really fucking fast though.

I feel the same way and I can’t explain it. But King loves Rae, I’ve seen it. Is that where Cat and I could end up? Is that what I actually want? “So when you knew, you knew.”

King slaps me on the shoulder. “Yeah. When I knew Rae was the one for me, I knew. But I’m a really shit example of how to find your woman. Doubt my way of doing it would work for anyone else.”

CATALINA

“I don’t know what else to tell you,” I say as Halo asks me for more details than I have.

Halo tugs his hair into an elastic. “Sweetheart, you’re clearly a woman with a very different set of skills.”

“Thank you,” I say. It’s rare someone notices.

“Normal people don’t pull Krav Maga moves that immobilize two bikers, who both weigh double what you do, with the kind of ease you did.”

“You clearly never attended a Krav Maga class.”

“No. But I was a Navy SEAL. How you moved takes commitment to training. Which makes me think it’s protection for you. Because you’re somehow wrapped up in Los Reyes club business.”

I try to respect those who served, even when they are being a total douche canoe. The fact he was a Navy SEAL helps me temper my next question. “You know one of the things that really infuriates me about bikers?” I ask, the blood in my veins reaching boiling point.

“Can’t wait to hear this one.”

“You’re hypocrites who peddle double standards. You won’t let a woman join an MC because, Dios mío, you can’t live like free birds with a woman on your team or some shit. Like women members couldn’t see past the club pussy. Or that our very presence in the club would cause a distraction. But, as soon as the woman learns any kind of skills, she becomes useful. She suddenly holds some value for the club. Not useful enough that she’s worth cutting in on the life. But useful enough that she can help you protect it from the outside. Now, when she’s taken by an enemy club, one filled with men

with those exact same values, you all assume she must be a part of the rival club. Do you have any patched-in women?"

Halo scoffs. "Of course not."

"Then why would you assume Los Reyes let me join theirs either?"

"You make some good points."

I fold my arms. "Of course I do. You're sexist, misogynistic, and patriarchal. I am not a member of Los Reyes because I'm not allowed to be. I can ride as well as any man, I can fight as well as any man, and I have a remarkably flexible moral compass. What I don't have is a dick."

"Why don't you start your own club?"

It's always the answer . . . start your own club. "Because the majority of women's clubs are not taken seriously as one percenters. They're usually regarded for their community work, for the fundraising they do. I have my own skills. So does my friend. We do our own thing with them. For hire."

"Which brings us full circle. How do we know you're not here trying to use those skills? That you haven't been hired to kill King?"

At this I roll my eyes. "Güey, I had hours to kill Niro, if that were what I was hired to do. *Hours*. I could have killed him in your yard because you were all too drunk in here to notice one of your men had walked away. I could have driven him to the shore and held him face down in the ocean. I could have injected him with enough chemicals to melt his insides. I could have used any of the weapons I brought with me and diced him up into pieces so small, you would've never found a trace of him."

"But it still makes no sense why you are here. Why come all this way?"

"You have a dad?" I ask Halo, thinking of a different way to play this.

A loud belch filters in from the bar, and Halo laughs. "That was my dad." He points to a man with wild wiry gray hair and a denim shirt stretched at the seams.

"If he went out on a ride, and never came back, and all you were told was that he died en route, would you stop trying to find out what happened?"

Halo thinks about my question. "No. I wouldn't."

"That's all this is. My father is missing, likely dead. No one will tell me why. I can't live with that. And I promised my father I would return his ashes home. When I first asked the club about his whereabouts, it was simply so I could find him. In all honesty, I assumed whatever happened to him was dangerous and life-threatening to the club. That maybe, for their own safety, they had to leave my dead father behind. I tried to make my peace with it,

that my dad had died for a cause he believed in. That he'd died out with his club and his bike, and while he'd rather be alive, he'd probably be okay with his end. But over time, the club's reluctance to tell me where he was became an issue. And I got mad that they made no attempt to go back to retrieve him in the aftermath. Having spoken to Niro, I'm even more determined to get to the bottom of what happened."

Halo draws circles on the table with his fingertips. "Your club gave you good advice though. It was ballsy and reckless to kidnap the man you thought was our president."

I shrug. "Would you shy away from finding out the truth?"

His eyes meet mine. They're more green than blue. He's an attractive man, though not in the same way Niro is. "No. I'd go to the end of the earth for my family."

"Then why do you seem surprised I'd do the same?"

"You know this could get you killed, right?"

I shake my head. "Will you stop speaking to me like I don't understand all this? I've lived my entire life surrounded by the club. The code. Death. This was not some emotional decision, to drive halfway across the country. It was calm. Deliberate. Meticulous." I lean back in the chair and get a faint whiff of Niro's scent. "Speaking of which, how did you know we took him?"

"Vex. We have the place and street outside covered with cameras. And all our phones and bikes have GPS trackers in them now."

"Shit."

"You're lucky we had a party that night and everyone was half cut with alcohol."

"We cased the place for an hour before. There was no one on patrol outside. Los Reyes have club security. Do you not?"

"You realize you talk about Los Reyes as if it *was* your club. *We* have club security."

"I'm theirs when they want me to be."

"Must be a tough spot to be in."

"Tougher than you know."

"We have a security patrol. The two prospects who were supposed to be on duty outside decided to slip into the party and drink while no one was paying attention."

"I'm assuming they are no longer prospects."

Halo grins. "You assume correctly. I probably shouldn't tell you this, but

we have them somewhere secure so Niro can have the pleasure of kicking them out.”

“Is that a euphemism for kicking them out of life altogether?”

“That would be telling you more than you need to know.”

“For what it’s worth, we would have picked up Niro down the block, even if they had been on duty.”

We sit in silence for a moment. Not awkward. I wonder where Niro is. I don’t like the idea that I might end up joining the two former prospects. But I feel confident I could negotiate with Niro to leave with my life.

“I don’t know where my father is. And as I told you, Felipe, the son of our president, told me he had ridden here with them five months ago. But according to Niro, my father never made it into the clearing. Niro said he’d try to help me figure out what happened to him.”

Halo tips his chin toward my phone, which had been taken from me and was now sitting in the center of the table. “You got a picture of him on there.”

“Yes.”

“Let me see it.”

I do as he asks, then Halo walks outside the room with my phone. Do I like the idea that members of an opposing club have my phone? No. But it’s not like there’s anything particularly incriminating on there. Club photos are probably the only thing. They’d see images of the members. Through the window, I see Halo showing the phone to King. Niro gesticulates wildly next to them both. I can’t hear the words, but I feel like he’s backing me up.

It’s a strange sensation to know someone has my back. Stranger still to find him among my enemy.

It feels good to know someone is on my side.

Niro walks into the room and grabs me by the elbow. “We’re getting some food.”

“Wait, I need to speak to Neva.”

But he doesn’t stop. At first, he leads me by the elbow through the bar, but then his hand slides down my arm until he’s holding my hand as we walk into the kitchen. It takes me a moment to realize, and when I do, I quickly whip my hand out of his.

“You kidnapped me, drugged me, and tied me up . . . you at least owe me holding my hand,” Niro says.

Saint is in the kitchen, and he chuckles. “You know that’s not how

relationships work, right? Assuming that's what the whole hand-holding thing is about."

"We're not in a relationship," I say.

"Yet," Niro adds.

I place my palms on the counter. "This whole situation is wild."

"What's up?" Clutch says, as he pulls the fridge open. He's holding an icepack to the side of his face and his vice-president patch gives me momentary regret for my choices. VPs hold a lot of power.

"Sorry about that," I say.

Clutch looks at me for a second, undecided in his view of me, I suspect, then he sighs. "All's fair in love and war, yeah?"

I like his response, so I nod once. There's a vibe to this club. The men are tough, but not hardened. I can't explain the difference to their edges. They could have killed me and Neva, but they haven't.

"How come he gets an apology after being kicked in the head, but I don't get an apology for being abducted, tied up, and injected with shit?" Niro says as he throws down two large rolls that look like oversized bolillos.

I tip my head in Clutch's direction. "Because he's being stoic about it and not telling me I owe it to him to hold his hand."

Saint rather annoyingly ruffles my hair. "I think I'm going to like you, Catalina."

Clutch huffs. "Jury's still out over here, but you get bonus points for pointing out Niro's being a pussy."

"I'm not a fan of *pussy* being used in that context," I say.

"I'm not a big fan of being kicked in the head, but here we are. In my clubhouse," Clutch replies.

Saint takes his coffee and follows Clutch out of the kitchen.

"So, what happens now?" I ask.

Niro rustles around in the fridge and grabs an armful of ingredients. "Well, first I'm gonna slice the hoagies open, and then I'm going to chop up some peppers and shit."

"Okay, first, what's a hoagie? And that's not what I meant."

Niro lifts the bread. Flirtation is written all over his face. His eyes flash with it. "If you're from Jersey, it's a *hoagie*. The rest of the world calls it a *sub*."

"Everywhere else that speaks American English. I mean, the world has nearly eight billion people on it, and I bet a quarter, maybe a half a billion

people speak American English.”

Niro just looks at me, his mouth slightly open. “What?”

“You just spoke as if the rest of the world speaks your version of English.”

Biting down on his lower lip, he thinks for a moment. “Am I in trouble? Because this feels a lot like school when Mrs. Green used to tell me I was talking shit.”

I laugh. “No teacher ever told you you were talking shit.”

Niro slices the hoagie. “Got told I was dumb as dirt once too. Yet somehow, I stay on top of the finances of the club.”

“You’re the treasurer?”

“I am.”

“Wow. Big job.”

He shifts to chopping the peppers and cucumbers and round, ripe tomatoes. The tangy scent of them hits the air as he slices. “Boring as fuck. Would rather be enforcer or something.”

“I know about wanting something different than what you have. I wanted to join Los Reyes. Change their mind about accepting women. I think I had convinced Papá, but we knew we’d never get it through Perrito. He still has too much of the old-school Mexican machismo—women should keep house, make babies, and keep quiet when their husband fucks other chicas on the side.”

Niro places the knife down on the counter and studies me earnestly. “You really want to join the club?”

“I live in hope of finding one who’ll accept me.” I reach and touch the skull and crossbones on his patch. “Respect Few, Fear None.”

We both know what it means. That we’re people who have killed for our clubs.

He places his palm over my hand, holding it pressed to his chest. For a moment, I let him, wondering just how far I’d let him go.

“If you’re not trying to give me a boner, you should stop telling me your secrets, Catalina.”

I pull my fingertips away, missing the heat immediately. “I just want to do things that make me feel alive, Niro. Is that too hard for any man to understand?”

NIRO

I slam the knife down on the counter and place both my hands on the edge. “On a scale of one to ten, how offended would you be if I hauled you onto this counter and fucked you?”

Catalina’s eyes flare with interest, but she doesn’t immediately answer.

“I’m serious,” I say. “I’m trying to bury this thing, this *tension*, between us but it’s not working.”

“I figured you were,” she replies, but there’s a huskiness to her tone. “For all the same reasons I am.”

I feel the need to explain all the reasons it makes sense. She’s fit as fuck—and not gonna lie, so am I. So why shouldn’t two bodies like ours meet their equals? I like her mouth, the way she purses it when she’s thinking, like she’s doing right now.

Tits. Obviously. But that’s more a reason for me than her.

Plus, it would be a good release to all the tension that’s existed between us for the past twenty-four hours.

Except. “It’s a bad idea, right?”

“It would just be sex, right?” she asks.

Yeah. Reason three hundred and seventy-six why I want to fuck this chick who kicks ass, takes names, and doesn’t give a shit that she’s killed people.

“Just sex. We all know you’re going back to Barstow eventually. If it helps you decide, I’m really fucking desperate to feel that cunt of yours around my cock.”

Catalina tips her head to one side. “You got more of that dirty talk?”

“I’ve got more of anything that will turn you on.”

“Then let’s do it.”

I’ve often wondered what it feels like in the exact moment you find out you won the Powerball. One of those mega lotteries with a billion bucks in it. Like, you walk into the store or call the number or whatever, and then whoever you speak to confirms what you thought you knew.

You’re a winner.

Your life changes in an instant.

And as Catalina stands from the stool and tugs her hoodie over her head, I recognize the feeling. Your stomach drops with the holy shit-ist feeling. Your chest tightens. And your cock gets really fucking hard.

Wait, that last part probably doesn’t happen when you win the Powerball, but watching Catalina walk toward me is making my cock punch my denim.

She tugs her T-shirt over her head and reveals a black lace bra, and for a moment, I’m poleaxed.

“You gonna stand there and watch like a voyeur, or are you going to join in?”

It’s broad daylight. It’s morning. I’m hungry. Not sure I want everyone to see her getting railed by me as much as I want everyone to know I’m fucking her. It’s a quandary I don’t overthink. I simply hook a finger under the bra between her breasts and tug her to me.

“Can’t wait to taste every part of you, starting with these.” I brush my thumb over her lips before I allow my mouth to touch hers.

One taste and I know she’s different, and I got a problem.

Because one kiss is not going to be enough. I want more. I want to rip her apart and put her back together again. I slide my hands around her, letting them trail up and down the bare skin of her back. She’s got soft, warm, and utterly virgin skin I want to scar as much as I want to ink. I want to leave a permanent memory that for a brief moment she was mine and I was hers.

Something indelible.

Something she’ll have to explain to Felipe if she returns to his bed.

Her hand creeps into my hair as we fall into each other.

I reach between us for the button of her leathers and pop it open. I’m waiting for the moment she tells me we aren’t fucking here in the public kitchen. But she doesn’t.

None of the brothers think twice about fucking one of the club girls wherever they want to.

It seems Catalina is the same.

Wait, does this make me the club girl in this scenario?

Hell, I'll be anything she wants me to be if it ends with my cock inside her.

Lowering the zipper, I allow my knuckle to drag along her underwear. Her eyes never leave mine, and what hot fucking eyes they are. They're the kind that suck you in and spit you out again. There are depths and secrets I'm never going to understand.

I slide my hand beneath her panties. She's smooth. So fucking smooth. No hair. When I reach her cunt, she's already dripping, and I bathe my middle finger in her juices before I slide inside her.

Catalina gasps, and I kiss her again. I want to inhale her need. "Love the way you're clamping down on my finger. Can only imagine how hard you're gonna squeeze my cock." The words are mumbled against her mouth.

I slip my hand from between her legs and rub my juiced-up finger over her lips. Her tongue darts out and lazily traces her lower lip.

"Fuck," I groan and kiss her again. It's messy, and I want that taste of her all over my tongue. I lick her upper lip and swirl my tongue around her mouth. She meets me beat for beat.

In an unexpected tenderness, she kisses where my scar crosses my lip.

Catalina shoves my cut off my shoulders. Usually, I treat it with more respect than letting it hit the floor, but the desire pulsing through me is greater than my need to stop and pick it up. I help her get my T-shirt over my head, then remove her bra, and suddenly our upper bodies are skin to skin. Tawny nipples rub against my chest.

"I want inside you," I gasp, shoving her leathers down her thighs.

It's a miracle no one has come into the kitchen and seen us. The idea we might get caught is a turn-on. Hell, I'm enough of an exhibitionist not to care if someone sees me shoving my cock into the hottest woman to ever grace this building.

I lift her onto the counter. We're a tangled mess, but I don't have the self-control to remove her boots and leathers. Catalina reaches for my jeans, unzips me, and frees my cock. With a grip that threatens to make me come before I've even gotten inside her, she eases her hand up and down my length.

"I love how nice and thick you are," she says looking up at me from beneath long, dark eyelashes.

She looks different right now.

Softer.

The woman who kicked ass earlier today got me worked up. This version of Catalina, the one sitting on the counter, waiting for me to fuck her, is a whole other ball game. This one has the power to undo me, of that I'm certain. I just can't let her.

"I love that you're so fucking tight. I'm gonna slide into you nice and slow. Inch by inch. Until we're both so desperate, so fucking aroused that we can't wait. I'm gonna make you come fast, then make you come slow while I pump you full of my cum."

"Please," she begs. "Wait. Condom."

Fuck, I want her bareback, something I never do, but I do as she says. I tug a condom out of my wallet, then throw the wallet down.

It's a fumble to get it on. Wouldn't go as far as to say it's nerves, but definitely anticipation. I cup my hands behind her ass and slide her forward so she's just perched on the very edge of the counter, and I step right up into her space to stop her from falling off.

I slide my palm around her neck, then squeeze it gently, before releasing her and dragging my hand between the dip of her breasts. Her nipples are tight buds, asking to be sucked on, but the time for that will come.

I look down to ease my cock into her hole. And I do as I promise, nudging my cock into her opening. No more than an inch.

"Oh, fuck," I gasp.

Just this far and it feels like heaven. As I slide the tip out again, her lips drag over my cock. I'm coated in her juices.

"Again, Niro," she begs, rolling her hips. I love the sound of my name on Catalina's lips as much as I loved the taste of her on them.

I nudge forward, still looking down. This time I ease in farther. It's hard to stop myself from ramming home. But you only get one first time with a woman like Catalina Flores, and I want the experience of it to be etched in both our memories.

Catalina slides her hands around my ass, digging her short nails into my skin. I love the burst of pain. "Love the way you're greedy for my cock already."

My legs begin to shake. I want more of her. And yet, I need to prove to myself that I'm in control of my body, not the other way around. I can be slow. I can make this last. I don't have to hurry despite the part of my brain

yelling at me to just fuck her already.

“Give it to me, Niro.”

This time, I slide about half my length in. Now I can feel that squeeze. The tightening. Her pussy is fucking heaven. I take her chin and kiss her, softer this time.

She moves her hips, trying to take more of me, and I pull out.

I wonder if winning the Powerball makes people as desperate for their next breath as fucking Catalina does. I wonder if winning makes them feel as big and as tall as knowing I’m giving Cat what she needs.

I’m reckless with the next stroke, giving her more than I intended for both our sakes. Three quarters. I’m long and horny as fuck.

“Cat,” I gasp, and cup her cheek.

Her eyes are wide, her mouth open. I don’t even kiss her. Just look at her as I withdraw and slide fully home.

“Niro,” she gasps.

“Yeah, baby. I felt that too.” So much so, I need a minute to peel myself back from the edge of coming way too soon. We stay there for a moment before she pulls me flush to her.

“I really need that orgasm,” she says against my ear. The whisper of her breath and the illicit words make me shiver.

I wrap my arms tightly around her; she does the same to me. There’s barely any distance between us, and I begin to fuck her in earnest.

Our upper bodies barely move, but I rail her with my hips. Over and over. Wanting to experience every glorious second she allows me inside her like this, but trying to not overthink it so I can last.

I curve my hips upwards, hitting her at a different angle.

“Like that,” she gasps as I bite down on her neck. She tugs on my shoulders, trying to get higher, but I hold her in place. I don’t change a single thing because this is doing it for her.

“Oh, Dios,” she mutters, and then I feel it. I feel Catalina fall apart in my arms. Her movements are out of control. Her sounds are somewhere between moans and soundless screams. Everything about her tightens and releases.

My cock is in seventh heaven, but I don’t come yet.

I ease her down gently, take us back to a slow and steady slide.

“Fuck me, all I wanted was a coffee, not a fucking peep show.” Bates stands in the doorway facing me.

Catalina flinches in my arms. All he can see is Catalina’s back and half

her ass, but it's still too much. I pick up the knife I was going to use to cut the hoagies. "Get the fuck out and keep everyone else out." To reinforce my point, I throw the knife. It hits the wall, six inches to the side of his head.

"Fuck me, you psychopath."

He knows I hate that word, but I'll forgive him. And he'll forgive me. Best friends always do.

"Should we take this somewhere else?" Catalina asks.

"No," I decide and start to move my hips again. "You gonna give me another orgasm? Gonna coat my cock in more of your cum, babe?"

I dip my thumb in her wetness and drag it up over her clit. "How do you like it? Circles?" I draw them over her clit, around and around. "Or back and forth?" I change my action, rubbing upwards and back down.

"Circles," she gasps. "I don't always come twice."

"I'll take that as a challenge. Tell me what you need to get you there."

"This. And the way you were fucking me before."

I do as she asks. And this time, I let myself revel in all of it. The musky scent of her. The way she hugs my cock with her pussy. The way she gasps and the feel of her puffs of breath as they hit my neck. The way her body fits against mine as if she were made for me. She rests her forehead on my shoulder.

I increase my speed. Sometime soon, I'm gonna become a selfish fucking asshole and allow myself to come even if she hasn't.

I'm probably sixty seconds away from that breaking point.

"Oh, Niro," she gasps.

"Yeah, you feel so fucking good, babe. Can feel your cunt tugging on me. You want my cum, babe? One day I'm gonna fuck you without this condom. And you're going to walk around all day with the reminder of me dripping out of you slowly."

"Please," Catalina gasps. She slams a palm down onto the counter and raises her hip slightly. It changes the angle, to a place I have no fucking control of anymore.

I just need this release.

Need this moment with her.

"Fuck, milk me, Cat," I urge. "I'm so close."

I feel it in the ache in my balls, the electricity flowing down my spine.

"Dios. I'm coming," Cat gasps.

And this time, I join her, coming in violent waves that rip my soul from

my body.

And like a slap to the face, I realize that no one else will ever be as perfect for me as Catalina Flores.

And that I will never be the perfect man for her.

CATALINA

I just fucked an Iron Outlaw.
In the Iron Outlaw clubhouse.
In the kitchen.

We were seen.

What the hell is wrong with me?

And yet . . .

I can't seem to move out of Niro's arms, which hold me so tightly, I feel the faintest whisper of safety. Not the kind of safety that comes from knowing I can take care of myself. Not the kind of safety that comes from my association with a motorcycle club.

But the kind of safety I found when Mamá used to hug me in the morning.

The kind of safety that comes from your own home, when your father isn't there telling you to grow up, to be strong, to hide it when you get scared.

Tears sting my eyes, and I blow out a breath and look up at the ceiling, willing them not to appear.

No, this is just the side effect of a stressful couple of days, limited sleep, and a stellar pair of orgasms. Not the tug of wanting to belong in yet another place I won't be welcome.

"You okay, Cat?" Niro asks, placing a row of kisses behind my ear.

I swallow deeply, forcing all the emotions swirling around inside me back into their boxes, where I can control them. When I was younger, my emotions bled all over everywhere. Home. School. The clubhouse. Dad told me the secret to life was to be measured at all times. Never to let anyone

know what I was really feeling. Mentally, I get a handle on myself and visualize locks closing.

“I’m good. Thanks.” I push him away and drop down off the counter.

“Let me,” Niro says, moving to pull up my leathers, but I grab them.

“I’ve got it.” I shimmy them up my hips with my underwear and fasten them both. Glancing around, I find my bra hooked over the knob on the oven. I turn my back to Niro as I fasten it. I don’t need his help. I’ve managed just fine on my own for so long that letting him do something as simple as fastening my buttons feels like an invasion of my space.

Which, given the way we just fucked, is messed up.

By the time I’ve pulled my T-shirt back over my head, Niro has removed and dealt with the condom, and I’m back in control. “I want to check on Neva. And then I want to leave.”

Niro reaches for his T-shirt and pulls it over his head. When he’s done, he places his hands on my biceps. “Two more minutes before we move on.”

He leans in to kiss me again, but I put my hand out. “No. We had sex. It was great. Now we need to go and figure out what your club knows about my father.”

What I really want is to do as he says. To lean into him for those two minutes before I become me again and put this momentary weakness behind me. Instead, I grab my hoodie and tug it over my head, needing the warmth of it to shore up my defenses.

I tug the knife out of the wall and place it on the counter.

“At least let me make you a sandwich,” Niro says.

He’s trying to be nice.

Fine, I’ll play along. “I’m hungry. But I’m worried about my friend.”

Niro pulls on the rest of his clothes, then grabs his phone. “Can you bring Cat’s friend to the kitchen? . . . No, we’re done . . . Fuck off.” He ends the call. “Bates is going to figure it out with King. Just have some fucking food. You must be starving.”

I sit back on the stool. “Can I help?”

“Just let me feed you.”

I watch as he cleans the counter then makes the hoagies like he’s chiseling the Venus de Milo. Buns are sliced perfectly down the middle. He starts assembly, every piece of meat precisely laid.

“Fuck,” he mutters.

“What?”

“Forgot to put the mayo on the bottom.”

“So put it on the top.”

“Then the oregano sticks to it in clumps instead of being even.”

“You’re putting oregano on the sub?”

Niro grins. “No, I’m putting oregano on the hoagie.”

“Why do you Americans butcher every meal source there is? Pasta, oh, let’s make a vat of it and make it swim in sauce. Pizza, let’s treble the crust and stuff cheese inside it. Appetizers, how about we treble the size of them too so they’re big enough for a full meal? And don’t even get me started on restaurant-style guacamole.”

“We do it because the sauce on pasta is the best bit. And isn’t everything better with cheese? And if something tastes good, why wouldn’t you want a shit ton of it? And you win on the guacamole. There’s nothing quite like the guacamole I had in Cabo a couple of summers ago.”

“You should taste my mamá’s.” If I close my eyes and focus, I can taste it. “Chunky ripe avocados. Perfectly tart salsa Mexicana with lime, serrano peppers, tomato, onion, salt, and cilantro. It’s the best. She’s shared her recipe with me, but mine never tastes as good as hers.”

Niro glances out of the kitchen window to the gray sky. “Now you’re making me want some sun, a nice cold beer, and some guac.” He turns back to face me. “And maybe you in a tiny bikini all rubbed in oil.”

I roll my eyes. “Not gonna happen.”

“Which bit?”

“All of it.”

“Bet I could persuade you.” He slides the finished meal across the counter. It’s different than the bland sub I ate the previous evening. Tastier. Fresher.

I glance up at him. “I’ll be gone as soon as you help me figure out what happened to my father. There’ll be no beach. No beer and guac. And certainly no me covered in oil. Ever heard of sunscreen?”

Niro grins. “You have absolutely no idea how persistent I can be.”

“And you have no idea how stubborn I can be.”

I’m halfway through my lunch before what feels like the whole club descends on the kitchen.

“Awww, look, he made her food, like those crows you can train to leave you shiny gifts,” Clutch says.

“Fuck off,” Niro says, but his eyes stay fixed on me.

I look around and see Neva. “Estás bien?”

Neva simply tips her chin.

I offer her the rest of my sub and she shakes her head.

“You both told the exact same story,” King says. “Either you planned for this eventuality, or you’re telling the truth. I’m inclined to believe it’s the latter. You’re free to go. We’ll take you back to where you were staying, then escort you over state lines. Go home.”

“We should get out of here,” Neva says.

“No.” I stand. “We came here to find out what happened to my father.”

King steps toward me. “He’s dead. Any which way you paint it. He didn’t come back to you. We didn’t kill him, so he’s not buried here. There’s no polite way of saying this, but no matter where he was buried, his body has probably decomposed.”

I hate the idea that this is a dead end. And I’ve got no idea what I should do now. “But maybe you can help me figure this out. Niro drew me the three extra guys you buried, maybe we—”

“Show me,” King says.

I pull them from my back pocket and unfold them. King walks toward the window and studies them for a second before pulling his lighter from his back pocket, setting fire to them, and dropping them into the sink.

“No,” I gasp, before I remember I took a photograph of it and sent it to my mamá already. Relief washes through me.

King ignores me and looks at Niro. “For fuck’s sake, Niro. Why would you put your fucking fingerprints all over a piece of paper on which you hand drew people we killed? Didn’t we just get you out of one mess?”

I hate to admit it, but King’s logic makes sense.

Niro looks down at the ground, but I see the side of his jaw twitch in anger. “Except I didn’t get myself into that mess. Everyone’s favorite preacher got me into that mess, right, Saint?”

His eyes lock onto Saint, and I wonder what the problem is between the two of them.

“I asked him while he was still under the effects of the drug I used on him.” I don’t need to tell King it was hours later. Neva knows the truth, but I don’t make eye contact with her. “You can’t blame him for anything he did while he was under the influence. He didn’t stand a chance against it. It’s why it’s so effective.”

“Fuck me.” King turns to Switch. “Can you do a blood test or something,

figure out what to give Niro so we know he's back to his usual messed-up self?"

Neva huffs. "No need. I can tell you the drug and its dose. It was sodium thiopental. Slows your processing down." I'm glad my girl has my back. "Should be out of his system"—she looks at the clock hanging on the wall dramatically as if calculating it, when she and I both know it only lasts hours—"anytime now."

Niro's head is down again, but he checks me out of the corner of his eye. I'd give anything to know what he's thinking right now.

"You all need to get the fuck out of this clubhouse," King says. He tips his chin to Vex, who hands back our phones. "Go back to that rental of yours, pack up your shit, and get out of here. Los Reyes killed my father and we don't owe you shit."

"My pleasure," Neva says as she swipes her phone from Vex's hand. "Come on, Cat."

I look at Niro who nods once.

The club killed his father.

No wonder he hates me. "I'm sorry. I had nothing to do with that. But hopefully knowing how it feels to lose a parent will help you understand why I need to find the truth about my own. I want to stay. I want to share what we've established and see if any of you remember anything that might help us find him."

Spark steps forward. "Not gonna happen. Halo shared with us what you told him. Niro helped you as far as he can. You gotta get out of here."

Niro steps forward and almost chest bumps Spark. "She leaves when I say so."

"As sergeant at arms, I believe it's in the best interests of club security that both these women leave."

Niro moves even closer to Spark, so close that it's as if their noses are touching. "Didn't see you rushing the Irish chick out when she arrived here all shot up. In fact, I seem to recall you acting like a lovestruck cunt when she was bleeding on our pool table."

Spark is remarkably calm. "Iris was never a member of her uncle's organization."

Niro scoffs. "Yeah, but we didn't know that at the time, did we? And Cat isn't a member of Los Reyes."

"Sounds like that's a fucking technicality," Spark says.

Halo steps between the two of them. “Okay, boys, back it up.”

Bates starts singing that song about backing it up like a Tonka trunk. Niro snarls but doesn’t move until Halo shoves at his chest.

“Cat says she wants to stay until she figures this out, she gets to stay with me.” Without turning to face me, he reaches out his hand. I glance at it for a moment, but then I take it. And when I do, that same feeling of security hits me like it did before.

And while I don’t understand it, I want the feeling to last just a little while longer.

NIRO

“**F**uck me,” King mutters beneath his breath. “Fine. But she’s your responsibility. Anything that happens from now on is your cost. She can’t be here during church. And if we find out anything she has said so far is a lie, I’ll take her out to the shed and kill her myself. The other one has to leave, though.”

“My name is Neva. Not *other one*,” Neva says.

“Fine,” I agree. Because I just had the best fuck I’ve had in a long time, and Catalina Flores is not just hopping onto the back of that bike of hers and riding off into the sunset.

“Wrong call, Prez,” Spark says.

“Seem to recall you punched me so hard, I fell off the back of a stool because I laughed at you calling your woman *Little Chick*. Can’t imagine what you would have done if I’d tried to kick her out,” I say.

“Stop talking about Iris,” Spark says.

“Or what? Should we talk about all the stalking you did before Prez followed you and called you out on your shit? Or how the club found out you’d been fucking her after an explicit order from your Prez to leave her alone?”

Spark grabs my shirt in his fist.

“Don’t hit him,” King shouts. “You know how he gets.”

If shame were an emotion I felt, I’m sure I’d feel it now, but I don’t. Spark’s asking for this.

I remember the doctor I got sent to when I was thirteen—an attempt to keep me out of jail for attempting to steal a car. My mom sat there as he told

us the manual on mental disorders confirmed I had antisocial personality disorder. He listed that I had a pervasive pattern of disregard for the violation of others' rights, including failure to conform to societal norms, and deceitfulness for profit and pleasure. He also threw in my chronic level of impulsivity, heightened by my ADHD, that gave no concern for negative impacts, *and* an absolute indifference to showing any kind of remorse. While it couldn't be confirmed until I was eighteen, all the signs were there.

It was a word soup that basically said the world already saw me as an asshole.

Did they ask me why I tried to steal the car? No.

If they had, I probably wouldn't have told them. It was because I hated that we were so poor, mom had a two-hour commute thanks to the bus and train network. It just didn't occur to me that the person I stole the car from might've needed it too.

Despite King's words, Spark does not remove his hand.

Catalina grabs his wrist and jabs her short fingernails into it.

"Your president said to not hit him," she says.

"You better let go, bitch," Spark says.

Rage drenches me. I pull my arm and am about to swing when Halo and Bates grab me around the waist and shoulders. Clutch pulls Spark back. "Call her a bitch again," I shout. "I fucking dare you."

Spark clenches his fist. "Says the guy who can't keep my old lady's name out of his mouth."

"Enough," King yells.

Occasionally, I feel like I'm standing outside one of those snow globes. Everyone else is inside, living some fantastical perfect life. And looking in is the closest I can get to feeling anything like they do. And as I look around the kitchen, I feel it now. I shake Bates and Halo off me. "I'm fine," I mutter. "But Cat is staying, and you just have to get used to it."

A warm palm rubs small circles on my back. The hand is too small to be Bates or Halo, and I realize Cat is by my side. The hand is hers. "Venga lo que venga," she whispers.

Come what may.

I glance down at her and wink.

Suddenly I feel peaceful again. And when I look up, there are puzzled looks on the faces of the men around me. Only Bates grins.

"I don't know what's in the fucking water, but I'm gonna stop drinking

it,” Halo says.

Vex chuckles. “You and me both, brother.”

“What?” I ask.

Switch looks at me, then Catalina, then back to me. “Less than twenty-four hours.”

“I’m fucking confused. Less than twenty-four hours until what?”

“Off you all go. I’ll clue the useless one in,” Bates says.

“Let’s get out of here, please, Cat.” Neva turns and walks out of the kitchen.

“I’m just going to talk with Neva, but I’m not leaving,” Cat says to me.

She pats my back before she follows them out of the kitchen. Finally, it’s just me and Bates. “What the fuck was all that about?” I ask him as he mooches in the fridge, grabs a carton of leftover Chinese food, and sniffs it.

“Twenty-four hours ago, you were blowing up balloons, shitting on King’s attempts to hold a birthday party for his old lady. Catalina’s not a shiny new toy you can just grab and claim as yours. You know that’s not how shit works, right?” He grabs a fork and bites into the noodles.

My head spins for a minute as I place me and Cat on a timeline of hours that seems inconsequential but already feels like forever. How can it be less than twenty-four hours since we met? That makes no sense. I’ve already won her over, fucked her, right where Bates is sitting. Now I’m worried that Neva is out in the bar convincing Cat to leave with her.

“It feels like a lifetime,” I say out loud, unintentionally.

Bates raises an eyebrow. “What happened to never falling for a woman, that your condition made it impossible for you?”

I blanch at that. “I never said anything about falling for Catalina. I just think I can help her.”

My heart thuds traitorously in my chest. It must be the drugs Neva pumped into my body. Perhaps they haven’t all left yet. There can’t be a different reason. One that isn’t a biological function.

“I beg to differ. You were about to go postal on Spark’s ass for calling this woman you are *just helping* a bitch, when you and I both know you call women a lot of other shit.”

I place my palms on the edge of the counter and brace my arms, taking my weight in them until my shoulders burn. Which reminds me, those tattoo sketches never got finished, and I haven’t been to the gym in a while. If I’ve got any clean gym shit. I think about folding my laundry.

And Cat coming to my room. Or my house. Or my life.
Or leaving.

My mom always made cookies when someone came to visit.

I should make cookies and—

“Niro.”

“Do we have any sugar?”

Bates shakes his head. “Brother, you’re on a tilt. Slow your roll a little. You want help with this shit involving her dad? I bet Vex would help too.”

“I don’t need help.”

“We all need help sometimes, you jackass. Just let me know what you need. You don’t tell me today, I’ll ask you again tomorrow.”

I look at my friend. I met Bates about five years ago. He’s a year younger than me but twice as smart. We bonded over a love of knives and face-to-face combat. “Thank you.”

Bates slips down off the counter. “You know I’ve got your back. And it’s okay to admit you like the woman who kidnapped and drugged you, as fucked up as that is to say.”

“You think I’m wrong though, don’t you?”

Bates shrugs. “I’m a poor judge. You know how I feel about permanent relationships. But I think you have to do you.”

I remember once in our early days getting blind drunk on a run to Phoenix together. Bates told me about a woman he’d loved once. She’d been perfect, until he’d decided to join the Outlaws. She hadn’t liked the secrecy, the brotherhood, the less-than-legal activity. He’d returned from a run and found all her belongings gone.

“Now, I gotta go shit, because my stomach is suddenly rough as fuck,” he says, screwing up his nose as he looks down at the empty takeout carton.

“That’s way more information than I need.”

“Might go use Spark’s bathroom just to piss him off for that move he pulled when he grabbed you.”

I shrug. “In fairness, I shouldn’t have brought Iris into it.”

“And he shouldn’t have put a woman over a brother.”

I huff a laugh as Bates slaps my shoulder as he leaves. I follow him into the bar, where Cat and Neva are deep in conversation.

“I’m not just leaving you here,” Neva says with force.

“I’ll be fine. I just . . . I need to learn as much as I can. Go back to the house. I’ll meet you there. I have my phone, and I’ll keep you posted,”

Catalina says.

Catalina.

I like the way it sounds.

Makes me think about boats. Catamarans and marinas. Sunsets and lulling waves. It's been a while since I've been on a boat. When was the last time I had sushi?

That's what I should get Catalina for dinner.

"I'm not leaving you with him," Neva says, glaring in my direction.

"Chill, bitch. I got your girl. She's safer here with me than she is with you."

Neva's jaw drops.

"Don't call her a bitch." Catalina raises an eyebrow in my direction. "And you can stop it with the pissing-on-me-so-everyone-knows-I'm-yours shit, right now. I'm no one's."

There's a fire in her eyes. Not the cozy campfire kind, but the flash fires that come out of nowhere. My cock twitches. "Pretty sure I'm gonna keep fucking that up, so I'm not going to apologize."

Neva shakes her head. "This is all screwed up. He's lying. They all are. It makes more sense than believing Los Reyes, our family, are culpable in this."

Catalina touches Neva's arm. "I think the Outlaws have no reason to lie to me, and Perrito hasn't been transparent with me and Mamá for a reason. But he doesn't know we're here, so we're safe for a few more days. Go back to the house. Get some rest. Pack up if you like. I'll message you."

"You're making a mistake, Cat," Neva says.

Catalina glances in my direction. "Maybe I am. But what are my other choices?"

Neva crosses her arms and sighs. "Fine. I need a ride back."

"Switch," I shout. Our medic is standing by the bar, talking with Vex.

"What?" he replies but doesn't move.

"Neva needs a ride back to their place."

He shakes his head. "So why don't you take her in the van?"

I roll my eyes and remember what Bates said about asking people for help when I need it. "Please." I choke out the word. It feels a little too close to begging someone instead of doing shit myself. "I need to help Cat with this thing with her dad."

Switch looks at Neva as if he'd rather eat dirt. "Fine. But she's not sitting behind me on my bike again. I'll get the keys to the tow truck."

“Wouldn’t want to sit on anything to do with him,” Neva mutters as the three of us watch him walk out of the building toward the repair shop.

“Neva won’t be at risk with him, will she?” Catalina asks.

I glance into her eyes and think of what ink I’d mix to make that exact shade of brown. “He’s our medic. Military trained. He’d rather chew his own arm off than hurt someone who didn’t deserve it.”

Neva offers her arms to show me the red lines left by the cable ties. “I beg to differ.”

I can’t help but huff out a laugh. “I said ‘someone who didn’t deserve it.’ He did that when you’d stupidly kidnapped the club treasurer, thinking he was the president of the Iron Outlaws, and tied him to a chair. We’ve since determined you aren’t a risk. Switch isn’t gonna hurt you. Piss him off, and he might just shove you out of the truck in the middle of nowhere. So unless you wanna walk, I’d be nice.”

Neva’s eyes narrow. “How utterly reassuring. I still think this is stupid, but stay safe.”

Catalina tugs her into her arms. “You too.” She whispers something I don’t catch and watches her friend as she leaves.

Me? I watch Cat.

She’s tall for a girl, and I like it. I’m six four. She’s gotta be near five ten. Sure, there’s a thick sole on those biker boots of hers, but I bet she isn’t short without them. I kind of like that I can still manhandle her, but that she isn’t breakable. If I were Spark, I’d be terrified of snapping Iris in half. Not that I want to think about my brother fucking.

“I like your clubhouse,” Cat says. “It’s big compared to Los Reyes.”

I take in the surroundings through her eyes. “We’re lucky. King’s grandfather bought the land in Asbury Park decades ago.” A building permit was issued in the nineties to construct a housing development not too far from the clubhouse, but the access road would’ve passed right by the edge of our lot. Arthur “Camelot” Hills, King’s father, followed all the legal processes to object, and the whole club, bikes and all, showed up at the town hall to discuss it. Camelot asked if they thought people would be willing to buy a house if their main road went by him and the club every day.

Sure enough, the permit disappeared and was never revisited. Amazing what a leather cut and a fuck-you attitude can do.

“I’m guessing you want to talk to the brothers about what they know, see if it’s any different than what I told you,” I say to Cat.

She yawns and then blinks. “Yeah. Sure. But can a girl get a large cup of coffee first?”

We had a shit night’s sleep. Me, tied to that stupid chair, half out of my mind on those drugs. And her, grabbing a few hours while Neva kept watch.

“You won’t think straight or be clear and alert. Come with me.” I take her hand and only notice her resistance when I’ve dragged her halfway across the room.

“Where are we going?”

I pause and cup her cheek. For the first time, I notice the dark shadows beneath her eyes. “You need some sleep.”

“I’m fine. I’ll catch up when I get back.” But even as she says the words, she leans into my palm. I’m pretty certain it’s not a conscious gesture.

“Well, I’m tired, and the guys won’t speak to you without me there to run interference. Which means if you want answers, you’ll come take a nap with me.”

Catalina shakes her head. “I don’t have time to—”

“You don’t get a say. Come on.”

Maybe she sees the determination in my eyes, but she capitulates and lets me lead her to my room. I know what it feels like to be exhausted. I think of it as being on a tilt. In poker, when you play a good hand and then someone gets lucky on the river to make a winning hand, it’s frustrating as fuck. If you don’t manage that energy, the next hand you get makes you rage and go all in. Not because you have the best hand, but because you want to teach the world a lesson.

That’s when my ASPD is at its loudest.

And it has a high comorbidity with ADHD. Sometimes I have two simple tasks to do, but seven hours and sixteen half-started things later, I still haven’t gotten to the first two tasks, and I’m mad as fuck I didn’t get them done. Yet I somehow feel like I couldn’t have done anything differently. The energy it takes to balance all that, all day, wears me out.

When we get to my room, I push the door open and see the evidence of my life, even though I attempted to clean up my space.

Thankfully, the sheets are clean.

“You think I’ll take a nap like a child?” Catalina asks.

“No. I think we’re going to acknowledge we’re both sleep deprived and do the sensible thing, so our brains can function better this afternoon.”

She glances over her shoulder at me. “What if I don’t want to?”

I shrug. “Then my helping you stops, and you can take your bike and catch up to Neva.” I wonder why I said that. I don’t really mean it.

Catalina runs her tongue over her lower lip. “That’s blackmail.”

I shrug. “More like a deal.”

“A deal is more of a negotiation. You low ball, I come back with a counteroffer.”

Reaching for the hem of her hoodie, I step closer. “My only counteroffer is I won’t fuck you again yet. Much as I want to, I’m serious about the sleep part. Do I need to cuff you to the bed, or are you going to stay where I put you?”

There’s a hitch in her breath before she sighs. “Fine. And no to the cuffs.” She looks up at me from beneath long eyelashes. “You cuff me and we’re definitely fucking.”

I can’t help but grin. “God loves a dirty girl.”

“God doesn’t exist. Nothing dirty about knowing what you love in bed.” She glances down at her chest. “And nothing about me says *girl*. I’m a woman.”

I kiss her lips. “You can protest all you want, but you’ll be my dirty girl if I want you to be.”

“Stop talking, Niro.” She steps away from me. “I’ll undress myself.”

I think back to what Bates said in the kitchen about needing help. And I realize Cat and I are like two peas from the same pod. Neither of us likes help. She let me fuck her, but then she stepped away to dress herself. And she’s doing it again now. Undressing herself so she can get into bed on her own terms.

I’d do the same thing.

So I let her. As tempting as it is to run my hands up her skin beneath that T-shirt she’s wearing. I let her decide when she’s naked enough, which appears to be removing her bra through the T-shirt armholes and leaving her panties on. Her olive-toned legs are long. Well defined and muscular.

Guess that’s how she got enough force to chamber a hook kick to nail Clutch.

I like her strength.

Her composure.

But most of all, I love the sight of her ass as she crawls onto my bed and slips those long legs beneath the covers.

I set a two-hour timer on my phone, then strip down to my boxer briefs.

The sheets are cool as I climb in between them. “Come here,” I say, pulling Catalina into my arms.

“I thought we were napping,” she grumbles, but is malleable in my arms. I turn her onto her side so I can tug her to my chest.

Something eases behind my ribs as she settles against me, as the smooth skin of her legs slides against my own and her firm ass settles against my cock. My arms wrap around her.

“We are. Close your eyes, Cat. I’ve got you.”

And within minutes, we’re both sound asleep.

CATALINA

When I open my eyes, it takes me a couple of minutes to figure out where I am. The sheets don't feel like my own, and they don't smell like them either. It's dark, while I always leave my own windows and curtains open so I can be greeted by fresh air and daylight.

Niro.

The name whooshes into my brain like a high-speed train that's out of control. There's force behind it.

I sit up and rub my hands over my face.

A nap.

He told me we needed to nap. And by the way I feel right now, groggy and out of sorts, I napped like a campeona.

I blow out a long breath when I realize I'm alone and move to the edge of the bed. The floor is cool beneath my feet as I stand. The room is . . . not exactly messy . . . just haphazard. There's a sketchbook with what looks like an exceptional half-finished tattoo. Two piles of receipts and invoices sit on the desk, and two piles of clothes sit next to it . . . not sure what the difference is, beyond the socks looking cleaner in one pile versus the other.

I pull my clothes back on, and just as the hoodie glides over my head, the door opens.

Niro steps in holding two steaming cups of something I quickly identify as coffee thanks to the nutty smell. "I wondered where you were."

"Sorry. I wanted to wake you with coffee."

I reach for one of the mugs. "Mission accomplished; I don't usually wake up properly without a caffeine hit."

As I blow on the surface, Niro watches my lips. It's impossible to deny he flips my switch in ways Felipe never did. I think it's his masculinity. If I'm honest, for all the times I've snatched my hand away from his today, something settled deep inside me when he held me firmly and led us. I liked the way he talked dirty and delivered. And I especially liked those moments when I felt protected and safe.

When he stripped the previous night, I studied his tattoos thoroughly. They cover every inch of his muscular body. I want to ask him what they all mean. Who is the *we* in his *We Found Wonderland* tattoo? Why the ocean theme on one arm? And what's his connection to the red and brown maple leaves that flutter over his shoulder?

I wonder what it says about me that I find the scar hot. When he kissed me, I loved the way the small ridge crossing his lip felt when I ran my tongue over it.

He's odd . . . no, he's different. I can't explain it. Forthright. Unemotional one minute, then highly emotional the next.

"Why did you almost hit Spark earlier? In the kitchen?" I ask.

Niro tucks a piece of hair behind my ear. "Because he called you a bitch and I didn't like it."

"Thought it was brothers before others."

Niro grins. "It is. King just asked me to go take care of something for the club. I'm headed out with Bates. I'll drop you off at my place on the way."

"But you said we were going to talk to—"

"I know what I said. But I can't. This won't wait."

Shit. "I can stay here, start without you. You can ask your brothers to help me out before you leave."

Niro shakes his head. "Not gonna happen. Your best choice is to come back to my house with me and Bates and wait for me there until we're done with our run. I haven't got any secrets. You can shower, whatever, and relax until I get back."

"Why can't I go back to the place Neva and I are using?"

"Because if you leave, I'm not going to come chase you."

"You're not?"

He shakes his head.

"I'm confused."

"By what?" He takes his coffee cup in one hand and takes a large gulp.

"You're jumping around. We're not finishing one conversation before

you're talking about something else."

Niro looks me in the eye. "I do that a lot. Where did I lose you?"

"If it's brothers before others, why did you still go to hit him?"

"You ever watch *Xena*? The warrior princess?"

I shake my head. "Can't say that I did. Probably before my time."

Niro smirks. "How old did you say you were?"

"Twenty-five. How old are you?"

"Nearly twenty-seven. You'll have to respect my wisdom as your elder."

"Now we're even farther off course. *Xena*. My age. Why did you almost hit Spark?"

"*Xena* was tough. Could take care of herself. Came up with solutions when men were just standing around looking dumb. She also happened to be fit as fuck. I used to watch her reruns. You remind me of her."

"You almost hit Spark because I remind you of this *Xena*?"

He shrugs. "Not in looks, but in attitude and presence. I think it would be fun to hang out with someone like you."

I want to dismiss the whole thing as ridiculous. Yet he's as intrigued by me as I am by him. I already see he doesn't process things the way I do. "That's the best you've got?"

Niro looks around his room, taking in the notebook and the receipts and the piles of clothes. "Yeah. Unfortunately, it is." He looks genuinely sad about it, and it tugs at the tight strings around my heart.

"Fine. I'll go with you to your house."

"You will?"

"Sure. Aren't you worried I'm gonna steal from you?"

"What are you going to steal? Some cash? If you're that desperate, take it."

"You're so confusing."

He brushes a kiss across my lips. "Get used to it."

It takes a few minutes to get organized and finish our coffee, but once we're ready to ride, I hold out my hand. "You still have the keys to my bike."

He drops them in my palm. "Follow me and Bates."

It's a bitter pill to swallow, to know they are off on club business without me, when I know I'm just as capable and deadly as they are. I'm constantly underestimated. I even debate asking to go with them, to tell them I can help with whatever club business they are going on, to show them what I can do. But there's no way they would take a woman or a member of a rival club

with them.

When we reach our bikes, Bates is already there. His skin looks pale and almost clammy despite the cold temperatures. “Are you okay?” I ask.

“Golden,” he replies and climbs on his bike.

He looks anything but.

I don’t complain about riding behind the two of them. I respect the order to a club ride out, even when there are only a few people. The two of them are fully patched-in members, and I’m just . . . nothing. The way they ride alongside each other so seamlessly it’s like they are connected tells me they do it often.

The moment we reach Niro’s house, Bates grabs the keys out of Niro’s hand and runs up the steps, lets himself in, then disappears. “His stomach was fucked earlier. Looks like it still is,” Niro says.

His house is cute. A split level with wooden shutters and a simple yard. The skeleton of plants that will blossom in spring frame the edge of the property.

When we get inside, I hear Bates groan in what I hope is the bathroom. His bike keys were thrown on the floor.

“Fuck it,” Niro mutters. “Must have been the leftovers he ate.” He looks to the bathroom door, then to me. “Want to cause chaos?”

“As a general rule, yes. What did you have in mind?”

He grabs Bates’s keys and disappears with them before reappearing with a thick, heavy-duty jacket. “I hid them. Let’s go. I’ll tell you where we’re going on route.” He hammers on the bathroom door. “Cat and I have got this.”

“Don’t you fucking dare, Niro,” Bates yells. “That’s the most . . .”

I don’t hear the rest of it as Niro drags me out of the house and back to our bikes. “You want to live this life, yeah?”

I nod. “More than anything.”

He holds out the oversized lined leather jacket for me to slip my arms in, and I do. On the drive over here, the bitter wind stung as it cut through my layers. “Then follow me.”

We wind through the city Niro lives in. We skirt the edges of a long shoreline. There are a few people out walking. The properties start to thin out as we veer away from the coast. The gaps between homes begin to grow, and we finally pull up to the edge of a wooded area.

“What are we doing here?” I ask.

“The guy who owns this land and the house on it is blackmailing someone on our payroll, and it caused a huge shipment delay.”

My heart starts to race. The rush of excitement is thrilling. “What are we here to do? To stop him from blackmailing or stop him from breathing?”

Niro grips my chin, hard, and pulls me to him. The kiss he delivers makes me stumble back toward my bike. I reach for his biceps to steady myself as his hand slides around the back of my neck and keeps me pressed to him. His tongue dives into my mouth, and I can’t help but respond. My nipples grow tight beneath the cotton of my bra.

And I’m sure my panties are wet. “Fuck. A boner is so inconvenient right now,” he mutters.

“We passed a motel about thirty minutes ago. Let’s get this done and then stop there for the night.”

Niro closes his eyes. “Could you be any more perfect?”

“No one has ever called me perfect before.” Not even Felipe, who professes he wants me as his old lady.

“Then all those *no ones* are fucking idiots. How do you want to do this?”

I look at him, stunned he’s asking my opinion. “Does our target live alone?”

Niro nods. “He has a wife who tried to get restraining orders against him. Three unsuccessfully, once successfully.”

“Then I have no issue with what we’re about to do. Is she likely to be there?”

“According to Vex, she has a different home address and a job at a bar. Don’t know if anyone else is.”

“Does he have security cameras?”

“Not sure but unlikely.” Niro grins. “Why don’t we leave our bikes here and go do some reconnaissance?”

I leave the extra-large leather jacket on my bike and rely on my smaller one. We walk through the woods behind the man’s house. I was out on the guy when I heard his wife had filed for four restraining orders. “What else do you know about him?”

Branches crack beneath our feet, but it doesn’t matter; the property is still out of sight. “Former cop, relieved of duty over something that was sealed in his file.”

I raise my eyebrow. “We all know what that means. Probably shot some innocent Black kid and called it fear for his life.”

“Vex, our Black brother, is singled out by cops every time they get up in our business.”

“Yeah, well, life in any marginalized group is a journey. I’ve had all kinds of slurs thrown at me, but being Black in this country is a whole other level.”

When we get to the edge of the property, we keep low to the ground and use shrubs to hide from view. The house is simple and tired. A siding panel is missing, and a broken window has cardboard taped over one corner, as if someone never got around to replacing it.

“Looks empty. We can head in,” Niro whispers, but I tug him back down when I see a shadow pass by the kitchen window.

“Wait.”

A light flicks on, and we get a better look at our target. He holds a phone to his ear and is talking animatedly. “Patience is a virtue,” I whisper. “Are you a good shot?”

“Close range, always. This far out with a GLOCK, no chance. Here.” Niro opens his jacket and withdraws a gun. “Grabbed this for you when I hid Bates’s keys.”

I take the gun. The standard magazine for a GLOCK 19 holds fifteen bullets. I check. It’s full. “You think he’s told the club what you did yet?” As much as I want to be here with him and be a part of this, I don’t want him to get in trouble.

“No. And you’re gonna have to help me out with this boner when we’re done, because my gun in your hands is better than porn.”

“Honestly, you giving me your gun and letting me do this with you is better than porn too.”

He kisses me. “If it weren’t so fucking cold, I’d fuck you here before we go inside.”

“I wouldn’t let you. First thing they’ll look for is where the perpetrators waited for the victim and see if there is any DNA lying around. Pretty sure fucking on this iced-over grass would leave some evidence.”

“Stop being so practical,” he teases. “Fine, I’ll wait.”

I’ve never really thought about what life would be like if I were accepted into a motorcycle club. Los Reyes has made it clear to me that it could never happen. But the idea of Niro and I doing good work and getting rid of bad people feels like possibility.

The future has always been a nebulous concept. Filled with things I want

so badly, but pragmatically knew I'd never get. And yet as we bide our time, watching and waiting while our mark finishes his call, I'm sure it's within my grasp.

When the mark's done, he sits down on something by the window. Hard to see what it is. A stool, a chair, or a table maybe.

His back is to us.

"Ready?" Niro asks.

I check my weapon, check the house, then look back at Niro. "Ready. I'll go to the front door and knock to distract him while you break in the back. We're killing him, right?"

"We are. Before we do, we need to find the evidence he's holding."

I nod. I understand my mission. Something tells me this is my path. I'm reassured that Vex is a brother. It shows the club is already more progressive in its thinking.

With a deep breath, I hurry through the trees to the property's driveway. As I walk up to the door, I create a role for myself, a reason for knocking. I also tug on the thin inners of my thick riding gloves. By the time my knuckles hit the front door, I'm certain of two things: There are no cameras on the front of the property, and I'm completely in character.

"What are you here for?" the man says after opening the door.

I tug my leather jacket more tightly around me, wishing I still had Niro's thicker one to battle the icy wind. "I'm sorry. My car just broke down over the rise. And my phone is dead. Can I borrow yours to make a quick call for a mechanic or a tow?"

His eyes trail lazily down my body. I see them take in my hair, linger on my lips, then ease down to my chest. So, I pop my hip and stand a little straighter. Let him look. None of this is for him. And if he gets a hard-on, I'll shoot him in it.

"My phone is inside. You want to come in and warm up a little by the fire?"

Oh, señor, you have no idea. "Are you sure? I don't want to interrupt you."

"Just about to have a beer. You want one?"

I shake my head and point vaguely down the road. "I'll have to drive if the mechanic can fix my car."

He steps back and pushes the door wide open. "I have an idea. Why don't you come in. We have that drink. And then I walk down to your car, see if I

can't get it started for you?"

He's some kind of idiot if he thinks I don't see all the red flags happening here. While I don't see any obvious weapons, he may have one stored somewhere he can reach quickly.

In my peripheral vision, I see a glimpse of Niro's tall frame as he disappears down the hallway. I take in the faded rug, the single unopened button on the bottom of the man's untucked shirt.

"Sure." I step inside and feel his palm touch the lower part of my back. I don't know why men always feel the urge to do that.

"Kitchen's this way," he says.

I follow him, my hand on the barrel of my gun.

Niro's gun.

He trusted me with it.

I need to focus.

And by focusing, I hear the creak of the floorboard not caused by me or the man.

"Henley," Niro says as he emerges into view as we reach the kitchen. His gun is held high, aimed right between the man's eyes. "Where are the photographs?"

Henley. So now the man has a name. He puts his hands out, beads of sweat immediately forming on his forehead.

I pull out a chair and push him down into it. "You better sit."

"What photographs?" he croaks.

Niro grins. "Don't be predictable, Henley. You know what photographs. Every time you play innocent, I mentally double how painful I'm gonna make this. And considering I'm thinking of stabbing your eyes out for a start, you might want to reconsider."

Henley looks at me. "I don't know what he's talking about. Please. Help me. I can pay you."

Slowly, I walk up to Niro, slipping beneath the arm holding the gun aimed at Henley. Niro glances down at me, a lazy heat to his eyes. I slide my hand down over his ribs until I reach the holder on Niro's belt and dramatically withdraw his knife slowly.

The only sound is Henley's whimpers. Niro runs his tongue over his lower lip. He doesn't stop me. Electricity passes between us, a spark ready to ignite.

"Here's the thing," I say, turning to face Henley. "Watching him use this

is hot. So, the longer you take to answer, the more turned on I'll get."

"You're sick," Henley says.

I shrug. "Maybe. But calling me that doesn't help you any." Using the blade, I cut the button off his pants.

"What are you doing?" Henley asks, gripping my wrist.

"Hands off her, you fucker," Niro says. There's a deadly intensity to his tone that's utterly unmistakable.

Henley lifts his hand off me like I'm the sun, too hot to touch.

"See, you were hinting at the door that we could get to know each other, which I assume, you meant at the time that I could play with your dick." I turn the knife so it catches the reflection of the light above us. "And this is my idea of doing just that."

"Jesus. Fine. The photos are on my phone. A copy on my laptop." He tips his chin in the direction of a small desk in the corner.

"Now, how hard was that? Get them," Niro instructs, and I know he's talking to me. Knife still in hand, I hurry and pick up both items, but when I return, he takes them from me and tips his chin at Henley. "Who do you want to kill you?"

"No. Wait. You've got what you wanted. I'll drop it. I'll leave Jasper Haven alone. I know he clears the docks for you, for your weapons deliveries. I won't mention a thing. I'm sorry." The smell of urine fills the air.

"I'll do it," I say. "It will help the club take me seriously and show there's no reason to not trust me." It's the perfect solution. I'll have dirt on them. They'll have dirt on me. Sometimes, dirt is all you can build a pact on.

Niro ignores Henley's whimpering. Instead, he winks at me. "Do it. But make it look like he killed himself."

And I do as he says without the slightest remorse.

NIRO

We run from the house via the woods. I doubt anyone saw or heard anything. But it's better to be safe than sorry.

It's not easy to run with an erection pressed up against the zipper of my jeans, but I'll be the first to admit, watching Catalina kill Henley did something to me. And the doctor was right. I do show an absolute lack of remorse that leaves me indifferent to the pain of people like Henley.

I don't care whether it's wrong to be turned on though, because right now, all I want is Catalina underneath me. My only question is how quickly I can get this woman naked.

"Jesus, if I'd known we'd be jogging three miles, I might have done more training beforehand," Catalina says.

I grin as she breathes faster. I feel . . . free. Happy.

I wonder if she likes sexual asphyxiation.

Thoughts of my hands around her throat do little to ease the pain my cock's in.

The bikes are in sight. When we get there, I lift Cat so she can drop her legs on either side of her saddle. She laughs as she does so. "Follow me," I say, as she tugs my leather jacket on.

As much as I want to fuck her right away, I need her in my home. In my bed. And for safety's sake, we've got to get our asses out of this area as quickly as we can instead of checking into a motel for two hours so I can rail her the way I want to. Especially when one of them looks the way I do.

After I tuck the laptop in my saddlebags, we ride side by side, like equals.

Fuck cars and their owners caged inside.

It's a good thing I'm an experienced rider, because I spend way too much time glancing sideways at this woman who is so like me, I can barely believe my good fortune.

Watching her manhandle my knife? Hot.

Hearing her threaten Henley? Hot.

Knowing she's willing to kill? Even hotter.

I speed up; she follows me. From all the court-ordered therapist shit my mother put me through, I have tools, circuit breakers that are meant to stop me when I get into reckless spirals, especially when it comes to my *reckless disregard for the safety of self and others*. But embracing this freedom, racing through the twists and turns of this road with Catalina by my side, I feel so fucking invincible that I don't want it to stop.

When we pull up outside my house, she's off her bike before I am and throws herself into my arms just as my feet touch the ground. Our helmets crash. I can't get to her lips. But I pick her up anyway. She wraps her legs around my waist, and I can hear her laugh as I march up the steps.

Getting the key into the lock is tricky, and I practically stumble over the threshold.

"I should fucking kill you," Bates says. His voice is raw. He's sitting in the hallway, still looking gray. "What the fuck was that shit?"

I lower Catalina to the ground, all thoughts of fucking her up against the door fleeing from my mind. There's a strange twinge in my chest and I wonder if it isn't the first real feeling of guilt I've ever had.

Removing my helmet, I take a breath. "It's done. Henley's dead."

"You took Catalina with you?" he asks.

Catalina removes her helmet. "He did. Now you have something to hold over me. Now you have to trust me."

Bates stands and jiggles his legs like he always does to help his jeans fall back into place. "I don't have to trust you for shit. The only person I care about in this room is the man standing next to you. And he just fucked up." Bates turns to look at me. "King will have your ass for this. Remember our deal."

Bates will have my back. He'll cover me when I'm on a tear. He'll stand by my side and help me make shit right. But he won't lie to our president or any of the brothers for me.

"You've got twenty-four hours to tell him, or I will." Bates moves to the door. "She could be the greatest thing that ever happened to you, or she could

be your end. If it's the former, I'll be happy as fuck for you. If it's the latter, I'll kill her myself. But be careful, brother."

The door slams shut before I can answer.

Not that I have a response for him.

I've seen what happens in the club when the guys hook up with their old ladies. Clutch dating King's sister caused the two of them to fall out. Spark fucking Iris put the whole club on edge because of her connection to the Irish mob, and it also came between Spark and Saint. Saint and Briar were their own kind of special sauce. But King nearly destroyed the club for Saint's sister Rae.

Old ladies cause shit between friends.

And I think Catalina is getting between Bates and me.

Am I being too impulsive with her?

"It might be easier if I just go," Catalina says.

"Why?" I turn to face her. She's slipped out of my jacket and her own.

"Why *what*?"

"Why should you leave?"

She points to the door. "Because of that. Because you'll be in shit with your club. Because this clearly isn't helping like I thought it would've. I thought your club might be different. But I guess I should have remembered my place."

The fact she cares about the impact on me . . . burns. I feel heat in my sternum. Her first thought was what it will mean for me. And I'm not used to being anyone's first thought.

"Not gonna lie, Cat. I've got demons that hide deep, but I always stand with my choices. Never make excuses. And I won't do that here . . . with you or with my president. I would have done this mission with Bates. But I wanted to do it with you. I wanted to see how far you'd go. I wanted to test your resolve because I've never met a woman quite like you. So don't bail on this. On us. Yet."

She shakes her head. "Do you know how wild this is?"

Jesus, do I.

"Babe, I'm antisocial, abrasive, often compulsive, and very effective in self-destruction. I'm used to wild. This? You and me? It goes way beyond the definition of wild. But I'm here for the ride. Are you?"

Those eyes of hers hold mine, as if she's trying to tell me everything she's feeling in just one look. I step to her, waiting for her to put words to

them.

“I shouldn’t.”

I rub my thumb over her lower lip. Softly first, then more firmly the second time. The tip of her tongue grazes the pad of my thumb. “I’m not asking what you should and shouldn’t do. I am asking what you want . . . What your heart wants. What that pussy of yours wants.”

“And what about my brain?”

I shrug. “Thinking is seriously overrated. Feeling wins out over time.”

“I’m not usually reckless.”

“That’s good, because I’m reckless enough for both of us.”

The corners of her lips twitch into the start of a smile. “You aren’t making it easy to be sensible.”

“Meh. Define *sensible*. Sensible is run by those boring fucks who work a nine-to-five, which is more like a seven-to-seven. They get on the hamster wheel, same routine every day. They open their laptops and attend meetings they don’t want to be at, where they have to mask who they are. They have to smile at the asshole across the desk or screen and pretend that person isn’t the most irritating fuck they’ve ever met. Sensible leads you to counting macros and cutting carbs and not drinking. It leads you to marrying the person who compliments you every now and then and staying together, even though your body yearns to be devoured and worshipped and fucked raw by a person who is most definitely *not* sensible.

“Don’t be sensible, Catalina. Not with me. I want the part of you that’s trying to push your ribs apart right now so she can burst free. I want the part of you that wants to strip right here and let me fuck you out of existence on this floor. I want the part of you that knows you are better than any club brother. I want the part of you that will scrape and claw and fight to shape a life you want more than anything else. No matter the cost or who gets in the way. Give her to me, Cat, because I’m really fucking hungry for her.”

I’m not sure where all those words came from, but before I can process whatever the fuck just spewed out of my mouth, Catalina is in my arms, her legs around my waist, and she does as I ask.

All thoughts of dead bodies and Bates and the conversation I need to have with my president tumble from my mind, until all that’s left is the scent of this woman in my arms and the feel of her lips against mine.

I carry her down the hallway to my bedroom, kicking the door shut with my boot.

There is a fleeting rumble in my brain that I should be gentle because she's precious, but as Catalina's lips torch my own, I know that isn't how either of us wants this. The door rattles on its hinges as I slam her back against it. Her hands slide into my hair, and mine grip her ass. Our tongues fight as we gasp for breath.

Clothing meant for riding is impossible to remove without putting her feet firmly on the floor, so I lower her.

It takes us a minute or two to get naked. Boots are kicked off. Weapons are removed as quickly as safety allows. And I watch her ass as she shimmies out of her underwear. She has the kind of ass that's lush and smooth. I grab a fistful of her hair and kiss her again as I deftly pop the clasp on her bra.

Catalina tastes like all the good things I've missed out on. Everyone else I've ever been with is dull compared to the diamond sparkling in my room.

We tumble onto my bed, a mess of limbs fighting to get as close to each other as anatomically possible. My tattooed body contrasts her smooth olive-toned skin.

Nothing I do feels close enough. I want to climb inside her. Own her from the inside out.

Crawling down her body, I lick and kiss and nip her skin. Catalina tenses and gasps as I do. It suddenly strikes me that I should check if this is what she wants, even though she threw herself into my arms.

"You want me to stop, you tell me, yeah?" I say.

I glance up at her, those wide eyes of hers looking straight back at me. She nods and falls backward onto my pillow.

When I reach her clit, I lap my tongue over it. Catalina's fingers dig into the sheets and grip hard.

When I do it again, her whole-body jackknives off the bed.

I ease my tongue inside her, licking as far as I can reach. She tastes so fucking good, I want to stay here and eat her all night. But even as I think it, my cock throbs against the sheets.

Sliding my hands along her thighs, I push them wider apart. "You're so wet. I want to swallow all of it."

Catalina's hand snakes into my hair, holding it tightly. Usually, I don't like that shit, but with Catalina, it feels like an ownership of sorts. That she wants what only I can give her.

Her hips shift, grinding her pussy against my face. I inhale her musk, swallow it, digest it.

Lick after confident lick, I eat her, ignoring the dull ache in my balls and the urge to come deep inside her. I want her orgasm more than I need relief of my own. I want this to be so good, she'll keep coming back to me to get it. The more ways I can chain her to me, the better, and I don't give a fuck if people think that's morally wrong.

I cup her breast, then tug on her nipple. Her body spasms around me.

"Ah, fuck," I mumble. "Come on my tongue for me, cariño."

And she does, like a lightning strike hits her body. Every part of her tenses, and she cries out loudly.

"Dios mío." Her words are husky, rough.

When she finally releases her hold on my hair, I climb to my knees and grab a condom from the bedside table. When I have it on, I position myself by her slippery entrance. Her lips are puffy, her clit no longer hooded. It's a visual designed to send me careening into an orgasm before I even wet my cock.

We both groan as I nudge the tip inside her. The way I stretch her threatens my sanity. I try to focus on something else, anything that will take away the rush of sensations I suddenly feel.

I want this woman.

Easing farther into her, I feel my chest constrict. It's unfamiliar.

I cup her ass, holding her in place as I take what I need from her. "Does this feel as good for you?" I ask her, needing to know it works for her too.

Her palms cup my cheeks, an unexpected tenderness. "Better," she gasps.

I lean forward and kiss her with more meaning than I'm used to.

Catalina whispers my name, Colton, against my lips.

My hips thrust harder.

Faster.

Deeper.

I feel out of control. Physically and emotionally. Like I'm blindfolded on a roller coaster. Everything feels hypersensitive.

Alive.

"Colton," she gasps, and I feel her walls squeeze my cock tight in rapid flutters.

At the sound of my name, I bury my face in the crook of her neck and lose my sense of self as I come deep inside her.

CATALINA

I glance at my clear skin and bright eyes in Niro's steamy bathroom mirror. Guilt ripples through me that I snuck in here once I'd woken up. Niro is still fast asleep. If he'd been awake, there is no doubt in my mind that he would have joined me in the shower. But I needed some time to myself to think through the last forty-eight hours.

My thighs involuntarily squeeze together as I recall both times Niro and I have had sex. Each time has totally blown my mind, and it would be so easy to lean into that and let it be the only reason I decide to stay in Jersey.

But I feel torn.

Los Reyes has been my home for so long. Up until this trip, I would have said that they were my family. They have my back. Or maybe I should say they *had* my back. Now, I'm not sure who they are or what I am to them.

Where I belong is desperately unclear.

I glance at my phone. There are three new messages.

Neva: *Send me proof of life or I'm coming to get you.*

I take a selfie blowing her a kiss and send it.

Mamá: *His name is Lobo, a nomad. Haven't seen him years. Want me to ask around?*

I type quickly. *No, please don't. Might cause trouble for me. Don't worry. I'm safe.*

Felipe: *When are you bringing that pussy of yours home to me?*

That one I ignore. My pussy belongs to me alone. And I'm wholeheartedly certain that it doesn't want a visit from any part of Felipe any time soon.

He's never come close to how I felt with Niro.

I've been adrift, and as much as I like being around Niro, I also wonder whether I'm secretly adopting him as my anchor. Someone or something that keeps me grounded. It seems like the wrong reason to be around someone.

I slip the navy-blue towel that matches the one wrapped around my body from my head and let my damp hair fall. I run my fingers through it as best I can, but I need my toiletries and comb from the place Neva and I were staying at.

The door opens, and Niro steps inside, naked. I'm not usually a whimsical kind of woman, but his body is a work of art in form and ink that could drive anyone to wax poetic.

"Come back to bed," he says, as he places both of his arms on the doorframe above his head.

"As much as I like that idea, I've got things I need to do today," I say.

He walks toward me and slips his arms around me from behind, and I can see our reflections in the mirror. We look good together. It feels too comfortable, too important, and I try to shrug out of his hold.

Niro just squeezes tighter. "You have a real issue with me holding you like this, or are you just freaking out about us?"

I hate that he sees straight through me. "I don't want to feel crowded."

He removes his arms from around me and steps back, just enough that we are no longer touching. The fact he listens to what I say shows the kind of man he is. The fact I feel the loss says much about my current state of mind. Every thought is contradictory.

"What do you have to do today?"

"I need to go back to my place. I want to talk with Neva. Then I want to start talking to your brothers. And you need to speak to your president so you can tell him what happened yesterday."

"Did you message her?"

"Who? Neva? I did. But I still want to talk to her in person. I belong with her. Not here."

Niro's brow furrows. "You're leaving?" There's a whisper of something between frustration and surprise in his tone.

"Of course I'm leaving. I didn't suddenly forget about my papá. I have things to do."

"After last night? What I said to you."

I turn to face him. "Especially after last night. I have a feeling you could

railroad me if you tried. You're a lot, Niro."

At this, he turns and steps out of the bathroom. Intellectually it was the right thing to say, but a feeling deep in my gut tells me it wasn't. Sighing, I follow him.

When I reach him, he's tugging jeans over black boxer briefs that cup his ass so perfectly, it should be illegal. His back is to me, and he doesn't acknowledge my presence.

"Niro, I—"

"We should get going," he says, tugging a black T-shirt over his head before he turns to face me. "You've got a lot to do today. Wouldn't want to hold you up."

He strides from the bedroom and takes all his energy with him. I've heard the thing guys sometimes say about girls, that dating them is like cozying up to a lightning strike. Well, I feel like I just spent the night with a tornado.

When I look down, I see a pair of spare sweatpants, boxer briefs, and a T-shirt thrown onto the side of bed I slept on.

My heart drops and bounces.

My own clothes are spread around the room where they got tossed last night. I step into his boxer briefs, but my leathers are fine to wear again. His T-shirt looks like a dress on me and smells of the man whose arms I spent the night in.

With a deep breath, I sit on the edge of the bed and rest my elbows on my knees. I came here for a reason—to find my father. I can't allow myself to get distracted, no matter how strongly the man doing the distracting affects me.

I walk into the kitchen, where Niro has got the coffee started. "You need to let us breathe, Colton."

He turns to face me and leans back against the counter. The only sound between us is the hiss and splatter of the coffee percolating. "What do you mean?"

This time I step into *his* space. "You have us on four-times speed. If you go any faster, you're going to have decided this isn't going anywhere before I've learned your last name. Slow down, please."

Niro's head drops, and I place my hands on his biceps. He says, "You're leaving. What's the point of this conversation?" When he looks up, he looks despondent.

"That's the other thing. Stop seeing the world in black-and-white. I haven't said I'm leaving."

“You haven’t said you’re staying either.”

“That’s because I haven’t decided, Niro. Jesus. I came here with a plan. Kidnap King. Get the intel I needed. I knew what I was going to do. And yet nothing has turned out how I planned. So, no. I don’t know what I’m doing. But I know I can’t rest until I find out what happened to my papá and have vengeance. As for you and me? We could do long distance. Or I could stay for a week or two and see how we feel then. Or I could leave this afternoon because you’re pissing me off. I could move in tomorrow and never leave. Who the hell knows. I. Am. Undecided. That’s it.”

“Okay.” Niro grins before he turns and grabs two cup out of the cupboard. “You want coffee?” When I don’t answer, he glances over his shoulder and raises a cup. “Coffee?”

I huff out a laugh. “That’s it? Conversation over?”

He places the cups on the counter. “You might move in tomorrow and never leave.” He says it like it’s my decision.

“I mentioned a lot of other options, Niro.”

“You did. But you moving in tomorrow and never leaving is the only option that has me rooting for it.” He runs a series of kisses up my neck to the base of my ear, and I squeal like a young girl.

“That still doesn’t mean it will be what I choose.”

He presses a quick kiss to my lips. “Semantics.”

“Not semantics.”

He fills the cups with coffee and hands one to me. “The longer you keep trying to talk yourself out of this, the longer it will take to get all those things done on your to-do list.”

I roll my eyes. “You got any cream?”

“Nope. I take it black. But I can pick some up for you when I leave the tattoo studio.” He puts his cup down and opens a tin sitting on the counter. “Cookie?” The smell of cinnamon hits me.

“This early in the morning?”

“They’re oatmeal raisin. Practically breakfast.”

I take one because I’m starving. Last night we ordered pizza between bouts of sex. I bite into it, and the sugary goodness melts in my mouth. “Oh my God, these are so good.”

Niro kisses me, licking a crumb from the side of my mouth. “I’ll make them for you every day if you move in.”

“You made these?”

“I’m a good baker.”

“Jesus,” I say with far more energy than I intended. “I don’t know who you are, Niro. You fill that cut in a way that’s deadly. You kill people. You tattoo. You’re the club treasurer even though you don’t want to be. And you bake. Who are you?”

“I’m the guy who sees you.”

He says it quietly, yet I feel like I got punched in the heart. “Colton.”

When he wraps his arms around me, I don’t resist. Instead, I rest my forehead against his chest and sigh when he kisses the top of my head.

“What am I going to do with you?” I mutter.

“Accept me as I am. That would be a good start. And maybe I’ll try to . . . you know . . . be less confusing. Whatever.”

I lift my chin to look at him. “I need you to take the pressure off all this. I like you, Niro. More than I should and more than is probably healthy, given our situation. I want to just roll with this.”

He kisses me, only this time, his tongue searches for mine. We sink into the kiss, and for a moment, it’s as if nothing else exists in the world. There’s something about his presence that anchors me.

When I think he’s going to undress me, he slows the kisses until they become chaste and sweet. “I have ADHD. I bounce around. A lot. But for you, I’ll try to wind it in.”

“Thank you.”

It’s snowing outside, so we take Niro’s truck. On the way to see Neva, he tells me about all the different things he does. When he said he bounces around, he wasn’t kidding. New ideas come to him in between a series of half-finished answers. His mind shifts so fast, but every now and then, I realize I see the connection, the leap he took from one subject to the next. I start reading his mental shorthand.

One thing that doesn’t move is the tattooed hand he plants on my thigh and leaves there the whole ride, occasionally squeezing, occasionally rubbing back and forth.

When we pull up outside the house Neva and I are using, Niro parks and moves to get out.

“I want to go see her alone,” I say as he reaches for the handle.

“No can do, chiquita.” I want to be the equal, not the *little one*, but my smile betrays me. “Your girl needs to know we’re cool. That you’re here by choice. She needs to see I don’t mean to hurt you.”

I take his hand and kiss his knuckles. “And you coming in there, with your cut and your GLOCK, isn’t going to convince her of that. She’ll think you’re controlling me. Let me go in there alone, show her I don’t need to run from you, and then leave by choice.”

Niro stares at me for a moment. I can see the side of his jaw twitch. “Fine.”

“Thank you.” I lean over and kiss his cheek.

“But more than fifteen minutes, and I’m coming in looking for you.”

I hustle out of the car and jog up the drive. I don’t normally like being told what to do, but I see this for what it is: a compromise between his desire to take control of our situation and me setting boundaries.

“Cat,” Neva says when I enter the house. “I was worried.”

“Come with me while I pack. I don’t have a lot of time.” She follows me up the stairs and watches as I begin to load up the packing cubes, which I’ll stuff in the hard panniers attached to my bike.

“What happened?”

“I’m staying with Niro for a little while to see if we can figure out what happened to Papá.”

Neva puts her hands on her hips. “But you heard King yesterday. He doesn’t want to help you. And I’m not surprised—they’re a rival club, Cat.”

“You’re telling me things I already know. But I also can’t go home yet, because I’m not sure I can trust Los Reyes now.”

Neva’s eyes go wide. “But they’re our club.”

I shake my head. “They’re not our club. They’re a boys’ club. We don’t actually belong to it. You don’t see us wearing cuts, do you? You don’t see us getting a share of the profits. We’re a disposable asset. And they are lying about Papá.”

Quickly, I move to the bathroom and throw my toothbrush and a few small bottles into my toiletry bag. “Listen,” I say, making a spur-of-the-moment decision. “I want you to go back home. We said we’d be gone ten days for vacation. Tell them I decided to extend my trip. That I’m going to head south to visit Abuela.”

Neva leans against the doorframe and folds her arms. “I can stay with you, Cat. You know that. I have your back.”

With a sigh, I stop packing for a moment and look at her. “I know you do. And I’m grateful. But we need all this to seem natural for the club to believe it. We already lied and told them we were headed to Florida. It’s all going to

get complicated if neither of us return. I promise I'll message you and tell you where I am every step of the way."

"Where are you staying?"

"With Niro."

Neva purses her lips. "You sure that's a good idea? He could be using you."

"For what? It's not like I know any club secrets of value."

"But you make really good collateral."

I zip up my toiletry bag and return to the bedroom. "I don't. I'm the daughter of a dead vice president."

Neva huffs. "Don't sell yourself short like that. If Felipe got a call that you were being held by an Iron Outlaw, they'd be on their bikes and halfway here in a heartbeat."

Her words irritate me. "Why, though? Why would they be halfway here? It wouldn't be because of me. It would be some misplaced machismo. They'd hate that the Outlaws had a woman they perceived as *their* property. They'd be filled with outrage that another club got one over on them. No part of what they do next is actually about me. It's about ego and ownership."

"You need to be pragmatic," Neva says. "You aren't saying anything that's untrue . . . it's just . . . this is our world. And we're trying to create the best life we can within it."

Niro's words from the previous evening hit me hard.

I want the part of you that's trying to push your ribs apart right now so she can burst free . . . I want the part of you that will scrape and claw and fight to shape a life you want more than anything else . . . Give her to me, Cat, because I'm really fucking hungry for her.

"I want to be unapologetically me, Neva. I want to be seen in the spaces I want to exist in."

Neva rubs at a small mark on her jeans. "Does Niro see you?"

"He does. And it's the only thing that makes sense right now."

"So, it's just sex?"

"I can't explain it, but no, it's more than sex. Or it could be if I let it. I don't know. I want to feel safe for a hot minute, and I do with him. Is that so hard to understand?"

She places her hands on my biceps. "You think you'll find that here?"

I shrug. "I don't know. It's too early to tell. But I gave Los Reyes enough time to prove I'm not going to find it with them."

NIRO

Through the window, I see King in his office, the room we use for church, with Saint and Halo standing in front of him. The door rattles as I knock, and King waves me in.

“We saw them,” Saint says. “They’re reconstructing their operations at the docks.”

“Fuckers,” King mutters. “The Righteous Brotherhood. Racist bastards and women traffickers. Suppose we should have guessed they would try to rebuild their trade route through the docks.”

“You want us to take them out?” Halo asks. “We can plan for that.”

Kings takes a draw on his cigarette and blows the smoke out slowly. “I’m sick of dealing with this shit. Whip in the Allentown chapter has a contact in the FBI. Get Haven, our guy in the docks, to find video footage for us. I’ll speak to Whip about passing the intel along.”

“Wanna go tonight?” Halo asks Saint.

“Fuck yes.” It’s personal for Saint. Briar, his old lady, managed to escape the Brotherhood’s trafficking ring. They were going to sell her to some wealthy bastard to be his slave or some shit.

I punch Halo’s shoulder as he walks by, and his gruff laughter reverberates through the room.

I nod in Saint’s direction. He doesn’t respond. The guy has every right to be pissed at me. I helped kidnap his sister Rae, for Prez. I wonder if Catalina has a line of what she’d accept from me. And I wonder what’ll happen when I cross it, because I always do.

The idea she might leave me hits a little harder than I expect it to.

“I need permission to be absent for a while,” I say to King.

I stand before him stone-cold sober. I’ve slept on what I’m about to do. Thought long and hard about the implications. I saw the look on Cat’s face as I loaded her bags into the back of the truck. She was quiet on the drive to the clubhouse, and I left her in the kitchen talking to Gwen.

Clutch’s old lady seemed taken aback by the idea Cat was mine . . . well, with me. As I left the room, I heard her ask Cat if she was there by choice.

King lights a cigarette and tips his chin toward my chair, three seats down on the right side of the table.

A steady stream of smoke leaves his lips before he speaks. “Is this to do with the Los Reyes chick?”

I crack my neck to the left and run my tongue over my teeth to avoid answering with the first thing that comes to mind. That King can go fuck himself referring to Catalina that way. Instead, I frame a response that says the same thing without being quite so confrontational.

“Catalina is not a member of Los Reyes motorcycle club. Her father was, and he is missing or deceased. She has no other formal ties to the club.”

King leans forward and rests his elbows on the table. “You and I both know it’s not as simple as that. If you weren’t so cunt-struck, you’d see it.”

“What the . . . ?” I lose the cool I’ve been trying to keep. “I’m trying to not be an asshole and do this right, but fuck you, King.”

He stays calm and pulls a bit of loose tobacco from his tongue and flicks it away. “That’s a bit like saying Iris is no longer affiliated with this club if Spark dies.”

When he puts it like that, I do understand his point, and I feel like I know he has the upper hand; but I’m arguing at a disadvantage. I never know how to handle conversations like this. If I concede, will he make another, then another, until I’m buried under all these points and can’t make my own?

“It’s not exactly the same thing. Catalina is not her father.”

King shrugs. “Fine. It’s like me not being affiliated to the club just because my dad died.”

I grind my teeth. This is not going how I planned it.

“Listen,” King says. “There’s a lot that’s wild about what’s happening here. I don’t see all the ins and outs of it yet. At face value, it could be exactly as you think it is. That Catalina is looking for her father, expected us to be hostile to her, and was proactive in subduing you to get answers when she thought you were me. I don’t like that she did that to you, but I get why

she did. It's smart."

"It's exactly that," I say. "She just wants to find her father, and I want to help her. I have a great memory when it comes to faces, you know that. I want to see if Vex can help her in any way. We've done this kind of thing a thousand times before. Finding people who don't want to be found. Getting to the bottom of secrets and lies."

"But," King says, as if my words don't matter in the slightest, "there is a chance that, given she was born and raised within Los Reyes, and given that she has a very obvious set of skills, she's playing all of us for some reason. This could be the classic wooden horse of Troy."

"That old lady of yours been spinning you stories again."

King glances down at the photograph frame on his desk. I've seen it, the image of King on his bike, Rae on the back, ready to ride out. His head is turned to look at her, and she's smiling back at him. "Don't know where the story came from. Greek, definitely. Nothing to do with my old lady, so keep her name out of your mouth in this context. Your . . . woman could be just that. She gets access to us, to the club, to you, and we end up with trouble."

"You know when I messaged you and told you that Henley had been dealt with?"

King nods.

"Yeah, well, Cat killed him."

King stands suddenly. "She did what?"

"You heard."

"What the fuck were you thinking?"

I stand too. "Bates was busy losing his bowels in the shitter. And the mission needed doing. And Catalina, you can call her that by the way, was there and willing to help. She was cold. Threatened to cut his dick off with a knife. She thought it would help build trust with the club."

King slams the table. "She's not a fucking prospect, Niro. I don't need to trust your bitch as far as I can fucking throw her. You had no right to bring her in on club business. There'll be sanctions for that."

"Even though I don't know what those sanctions are, I'd still make the same decision. She could be so good for the club. She can get in places we can't."

King lets out another exasperated sigh before stabbing his half-smoked cigarette out in his ashtray. "You don't get it, do you? Look." He tugs his hand through his hair. "I know you process the world differently than most of

us, so trust me when I say you're not processing this right. You've known this bitch for three—"

"Call her *bitch* one more time and you're gonna need help pulling me off you."

King's eyes go wide with shock. "You're threatening me over pussy you've known less than three days?"

"If I started calling Rae a bitch and pussy, what would you do? You'd beat my ass. You turn the other way every time I say something the brothers don't like, you let me get hit all the fucking time. And I take it, like a man. It's my turn now. You speak out of line about Catalina one more time, I'll go nomad."

There's a knock on the door, and Halo walks in without asking. "Could see things getting heated from the bar. You need help in here, Prez?"

King keeps his eyes on me. "Get Clutch and Bates for me."

"Oh, goodie. A group lecture," I say.

"Sit in your chair before I knock you down," King says. He reaches for his pack of cigarettes and puts another to his lips before lighting it.

"Aren't you wearing a nicotine patch?" Clutch says as he walks in. "Thought Rae had made you quit."

"If I die from a nicotine overdose, it's this fucker's fault." King points in my direction.

Bates follows shortly after and takes his seat next to me. "What's going on?"

"Is it true you were too busy shitting your pants to stop this idiot from taking Catalina with him to deal with Henley?" King says.

Clutch's head snaps in my direction. "You did what?"

I shrug. Whatever.

"I was. Should have told you I wasn't fit to go. Thought I could deal with it. Clearly, I couldn't."

King looks at me. "How did you shake Bates?"

"Waited until he was in the bathroom, hid his keys, then left without him."

Clutch tugs at his hair. He's been growing it longer. Gwen says it makes him look like a Viking. Guess she's got a hard-on for Nordic dick. "How bad is it?" he asks.

King points his cigarette at me. "According to our little ray of sunshine here, Catalina threatened Henley with a knife."

“And then I let her shoot him,” I offer. “Might as well know the whole truth. Made it look like he did it to himself. And you know what, she didn’t so much as flinch. No remorse. She just killed for our club, and you still don’t trust her. I get everyone betrayed you and shit, and now you’re suspicious as fuck, but you don’t need to put it at Catalina’s feet.”

“Catalina’s so-called family killed my father and came to kill me. Have you forgotten that you—”

“Wait. Can we all just chill out?” Bates says. “Everyone take a minute before shit gets said that can’t be taken back.” He squeezes my shoulder hard. “How did this conversation start?”

I sit back in my chair. “I asked for a temporary leave so I can help Catalina find out what happened to her father.”

“You really think that’s a good idea?” Bates asks.

I turn to face him, take a deep breath, and focus on my friend—the guy who has looked out for me for half a decade. I know he won’t lie to me or allow outside opinions to sway him from doing the right thing. “I do.”

“Why?”

Words flood my brain in a jumble. There are threads, one leading to the next before the sentence is fully formed.

Because she’s my—

I can help her with—

Because I want—

Stop fucking asking me—

“Colt,” Bates snaps.

“Because I’m not meant to let go of her yet.” It’s the best answer I can give.

Bates nods, then looks at King. “Permission for me to join him.”

“What the fuck?” Clutch mutters.

“We can’t afford to have both of you gone with these attacks on the club getting bolder,” King says. “Halo and Saint were just in here saying they confirmed the Righteous Brotherhood are rebuilding their trafficking route through the docks.”

Bates rubs his hand over his chin. “Play this out, Prez. He’s going. We all know it. This”—he circles his hand around the room—“is all for show. In his mind, he’s checked out. So let him go. And I think we both know that as soon as he leaves, I’m gonna follow him to make sure he comes back in one piece.”

“Fuck,” King mutters.

“I don’t need you to come with me,” I say to Bates. “I don’t need any of you.”

“Well, tough shit. I’m coming, you ungrateful asshole.”

“Fine,” King says. “If you’re so set on going, we’re gonna have some rules. No more than two weeks. Get Vex to help as much as he can without distracting him from the Brotherhood. Do as much of the roadwork as you can before you even get on your bikes. Get him to tag you guys up. I want James Bond–level shit. I want tracking devices everywhere. Your bikes, your boots, your belts, between the cheeks of your ass. I want check-ins. I want Vex to know where you are going, who you are meeting with. I want photographs when you get there. Of people you meet, of plates from vehicles. If this is a setup in any way, I want to know every single one of your last movements and moments.” He turns to Bates. “And your only job is to keep Niro alive. It’s not to help him look, it’s not to play Sherlock fucking Holmes. I want you armed and covering his back. I don’t give a fuck what happens to Catalina. You are not there to save her in any capacity.”

What the fuck. “Wait. No.” I say. “What if she has an accident or—”

“Those are my rules.” King slams the table. “Anything she does could be a setup. If you won’t look out for yourself and this club, I will.” He turns his gaze back to my friend. “Are you clear, Bates?”

“As crystal, Prez.”

“I still don’t like this, but you have my blessing. Make sure the arrangements are made for the tattoo studio and any other club business you need to wrap up. Let me know when you’re heading out. Oh, and under no circumstances are you to go all the way to Cali-fucking-fornia and launch any kind of revenge mission on Los Reyes. You do that and I’ll cut your Outlaws ink from your skin with a knife myself. Do not fuck this up. Do not deviate from the plan.” King flicks his hand in the direction of the door. “Now get the fuck out of my office.”

“Can I speak with you in private first?” I ask.

King nods and glances to Clutch and Bates with a tip of his head to leave. When the door shuts, I take a deep breath. “You think your old lady would . . . like, talk to me and shit?”

His eyes narrow. “What do you mean, *talk to you and shit*?”

“About, you know, my . . .” The word *diagnoses* sits heavy in my chest. “I hate the labels. Always have. But I think it might be time to manage things

a bit better.”

King runs his hand through his hair. “You can’t talk to someone else?”

I look at the ground and bite down the shame that sometimes creeps in when I think too hard about who I am. It doesn’t feel great that he doesn’t want me around his old lady. “Don’t want to talk to anyone at all. Fucking hated therapists and counselors. Rae feels one step removed from that bullshit.”

“So, why are you? Why now?”

I look up at my prez and say the only word that makes any of it make sense. “Catalina.”

“Fuck,” he mutters. “I’ll ask Rae tonight. Then I’ll think about it. Let you know when I decide.”

“Okay.” I turn to walk to the door.

“Hey, Niro.”

I place my hand on the door but don’t turn around. “Yeah?”

“Prove me wrong about Catalina, yeah? The right woman has a way of making you want to be a better man. If Cat’s that for you, then it’s a point in her favor.”

CATALINA

Two days later, a loud hammering wakes me from sleep. Niro's arms slip from around me as he climbs out of bed.

I know intellectually there isn't enough time for Los Reyes to find out what I've been doing in New Jersey since arriving from California, but it doesn't stop my heart from racing at the loud knocking.

I glance at my phone and see it's nearly ten in the morning. We stayed up last night and watched an old-school horror marathon. *The Exorcist*, *Nightmare on Elm Street*, and *The Amityville Horror*.

The last two days have been a blur. I've been to the tattoo studio and watched how immersed Niro gets in his work. With his client's permission, he freestyles his own flourishes and details even after the design they agreed on is placed on his client's skin, and his creations are utterly breathtaking.

Delicate and bold. Unique.

It's made me consider getting one, finally.

I've spent hours with Vex trying to understand what happened. And I've spent just as many hours grappling with how traitorous this all feels. I gave him email addresses and phone numbers so he could try to hack them. But while I have no new information yet, my belief that Los Reyes acted maliciously has grown.

Niro pulls on some jeans and grabs his gun from the drawer in the side table.

"You greet everyone with that?" I ask.

"Can't be too careful," he says.

I slip out of bed and pull some clothes on. Leggings and one of Niro's T-

shirts will suffice. As I make my way quietly to the kitchen, I hear raised, boisterous voices.

“Wanted to check out this domestic sitch you’ve got going on . . .”

“Never thought I’d see the day . . .”

“Fuck you both,” I hear Niro reply, but there is humor in his tone.

I release a breath. It sounds like these are friends.

“You got any of those cookies lying around?”

When I step through the doorway, I see Halo and Vex sitting at the kitchen table.

“I should knock you both sideways for getting us out of bed, not give you fucking cookies,” Niro mutters.

I grin as he grabs the tin.

“Morning,” he says, brushing a kiss to my forehead as he walks by.

“Morning.”

“Hey, Cat,” Halo says. “You settling in okay with our brother?”

I want to say it’s not permanent, but I also don’t want to embarrass Niro in front of these men. “Just fine. You guys want coffee?”

“Please,” Vex says. “I need at least six cups before morning makes any sense to me, and I’ve been awake all night.”

“What were you doing?” Niro asks as I spoon coffee into the filter.

“I hacked Los Reyes.”

I drop the spoon, and it clatters on the counter. “What? Someone opened one of those links you were going to send?”

A shiver of fear ripples through me. It’s one thing to extricate myself from Los Reyes in a bid to find the truth. But it’s an altogether different thing to be party to a rival club hacking their messages.

Vex shrugs like it’s no big deal. “I sent a link to Felipe for a porn website that, when opened, left some malware on his phone so I could extract everything he has on there. By the way, the horny fucker must have a major hard-on for you. His search prompts revolve around your name and your looks. Oh, and women stepping on men in heels. He’s watched that one four times.”

“The idea of him jerking off to images he’s pretending are you makes me ragey,” Niro says. “I’ll kill him if he ever steps foot in Jersey. It’s bad enough the fucker texts you.”

“How did you know about that?” I ask, my mouth dry.

“I read the messages on your phone,” he says, as if there were nothing

wrong with what he'd done. "They flashed up one morning while you were in the shower, so I read them."

"For fuck's sake," Vex mutters.

I rub my hands over my face. "You don't get to just read my messages."

"Why not?" he asks. "Have you got something to hide? His first message was some why-aren't-you-responding-baby bullshit so I knew you weren't replying to the slimeball."

Halo grins. "Dude. It's not about whether she has anything to hide. It's privacy. Trust. And you could've just asked her about the messages. Strikes me if Cat wants to find her dad badly enough that she was willing to come here and try kidnapping our president, she'd have talked to you. Plus, don't be a dick. Don't do that again. You wouldn't want her checking your phone, right?"

"She could if she wanted. I'm an open book." Niro looks at Halo for a second as his jaw twitches, before he turns to me. "Sorry, Cat. Didn't think it was a big deal, but it's clear it is. Won't happen again."

"Holy shit. Did our boy just grow up and actually apologize?" Vex asks.

The fact Vex is shocked by Niro's apology suggests it's a rare occurrence, but that doesn't make me feel better. "It's not that easy, Niro. You don't get to do big things that ruin trust and then just say sorry and expect it to be over."

The sound of Halo's laughter fills the kitchen. "You get used to it after a while, Cat."

Vex nods. "Niro never means what he does. He often acts without thinking. Just does the thing that's at top of his mind and rolls with it."

Niro takes a step toward me, and on instinct I take a step back. For anyone else, these would be major red flags. But I already know Niro doesn't think the same way as others do. "Your phone was just sitting there, buzzing. I was only gonna turn the volume off, but I saw his name and it pissed me off. By the time you got out of the shower, I'd done a dozen other things and forgotten about it. I didn't look at anything else. Didn't try to hack into your phone or anything."

I breathe a sigh of relief. I think of Felipe's messages, his uncomfortable attempts at dirty talk and control. The way I pacify him to keep my options open for a return to Los Reyes. While I don't like his attention, it provides me with a lot of aerial cover. The other brothers leave me alone because Felipe is the president's son.

But it also means I'm on a collision course, with him wanting to formalize our relationship. And there is no way on earth I am signing up to be his old lady. To sit on the sidelines and watch while he goes off and has all the fun. Plus, he's already hinted that my involvement in club business would stop if we were together, because he wouldn't want his wife "at risk."

I don't even know why I'm thinking about that, because I don't want Felipe.

How could I when I've experienced Niro?

I look up at him. It's clear there's more going on here than his ADHD. I don't know what it is. But his explanation is genuine. I see it in his eyes. And more, as I get to know him, I'm realizing he doesn't lie, even if it could get him out of trouble.

There's more to this man than I think even his brothers see.

"Fine. Next time, ask."

"Do we get to have make-up sex now?" He places his hand around my neck.

Halo chuckles. "Wait until we've left, yeah?"

"We didn't exactly argue," I tell him.

"Felt like it. And these two clowns interrupted what I wanted to do with you when you woke up, which included—"

"Stop." I push him away and turn to Vex. "Ignore him. You said you worked all night and hacked Felipe's phone. You wouldn't be here if you hadn't found something. What do you know?"

"Spoilsport," Niro grumbles and slaps my ass before he moves back to the coffee maker.

"Good luck with him," Halo says, laughter crinkling the corner of his eyes. "You're gonna need it."

I want to refute what he's saying but can't. "Of that, I have no doubt."

Vex leans back in his chair. "I looked at messages from five months ago, for the duration of the time they were supposed to be in Iron Outlaws territory and just before it. They made a stop at a house on the outskirts of Joplin, Missouri. Belongs to Diego Ramirez." Vex shows me an image on his phone.

I know that face, and I reach for my own phone. "Look." The image Niro drew of one of the people he killed matches him exactly. Mamá remembered his road name. "Lobo."

"What?" Niro says, putting all four coffee cups on the table.

“Lobo. Means wolf. El Lobo. But Lobo for short. He was a Los Reyes nomad.”

Halo glances at Niro. “Feels like if you need a place to start looking for her father, you might want to see what he had been doing there.”

“Spoke to King this morning,” Vex said. “I wanted to come with you and see if he left behind any tech I could dig into. King said no. Wants me focused on the Righteous”—he glances up at me and corrects himself—“other shit.”

“We don’t have a chapter in Missouri,” Halo says. “But to the best of my knowledge, no one has claimed Joplin. So you should be on neutral ground to wear your cut. I’d advise caution in some areas of Missouri, but I think you’ll be fine where you are going.”

“You ready to ride, cariño?”

I was ready for a roller coaster when I set out on this trip. I knew there would be ups and downs. But this feels more like one of those slingshot rides, the ones where they crank you back and shoot you into the air attached to a piece of hopefully strong bungee.

“Yeah. Feels better than sitting around doing nothing.”

“I’ll keep looking, Cat,” Vex says. “In between the other shit I gotta do. From Felipe’s phone, I have access to the rest of the club. If I find anything, I’ll tell Niro.”

“Take my number so you can text me directly,” I say.

Vex shakes his head. “You know that’s not how it works. You become an old lady, might be different. But right now, the favor I’m doing is for my brother. Not you.”

I want to rage against that answer, even as I understand it. Plus, I don’t want to offend the man who found out more in twenty-four hours than I did in the months since my father died.

Niro’s arms slip around my waist, and he nuzzles against my neck. “It’s okay, Cat. I’ll tell you everything. You can even check my phone whenever you want to make sure I’m not hiding anything from you.”

I place my hands over his and try to force myself to believe him. Various Los Reyes MC members have told me many things that never materialized.

He squeezes me once more, then let’s go. “I’ll call Bates.”

Over the next hour, the generosity of the Iron Outlaws overwhelms me. I meet Halo’s father, Wrinkle, who brings a bundle of cash for Niro. He splits it in two and gives half to Bates, who has arrived with his bike packed up.

Spark swings by with two weapons with the serial numbers etched off them. Halo, as road captain, prepares the route to avoid any obvious crossing of other clubs' and chapters' marked areas. It's wise. While brothers aren't scared of anyone, nobody wants to accidentally cause a turf war or get shot.

Vex hooks Niro and Bates up with trackers and panic alarms. And I'm surprised when he gives me one. "This is to help Niro if he loses you," Vex says.

I fire off a message to Neva to tell her I'm on the move, that we got a lead. I don't mention it's Lobo. She doesn't reply, but I don't expect her to. It's a long ride home, and I feel bad I'm making her do it alone.

Niro is standing by the window, glaring at something. I loop my arm through his and try to see what he's looking at. "Who put that frown on your face?"

He glances down at me, then looks back outside. "Clutch is checking our bikes."

My heart speeds up a little. Neva is right. I can't assume they are all friendly. "Why? I don't care if he's the VP, if that motherfucker is tampering with my bike, I'm going to kill him." I move to head outside and tell him to take his hands off my ride, but Niro catches my wrist at the last moment and spins me back to him.

"He's making sure they're fit for the trip."

"What?"

"He works in our garage and is great with bikes. He's doing a road check, making sure we're good to go."

"So, you're standing here frowning because he's checking our bikes are *good*?"

"Only I get to check your bike."

"Sometimes more eyes on a machine are a good thing, no?"

"No, cariño. You're mine. Which means your bike is mine to take care of. I don't like the idea that another man's hands are touching what's mine."

I open and close my mouth like a goldfish. "I honestly don't know where to start breaking that down."

Niro smiles, an honest-to-God smile. "Eventually, you'll stop trying and just roll with it."

"I want to be your equal, Niro. Not your property."

He slips his hand around the back of my neck and squeezes it tightly. "And one day, you'll realize you can be both."

“It’s impossible. You know this.”

“That’s because your rules are linear, Catalina. And I’m not a linear guy.” The kiss he gives me is heated. “You just need to bend a little. I get why you’re rigid. It’s the only way you’ve survived this far. Life’s taught you that you need to kick ass and take names. But your life will expand in ways you can’t possibly imagine if you just bend a little.”

And as the three of us get underway and hit the highway, I can’t help but think about what life would look like if I did.

NIRO

Riding behind Catalina for ten hours is the shit nightmares are made of for my cock.

I'm used to riding in formation. I'm used to knowing my place on ride outs.

But I needed to mix things up for this trip. I asked Bates to take lead, and I'd take the rear, so Cat is sandwiched between us. It was the safest place to put her and gives me the long view. I have her back. And what a sexy back it is. Her ass is two perfect peaches wrapped in leather. And I think about fucking her while she sits across me, the way she's hugging that bike of hers.

Hence, my cock has been up and down like one of those inflatable men you see wiggling outside car dealerships.

It's a little after eleven when Cat lets us into our hotel room in Indianapolis as Bates lets himself into the room next door. Halo made the booking and at first jokingly suggested three rooms, one for each of us. When I told him to fuck off, he then suggested one room for all of us and said he didn't know if I was in the mood to share. Not gonna lie, Bates and I have had threesomes occasionally in the past. But the idea of sharing Catalina was like a hot blade through an artery. My fist glanced off his shoulder because the former Navy SEAL ducked, which made Halo laugh even harder. We ended up booking two rooms.

"Dios, that bed looks so comfortable," she says wearily. "But I really need to shower."

I place both our bags on the floor and tug her to me. She wraps her hands around my waist and places her head against my chest. "It was a long ride,

huh?”

Catalina looks up at me. “I feel like I might never get warm again.”

I unzip her sturdy leather jacket and the thick fleece layer she wears beneath it. “I know a way to warm you up.”

She smiles like I hoped she would. I hate seeing her face anything other than happy. “If it happens under a long, hot shower, you can do anything you want.”

“Anything?” I remove my own lined leather jacket and hoodie before removing hers. Under the fleece layer, she has a hoodie of her own. Under that, a long-sleeve T-shirt, and beneath that, a thermal vest. “Jesus Christ, babe. It’s like pass-the-parcel. How many layers have you got on?”

“Clearly not enough, because I’m still cold. I hate winters in the north.”

I chuckle as I tug the thermal over her head until she’s in her bra, leather pants, and boots. “I ever tell you you’re gorgeous?”

“It doesn’t matter if you did or didn’t. I can never hear it too many times.”

I drop to my knees and remove her boots.

“I can do that. You don’t need to—”

I glare up at her. “Babe. I don’t get on my knees for someone else unless I really want to. Let me take your boots off, Miss Independent. I know you can remove your own footwear. But in this instance, you don’t need to.”

She sighs. “Fine.”

Then I remove my own. When I stand, her hands slip beneath my T-shirt and lift it over my head. I like the way her fingertips feel as they brush over my abs. I catch sight of us in the mirror that’s hanging over the desk. My body covered in ink. Her skin virgin. “You ever think about getting a tattoo, babe?”

“Yes, but I can never settle on what design I want. And I worry if I change my mind this often thinking about it, I’ll definitely change my mind about it once it’s on my skin.”

I place a row of kisses along the warm skin of her shoulder. “If you ever decide, come see me. You let anyone else touch your skin and I’ll kill them.”

She slides her fingers to the button of my leathers. “So controlling, yet so sweet.”

“You have no idea. I’d kill anyone for you.”

It takes another minute to get naked. Leathers, thermal leggings, wool socks, underwear.

When we're done, I grab a condom and lead Catalina to the bathroom before turning on the shower. I'm grateful Halo booked us here and not some roadside motel with tiny bathrooms and miserable water pressure. The bathroom is bright and clean, and when I turn the faucet, the water hits the tub with force.

Once it's warm enough, I help her step into the shower and watch as she lets the water sluice over her. The moan she emits hits my cock full on, and I climb in to join her. We kiss messily beneath the spray as water splashes off us in a million different directions. Cat's giggle breaks us apart as she brushes hair and water from her face.

Fucking love it when she's happy.

I drag my fingertips along her collarbone, between her breasts. I cup the weight of her breast in my palm, rubbing my thumb over a light brown nipple that peaks. I bend to draw it into my mouth. I love the taste and feel of her as I suck hard.

The other hand I slip between her legs to cup her.

Catalina gasps at the intrusion.

"Too much?" I ask.

She nods her head. "Intense."

"Let me take care of you." Using the shampoo from a container on the wall, I wash her hair, and she surprises the fuck out of me by washing mine. I'm not used to having people do nice things for me. If I had a gauge on emotions, I'd probably say it's like feeling cherished. As I don't, I simply revel in how good it feels.

Simply being around Catalina, doing things with her, makes me feel calmer.

Less chaotic.

Except, I still get to do everything I usually do for my club.

And she doesn't shy away from any of it. From me. From what we do.

Being accepted and unjudged is . . .

I blow out a breath and reach for the soap. Gently, I wash her, easing my palms along her waist, over her breasts, between her legs. I've never much been a fan of this kind of intimacy, and it takes me a moment to not feel stupid doing it.

But one look at Catalina's face and I can tell she likes it as much as I like doing it.

Will this all end in sex?

Absolutely.

But is this perhaps the *more* that King and Clutch and Spark have found? The more beyond the purely physical release of sex. It's the more that causes people to do strange things, like propose or imagine a picket fence and a happy fucking family.

I gently nudge Catalina under the shower. She tips her head back and rinses her hair and body. Soapy water sluices between her breasts and the dip that leads to her cunt. I wonder if she'd ever let me take a photograph of her just like this for the days when I'm on the road.

I could jerk one out in record time to this image.

When she's soap free, she switches our places so I'm under the hot water, then switches us back again before she washes me. Gentle hands tease as they explore my body. I watch as they stroke over years of ink and history on my skin, soaping and rinsing until every inch of me is clean and warm again.

Her hand slides down to my cock, and she grips it firmly. When she begins to slide her palm up and down between us, I close my eyes and let the sensation rid me of the fatigue I felt after a long day's ride.

Lips closing around me make me jump, and I open my eyes to Catalina on her knees.

I suck in air between my teeth. "Suck it hard."

She does. Her lips tighten their hold, she sucks more firmly until she's tugging on my head. If she does that for too long, I'm gonna blow. Never considered myself a fast trigger, but there's something about those lips of hers and the visual of her on her knees, water trailing over her tits, that makes me want to blow deep down her throat.

I step back, feeling the loss when I slip from her mouth.

"I was enjoying that." Catalina pouts.

I help her stand. "So was I. And that was the problem. I want to fuck you. How do you want it?"

"Subtle." The sound of Catalina's laughter does something to my insides I can't put a name to. It's like I've heard it all my life yet I'm hearing it for the first time. It's the sweetest fucking sound that chips at the edges of me that don't usually care how someone else feels.

Gripping her hips, I turn her so she faces the wall. Then I tug her hips out a little so she's bent forward, her palms on the cool tile. "I thought you asked me how I wanted it."

I grab the condom and put it on. "You were taking too long." But I wait

for the reassurance from her that she's cool with what I'm about to do.

Biting my lip, I wait until I feel the wiggle of her hips.

"Now *you're* taking too long," she says.

I line myself up with her soft pussy as water pounds on her back from the shower. I slide into her in one firm thrust that has us both gasping.

"Never felt so good," I say as my balls bottom out against her and I nudge her forward.

"Same," she says, but the words come on a breath.

We move against each other as if we can't bear waiting another second. I swear to God, it's like her ass vibrates. Up and down in fast strokes while I pound into her from behind. I wrap a hand around her so I can reach her clit. I close my eyes as water rains down on my head, but it heightens my senses. All I can feel is her warmth, her body responding to mine, her clit becoming firm beneath my fingertips.

"Niro," Catalina cries out. "Just like that. Please."

When I've had sex in the past, I've been a selfish lover. Usually disinterested in anything but my own means. Sometimes the person I was with would come, sometimes they wouldn't. I never felt that was my responsibility. But with Catalina, I want her to get everything she needs from me.

I bite down the idea that it will make her less likely to leave.

And suddenly I need my hands on her. Everywhere. Stroking down her spine, gripping her breast to squeeze her nipple. I want to be in her and on her and all around her. I want her over me and under me and available to me.

Most of all, I want her to come because of me. I want her pussy to squeeze me. I want her soaked through want of me.

"Jesus, Cat," I grunt, as I pound into her.

Unable to control myself, I bite her shoulder, and slide a hand around her throat. She doesn't tell me to stop, so I squeeze a little harder and she comes. The orgasm rattles through her in cries of pleasure and ripples through her pussy.

And I gasp as my cum explodes within her. Deep, pulsing waves that leave my knees so weak, I have to slam my palm against the wall over Catalina's head as my sight flickers and stars float in my peripheral vision.

I slow my hips, wanting the feeling to last, while knowing I need to deal with the condom between us. The last few thrusts ease both of us down before I pull out of her.

I help her stand and face me. There is a red mark on her neck where I held her, and I press my lips to it. “Did I hurt you?”

She shakes her head. “I wouldn’t want to pass out, but the way you gripped me? It felt possessive. I never thought I’d want to be possessed by anybody, Niro. Ever.”

“And now?”

“I’m bending.” She uses the words from our conversation this morning.

I wonder what weird plan fate had in mind when it sent her to kidnap me.

Mistaken identity. She thought I was King. If she’d actually kidnapped King, she’d probably be dead now.

And if there hadn’t been this connection between us, I think I would be dead now too.

I stroke the pad of my thumb along her cheek and kiss her. Softly this time.

Sweetly, without words or hurry, because tomorrow is never promised.

And I have no idea what’s going to happen once we leave this hotel in the morning.

CATALINA

I slowly open my eyes and adjust to the darkness.

Niro is wrapped around me, and for the first time in my life, I realize how good that can feel with the right person. With Felipe, it always felt controlling. The whole big spoon, little spoon thing had an integral hierarchy to it that made me itch. I was too hot. Too uncomfortable. And would look for any excuse to extricate myself to a cooler part of the bed. But with Niro, I want to snuggle in closer, be held a little tighter, which is so unlike me.

My brain fires back online as I remember where I am and why I'm here. With as little movement as possible, I reach for my phone. It's twenty minutes before six, when we need to get out of bed.

I turn in Niro's arms, and even though I jostle him, he doesn't wake up. The man sleeps like the dead. It's unsurprising, given how much energy he burns during the day. I like that about him.

I study his face. High cheekbones and long lashes that I envy. In sleep he looks younger, happier, more at ease. When he's awake, he looks tougher, harder. Unable to resist, I lean forward and brush my lips over his. As I do, his arms tighten around me, then relax.

"Morning," he says finally. His voice is rough.

"Hey."

His eyes flicker open and at first struggle to stay that way. "Why are you awake so early?"

"No idea." I trace my finger along the silver of his scar. "Who did this to you?"

Niro reaches for my finger and presses a kiss to it. "A man who was

trying to kill Arthur ‘Camelot’ Hills, King’s father.”

There’s a sadness in the way he says it. “I’m so sorry. Was Camelot killed?”

Niro rolls over onto his back and pulls me to his chest. “Not then, no. My sister was.”

“Jesus, Niro. Lo siento mucho. How?”

“I don’t talk about it.”

“Of course. I understand. I’m sorry to pry.”

I place my palm on his chest, and Niro covers it with his own. We lie there for several minutes, and I’m about to get out of bed when he starts to talk again.

“I was supposed to be looking after her for the day. I was fifteen, she was nine. Different dads and all that. She was mom’s second chance at being a parent. It was summer break. I wanted to be out with my friends, but I’d caused some shit at school and was grounded. I don’t even remember the reason why now.”

He slides his fingers between mine and holds my hand.

“You were both so young,” I say. I don’t even need to know what happens next to empathize with a teen who was left to look after his sister.

“Maybe. Mom told me my job for the summer was to look after Lacey. I was bored. I played video games and tried to work out with this paltry set of dumbbells a neighbor had given me because I couldn’t afford to go to a gym. Anything to keep my mind off the fact my friends were probably down the shore, chatting up girls, swimming. And Lacey was constantly at me, asking me if I’d play a game with her, would I make her some lunch, would I stop playing video games so she could watch *Alice in Wonderland*, an animated movie she loved. And I remember thinking what a pain in the ass she was.”

We found Wonderland.

Oh, god. All this time I’ve been trying to ignore the twinge of jealousy about who the ‘we’ was. I touch the inked letters gently. “This is for her?”

He nods, lets go of my hand, and rubs his across his face.

“You don’t need to tell me if it’s too painful.”

“Might as well get it all out so you know the truth. She pissed me off enough that I thought *fuck it*. I grabbed the twenty bucks I knew Mom kept in a tin in the kitchen and decided to leave. Wasn’t really thinking about Lacey or Mom or consequences. I just needed to get out of the house. I needed to do . . . something. It took me twenty minutes to walk to the shore. I saw these

two bikers parked up. They were smoking and swearing. I remember thinking it must be amazing to do whatever the fuck you wanted. Drive bikes all day. Be fearless. There were all these women in stars-and-stripes bikinis with their tits hanging out.”

“A fifteen-year-old’s wet dream,” I say, and Niro smiles sadly.

“Yeah. So, I’m walking around, watching them, thinking about going up to one of them and asking how you join something like that, when one of them breaks off and walks into a store. I decide he’s the guy I’m gonna ask. His patch said his name was Camelot, and that he’s the president. I didn’t know shit about club structures back then, but I knew what a president was. I bugged him on the way in, asking how you join, and he just looked down at me. And we have this conversation.”

I smile as Niro tells me pieces. It says a lot about him and Camelot.

“Don’t know why the fuck you’re bothering me, kid. You’re standing between me and some smokes.”

“Because you’re standing between me and joining your club.”

“You got balls, kid. I’ll give you that. Learn to ride. Grow some fucking facial hair. Decide if you want to work for the man or be the man. Those balls you got, grow ’em some more. Toughen the fuck up—your arms are skinnier than pool noodles. Learn to ride. Be fuckin’ heroic.”

“He sounds like an interesting man. Perrito wouldn’t give the young men in his club the time of day.”

“Best man I ever knew. Even some of the shit he pulled later, it was always because he wanted to do what he thought was best. Anyway, I wait outside the shop while he goes inside. I had more questions. Then I see three guys in different cuts, rival colors, running down the alley behind the store. So, I decide to follow them. Two of them go in the store through the rear door and come out with Camelot, who’s furious. They have knives pressed up against his back. The third guy starts to beat on him. I do the only thing I can think of. I grab a brick from a pile of builder’s rubble and charge the guy. Smack him so hard, I swear I heard his skull crack. Then it’s two on two. I just remember feeling invincible, Cat. All my anger at having to stay home and look after Lacey. Being grounded. Hating my life. It all just poured out. There were no considerations for danger or getting into trouble. It all just sort of happened. Until I heard Lacey scream at me to stop. She’d followed me. And at the same time, the guy I’m fighting uses my distraction to slice my face with while the other guy starts firing off shots.” Niro inhales sharply.

“Camelot’s friend, Wrinkle, runs out of the store, and he and Camelot deal with the three guys. I don’t remember much except watching the pool of blood grow beneath my sister’s head. Camelot gave me his white T-shirt to press to my face, but I couldn’t feel it. Couldn’t feel anything. Blood dripped from my face onto the black asphalt. He told me I’d done good, and that he’d take care of everything.”

I throw my arms around Niro, pressing my chest to his side. “I’m so sorry. That’s a brutal introduction to this life. What happened next?”

Niro wraps his arms tightly around me. “As good as his word, Camelot cleaned everything up. He came to the hospital to see me. Paid the medical bills. Told me there was a place with the Outlaws for me if I wanted it, that I’d have to prospect for the club. He and Wrinkle cleaned shit up, made it right with the shopkeeper. Paid off the cops and made it look like both me and my sister got caught in some gang crossfire and that Camelot had saved me after I’d been knifed. I made him promise me he wouldn’t tell his club the truth. I wanted to be a part of it one day and I didn’t want to be known as the guy who let his sister get killed. Camelot had told me to be fucking heroic, and I certainly didn’t feel it. Four days later, I showed up at the club with a face full of stitches because Mom kicked me out. She couldn’t get past it being my responsibility to look out for my sister and that we shouldn’t have been down by the shore in the first place. Honestly, I think it was the excuse she needed to get rid of me. Camelot gave me a new home.”

“Do you have any kind of relationship with your mom now?”

“Camelot wanted me finish school, but I was even more disruptive back then. Kept getting suspended for shit but stuck it out as long as I could. When I finally dropped out, the school didn’t bother finding me. Then I prospected. Camelot sponsored me to become a brother when I turned eighteen. Wrinkle seconded it. And they both kept my secret. It was my first real experience of a man living up to his word. I went to my mom’s house once I had my cut. Thought she’d be proud of me. Turned out she’d sold up and moved six months earlier. I saw her about four years ago. She’d aged. She saw me, looked at me long and hard, then put her head down and walked by me without a word.”

I prop myself up on one elbow and move his hair from his forehead. In the quiet darkness of the room, he’s shared his hardest secrets. “It’s unfair, the rough kind of life you’ve had.”

“It’s her fucking loss.” His words are hard, but I hear the hurt etched in

them.

“And yours. I wish you better things, Niro.”

He looks up at me. “Do those better things include you, Catalina?”

I struggle with what to say next. I thought I knew what I was doing. I thought I had the semblance of a plan to build a life I want. I want to be part of a club, and not just because of my relationship to a man in it. But I really like the man I’m in bed with. “It means a lot that you just shared something so deeply personal with me.”

“That’s not a yes then?”

“It’s not a no either. It’s—” The alarm on Niro’s phone makes us both jump, and I take the opportunity to climb out of bed and turn it off. “We need to get going.”

Niro sighs. “Yeah, we do.”

I know he’s letting me off the hook from answering, but eventually, I’m going to have to decide what I want. As we pull on our clothes, I realize I feel like I’ve lived my whole life forced into compromises. I would have loved to have grown up with my grandparents in Tonalá, but my father wanted a different life for us that included an American education. I would have loved to have a normal childhood, but with a father who continued to live his life as a member of Los Reyes, it was impossible. And once I embraced what the MC life was all about, once I realized who *I* was and what I was capable of, I was told my skills were valuable, but not enough to treat me as an equal. So, I do what I do on the fringes, hoping someone will open a true motorcycle club up to women someday.

Perhaps I’ve spent my whole life in search of a life that isn’t even possible.

Perhaps it’s a dream I can’t achieve.

If that’s true, I need to learn to accept it. But I’m not ready to yet.

Once dressed, Niro takes my hand and kisses my knuckles. “I know you’re struggling, Cat. And I’ll give you space to wrestle with the way you feel for as long as you need. But you’re mine, whether you like it or not. You might leave here today, depending on what we find. You might even go back to that fucker, Felipe. Doesn’t matter where you are, who you sleep with, or how long it takes— you’ll realize your place is right here with me.”

And before I can respond, he grabs our bags and walks out of the room.

NIRO

“What’s got your face looking like that?” Bates says when I meet him in the corridor.

“Don’t ask.” The door to our room has clicked shut behind me.

“Where’s Cat?”

“Still in the room, thinking about whether I feature in her future plans or not.”

Bates slaps a hand on my shoulder. “You know you can’t just decide that for her, right?”

I shrug. “Why the hell not? We’re good with each other. Can you imagine having an old lady like her?”

“No. Definitely not. I don’t want one who has the skills to cut off my junk or poison my dinner.”

I stop walking. “She doesn’t get we’re compatible. We like the same things. To ride. To do whatever we want. To live outside the law. And I like that she doesn’t make a big fucking mess everywhere.”

Bates laughs. “You realize how unstable that all sounds? It’s like you’re picking out a new dishwasher. We like the same things. To have clean dishes. And to be environmentally friendly. And not leak and cause a big mess.”

“Fuck you.”

“Have you considered that all those things might be the reason she’s the worst possible woman for you? Sometimes you need the person to anchor you, not run off and encourage you.”

I rub my fingers along my jaw, scratching my scruff. “You don’t get it.”

“I’m trying, man. Have you told her how she makes you feel?”

“Fuck off.”

Bates’s face turns serious. “I mean it. Niro, you’ve always marched to the beat of your own drum. And I know you’re utterly sincere about why you and Cat should be together. They are good reasons. Language to describe feelings isn’t your strong point. Hell, feelings aren’t either. But you might want to dig deep and try. If she leaves, how will that make you feel?”

I think about his words and what I just said to Cat. “She’ll regret it.”

“That’s your ASPD talking.” He shakes his head. “I’m not asking how she’ll feel. I’m asking how *you* will feel. Would you miss her? Would you feel lonely? Would you wish you still got to wake up next to her every morning? And if you felt any of those things, why would you feel that way?”

“You asking me if I love her?”

“No, Colt.” He rarely uses my real name. It stops the roll my head is on. “I already see that you do in your own way. I’m just waiting for you to acknowledge it.”

I sigh and rub my sternum with my knuckles. Something aches there.

The door to our room opens, and Catalina steps into the hallway. She’s braided her hair, and she’s bundled up against the cold. I wonder if she’ll be warm enough, or if she wants coffee, or if she’s forgiven me for being a dick. I think I’m gonna tell her about my ASPD. I’ve hinted at it before, but I think it’s time to be real with her. It might push her away. But it might also help her understand me.

“Morning, sweetheart,” Bates says, and I glare at him. “Steady there, cowboy, I’m not hitting on your girl.”

“Morning,” Catalina says as she joins us. She’s smiling, but it doesn’t reach her eyes. I want to say something funny to cheer her up. Instead, I dig into my feelings as Bates suggested. I feel bad that I caused it.

“Sorry for putting pressure on you,” I say.

“Thank you for saying that,” she says. “I have a sneaking suspicion you might be right, but that kind of pressure doesn’t help me think things through clearly. Doesn’t make my choices any easier. But let’s get moving.”

It takes us another eight hours on the road to get to Joplin. We stop to grab lunch and eat hoagies while leaning against our bikes. And the whole time, my head spins. Bates’s words turn into thoughts about my sister. How I really felt about her dying. I think I buried that too. Perhaps there’s more than one thing I should talk about with Rae if King sets it up. And then I think

about what those sessions will be like, and next thing I know, I'm wondering what happened to Mr. Owens who taught me math, and how many episodes of *Law & Order* there are, and how I should set up a social media account for the tattoo studio. One thought after another until I can barely keep up.

When we pull up at the address, I've got a headache, and I'm confused as fuck. Bates said to tap into my feelings. And I'm pissed off and happy and sad and frustrated and fuck knows how many other things.

The house has seen better days. A single story with reddish-brown siding. The porch is sagging, held up by four posts in various stages of rot. There are papers and flyers and unopened newspapers scattered over it. A wire fence sits around the perimeter. Nobody has lived here in a while, that much is clear.

"This is going to be a dead end, isn't it?" Catalina says.

I squeeze her hand. "No. Just makes it easier to break in. It's not like we're expecting anyone to be home either. We know Lobo is dead and buried in the Pines."

Bates returns from his quick ride around the block of the property and parks next to where we're standing. "Nothing around back. Looks as neglected all the way around. You want to go inside, I'll keep watch. Revving my bike is your sign you got company."

"Ready?" I ask Cat.

"Let's do it." We walk up to the porch, and she looks in the mailbox and under planters as I press my face to the window. Someone was obviously in the middle of renovating but appears to have given up. The place is lived in. There's a coffee cup on a work bench in the middle of the room. Channels are ripped out in the plasterboard; wires hang capped and loose from the ceiling. But there's a sofa covered in clear plastic.

"Find anything?" I ask.

"Nothing."

"Okay, stand back, I'm gonna kick the door in."

Cat puts her hand to my chest as I move to do as I say. "While I love the whole visual of you chambering a kick to put that lock out, can we use a little more finesse?"

"What do you suggest?"

She pulls a little leather case out of her inside pocket. And in less time than it would take me to kick the shit out of the frame, Catalina has broken in.

“That was hot, not gonna lie.”

The smile she gives me is genuine. It warms me inside. I hope what happened this morning, when I pressured her to stay with me again, isn't unfixable.

“Let's go,” she says, but this time, I hold her back.

“I'm going in first.”

She rolls her eyes and then gestures for me to do so. I push the door open slowly. Just because the place looks empty, doesn't mean it is. The musty, damp smell is the first thing to hit me. Catalina follows, holding one of the weapons Spark gave me before I left. I give her a hand signal to stay behind me.

Catalina nods.

The hallway is painted a nasty lavender on every wall, including the ceiling. The floor is pine with layers of varnish that's now chipped and peeling. There's a room to my right that's empty, also painted in the same vile color. To my right is the room that's being rewired. The kitchen is a masterpiece. Whoever was flipping this house is a very capable craftsman.

The first bedroom is beautiful too. A large bed with brown-and-cream bedding dominates the space.

“This is nice,” Cat whispers, and I nod in agreement.

Clothes are hung tidily in the closet. It's definitely the room of a Los Reyes club member as there is an array of riding gear with their patch on it.

I check the closet and the other side of the bed to ensure we don't get any surprises.

The bathroom is half-finished. The bathtub is brand new, the area around it untiled. The toilet is old, and the floors stripped back to bare wood. There's a Los Reyes flag tacked to the wall.

“There's no one here,” Cat says. “They would have shown themselves by now, not hidden away.”

I put my finger to my lips. She may be right, but I'm not chancing it. Not with her ass on the line. The door to the last and final door is closed tightly. It's different than the other rooms in the house, which were all left wide open. I gesture to Catalina to stand to the left of the opening while I take the right.

Gingerly, I turn the doorknob, which creaks as I open the door. With a nudge, I push it open.

And nothing happens.

I had been so sure that if anyone were hiding from us in this house, they would have been here.

“Shit,” Catalina says, obviously coming to the same conclusion.

The room is some kind of office. It’s filled with boxes and papers. There’s a laptop on the desk. “Grab that,” I say to Catalina. “We can take it back to Vex.”

Catalina moves around the desk and gasps. “Oh.” She raises a hand to her mouth as she picks up a leather cut that lay across the chair. Her face screws up as she clutches it to her chest, and I realize she’s crying.

“Cat, sweetheart. What is it?”

She doesn’t answer, just hugs the cut even tighter as a tear drops onto the leather. A sinking feeling hits my gut, and I go to her, pulling her into my arms and pressing the cut between us.

I realize I’m offering her comfort rather than checking out if the cut belongs to her father as I suspect. Or whether there are any leads in his pockets. This isn’t me. The man who is known for focusing on the practicalities at times like this.

I kiss her forehead as she cries. When she stops and looks up at me, her face a mess of tears and snot, she simply hands me the cut and says, “He’s dead, isn’t he?”

The patches say *Pensa*, which Catalina told me was her father’s road name when she first tried to kidnap me, and *Vice President*. Catalina slides her fingers through two bloodstained holes, which, given their position, would have gone straight through his heart.

For a heartbeat, Camelot pops into my mind. I saw his cut, all scarred up after he’d gone beneath the wheels of a truck last year. The memory hurts.

“Did your father love you, Cat? Did he love his club?”

She opens all her layers and wipes her face on the hem of her hoodie. “The club? Yes. Me? I think so.”

“Then it doesn’t take a bloodstained cut with his name on it to tell you what you probably already knew. He’s dead, or he would have made his way back to you. If this was done to him by his own club, which is looking more and more likely, he wouldn’t have let this sit. If he were alive, he’d have driven back to the Los Reyes mother charter and raised a complaint for resolution. So, yeah, sweetheart, he’s dead.”

“Are you always this pragmatic?” she asks.

I think back over what I just said. “I have antisocial personality disorder. I

don't have the same sense of emotional attachment you do. I'm sorry if what I said hurt you. I was just trying to answer the question as honestly as I could."

She nods, and I realize it's not enough.

I take the cut and lay it back on the chair before pulling her into my arms and holding her tight. "I'm sorry about your papá, cariño. I wish I could make your pain go away. But I'll make you a promise, right here. I'll help you avenge him. I'll help you figure out what happened to your club. And I'll be by your side until it's dealt with."

CATALINA

The first sign we're in trouble is the sound of a bullet passing by my ear that cleaves itself into the doorframe behind me. Both Niro and I drop to the floor and scramble on our knees into the hallway.

"Shit," Niro curses, grabbing his phone. He pulls up Bates's number and dials. "Bandits round the back of the fucking house," he says when Bates answers. "Bullet through the rear window."

Whatever Bates says in response, I don't hear. Plus, I'm too focused on checking our current location. We both have our weapons drawn. The hallway is central to the house. We're safe from a sniper, but not a forced entry.

"Keep down," I say. "We should get to our bikes."

Niro nods. "Let me lead."

I hear the roar of Bates's bike and hope it's a distraction. "Fine. Go now."

We hustle, keeping low and pressed tight against the wall. Gunfire sounds outside, and Niro runs for the front door. He throws it open wide without any concern for himself. A bullet splinters the door frame, but it doesn't stop him. He's fast to find the shooter and fires three shots in quick succession.

Our bikes are literally twenty paces down the path. Two gunshots sound from the rear of the house.

I don't hear Bates's bike revving anymore.

Niro tips his head toward my bike. "I'll provide cover. Go."

Without question, I do as he says. Then I return the favor by doing the same for him when he runs for his bike. We tear away from the front of the house and find Bates climbing onto his bike. Hand signals pass between the

two of them, and we drive on. It takes less than a minute. But this time, Niro rides next to me.

I'm not certain when I made a conscious decision to ride with Bates and Niro back to New Jersey. What happened after I found Papá's cut is a bit of a blur. The gunfight. The adrenaline. Niro and Bates's hushed conversation about an organization called the Righteous Brotherhood, which was not only growing but had recently claimed Joplin. Bates's best guess is that the arrival of our bikes in town alerted them to our presence. But I haven't even processed what that could mean.

Los Reyes killed Papá, and they never wanted me to find out why they did it. I can't imagine what he went through. Did they torture him? Did he do something wrong? I feel like he didn't, because if he had, Mamá and I wouldn't have been allowed to hang around the club any longer. Whatever he'd allegedly done would've tainted us all.

The only thing I keep coming back to is his relationship with Perrito. And how Perrito now has both his sons in positions of power in the club, as both vice president and sergeant at arms.

We slept in a different hotel on the way back. When we got to our room, Niro ran a bath, and I was worried because sex was far from my mind. Instead, he stripped me, helped me into the tub, kissed my forehead, and left me alone.

And it's funny. Because even though he wasn't in the room, I knew he was there for me, supporting me. While I tried to reset my emotional balance, Niro went out with Bates and picked up food. The last thing I felt like was eating, but he picked up potstickers and burritos and burgers and pizzas. More than two people could possibly eat.

I gave the burritos a try. They weren't as good as my abuela's but filled my stomach. While food is not a cure for grief, it tapped into the hole of homesickness and loss that gripped me like a band around my heart.

I slept holding the last piece I have of my papá. It smells of him. Of his cologne. It takes me back to celebrating Diez y Seis with my grandparents in Tonalá. Papá took us back one year to see the annual fiesta. Sitting next to him as we ate such good food with fireworks exploding all over the town is one of my favorite memories of him.

For all his faults, he was the man I looked up to and learned from, even if those skills of independence are standing in my way of moving forward right now.

I've followed Niro and Bates on the drive so unconsciously that I only realize I'm back at Niro's home when he kills his engine. Bates is no longer here and probably back at the clubhouse. I follow suit, but while Niro takes off his helmet and climbs off his bike, I stay exactly where I am.

With care, he unbuckles my helmet and slides it over my head. And I want to lean into all of it. The bathtub, the food, the care and consideration. I want to lean into letting him lead me. I want to bend.

But I'm terrified of it.

What will I lose if I do? Will the world see me as softer? Less valuable?

So, I do what I always do. I fake it. I shake my head and then yawn. "I'm sorry, I'm tired. That was a solid day's riding. We should grab some food."

Niro moves back a step to let me off the bike without responding.

"Do we need to do a grocery run? I can go if you want to—"

"Not with me," he says firmly.

"Not *what* with you?"

He places his hand to my cheek. "You're speaking to the guy who's always on the outside looking in. I understand people well enough to manipulate them which means I see you. You aren't fine. You don't need to be fine. And I sure as shit don't want you to pretend you're fine, when anybody with half a brain can tell you're not."

His words knock me off balance. "No. Honestly, I'm fine. Seeing Papá's cut was a shock. But I came here thinking my father was already dead. He hasn't been home for months, like you said. And that was a long four days of riding to get there and back. It's the closure I needed. I'm—"

"You say *fine* again and I'm gonna lose my shit." His eyes are focused on me intently, and I swear he can see what's going on inside my mind, which is madness.

"*Fine.*" The word echoes around us. "I'm not fine. I'm numb. And at a dead end. I don't know what the fuck to do now to find my father's remains because it dawned on me when we passed the *Welcome to Asbury Park* sign that my papá is probably buried in some unmarked grave in Missouri, and the only person who would know where is a man you've already killed and put in the ground."

I'm shouting by the time I get to the last sentence.

"There she is," Niro says, placing his hand around the back of my neck and squeezing it. "Doesn't it feel better to say exactly what's on your mind without having to filter it all, to make it more palatable for others?"

I gasp for air.

His fingers squeeze the base of my skull, slowly massaging. Tightening and releasing. It grounds me in this moment.

“You want to know something?” he says casually, as if I’m not having a meltdown on his driveway. “I’ve never really cared for anyone. I mean, I have lots of brothers in the club. Closest probably to Bates. But I’ve also seen brothers die. And it’s felt . . . well, it’s like I don’t care. Maybe that’s not right. I’ve been pragmatic about it. How do we help the family financially? Who will make the funeral arrangements? How do we backfill their role in the club? I’ve never *felt* it.” He places his hand over my heart. “I envy you loving your father so much that it hurts this fiercely. Even if he was a complicated man.”

Tears sting my eyes, and I look over the gutter of Niro’s house, trying to break the intensity before I cry again. It’s not just the loss of my father. It’s Niro’s quiet honesty.

I glance back at him. “You do feel things, Niro. You felt my pain. You felt it even though I tried to bury it. You cared enough to run me a bath and give me space and make sure I ate. And then you held me when I needed it. You do care, and it’s beautiful.”

Niro looks down at the ground, kicking at nothing that I can see with the toe of his boot. I climb off my bike as I realize more about the biker I seem to be falling for. He’s a better man than he realizes. This time, I do to him what he normally does to me. I slide a finger beneath his chin and lift it until his tortured eyes meet mine again.

“You *do* care,” I repeat.

“You think so?” The uncertainty I see in this usually confident man makes me want to wrap my arms around him and reassure him of this fact forever.

Even the word *forever* doesn’t make me freak out.

“Yes, Colton. I do.”

Niro slides his arms around my waist and pulls me to him. When his lips meet mine, they’re tender. A soft brush, light pressure, his tongue seeking mine. It’s unhurried, sweet. Even if he doesn’t feel emotions in the same way I do, his body is showing me he recognizes them. I kiss him back, pouring in every ounce of reassurance I can muster.

“I’m falling in love with the man you are, Niro.”

“I have to go,” Niro says suddenly.

“What? No. I didn’t mean to upset you.”

He tugs a key off his key chain and hands it to me. “The house alarm code is one-nine-three-nine. If you forget, it’s the year World War II started. I’ll be back as soon as I can. Just enter the number, then hit the button with a key sign on it next to the keypad. I’ll get dinner. Go.”

“Are you mad?” I ask. “I just told you I’m falling in love with you, and you run off.”

“The exact opposite. You’ll see. It’s a good thing. I’ll tell you when I get back.”

I look down at the house key in my hand and wonder what the hell just happened, and I’m still standing there when his bike roars off down the road.

NIRO

I stomp up the steps to my president's door and knock on it firmly.

When nobody answers, I knock again.

"What the fuck?" I hear from inside before the door pulls open. "You better have a good fucking—Niro." King looks left and right down the street as if looking for trouble. He has a gun in his hand and no clothes on beyond a pair of plaid pajama pants. His hair is a mess as if . . .

"Shit. Were you in bed?"

He tugs a hand through his hair. "Yeah. Because it's midnight and I'm home with Rae. What the hell is going on?"

"I need to speak with Rae. I know you said you'd ask her, but I really got to fucking speak to her."

King places the gun on a shelf in the hallway. "You aren't speaking to her now. She's in bed."

"She's not," Rae says, appearing from the staircase. She's tugging a bathrobe around her and tying it.

"I told you to stay upstairs," King says, pulling her beneath his arm.

"It's so cute how you try to tell me what to do. What do you need, Niro?" she says before yawning.

King kisses the top of her head. "He doesn't need anything right this minute."

Fuck it. I know this is my chance, so I look straight at Rae. "I have ASPD and comorbidity with ADHD, and I need to manage them so I can be a better man for Catalina."

King's eyes open so wide I think they might reach the top of his hairline,

but I keep going. I'm not usually so blunt about my diagnoses, but for once, I don't think about the stigma I always feel. Instead, I plough on.

"I mean. I've had them all my life. But I've never really wanted to get treatment as an adult because, well, it was brutal when I was a kid. Therapy and shit cost too much money, and mom worked so hard to afford it for me, but she needed me fixed quickly so she didn't have to hold down two jobs. But there isn't a fast fix. So I always felt shit about not being able to get fixed fast enough—fuck, how many times am I going to say fix? Or fixed? Anyway, it left me feeling permanently broken. ADHD can be a superpower or a grind. Honestly, I'm never entirely sure when it's my ASPD or when I'm just being an asshole. Like, those diagnoses can help me at times. But now they don't. I want to feel things and not be such a . . ."

"Dick," King supplies.

"Uther," Rae admonishes.

"He's right." I shrug. "It's true. I can be. Needling people brings its own special thrill. I was a dick to you too, and I'm sorry. Can you help me? Please."

There's a weird silence. It amplifies in my head into a whooshing.

What was I thinking? My president must be wondering who the hell he has in his club.

"Never mind," I say. "It's fine. Go back to bed. Sorry for interrupting your night. I'll just—"

"Come inside, Niro," Rae says. She pats Kings on the chest. "Please, could you go make us some coffee?"

"You have got to be fucking . . ." He looks away from me and down at Rae. Whatever he sees there makes him sigh and kiss his old lady. "Fine. I'll go make you coffee. But please go put some clothes on, because I know you didn't have time to put shit on beneath that robe."

Rae heads upstairs.

"You're a fucking cockblocker," King says as he steps out of the way to let me in.

"Sorry, Prez."

"Two apologies in less than ten minutes. What the hell happened to you and Catalina in Missouri?"

I follow him to his kitchen. "We found her dad's cut with two blood-soaked bullet holes through the chest. And we found it in a house that belonged to a man you and I had already killed and buried back in the Pines,

so she can't ask him what the hell happened." I hold off on the part about the Righteous Brotherhood because I want to focus on why I'm here, and King would've gotten all derailed with that intel.

King grabs a filter and coffee. "Not with her dad. I meant what happened to you. Must be important to you if the first thing you want to do when you get back is wake Rae up for help."

"I want Catalina as my old lady. I want to do better so she'll stay."

King prepares the coffee in the filter, then sets the machine to run. "So bring it to the table."

I pull out a purple stool by the breakfast bar. "Y'all are going to vote no."

King leans against the counter. "You got a crystal ball or something? How do you know that?"

"Because people never do anything nice for me. I bet some fuckers in the club will vote no, just to get payback for all the times I've been a dick. But here's the thing. I can't help it. It's a part of who I am. Doesn't make shit right, but it makes it harder for me to manage things. I want to be a better man for her, King. I want to love her. And I think it'll make me a better man for the club."

Rae joins us in the kitchen, and King wraps his hand around the back of her neck before kissing her sweetly. It makes me think of Catalina, who I left standing on the driveway.

Shit . . . I left her standing on the driveway.

Like, I didn't even see her into the house.

See? I have zero impulse control.

I grab my phone and dial her number. "Are you in the house?"

I hear her sigh. "Yes. I'm in the house."

"Sorry I drove off. Didn't really think about how that would make you feel." I'm aware of King's and Rae's eyes on me. It makes the skin around my neck itch, and I tug my hoodie to try to give myself some air. "It's just, I figured out something that would help me to help us, and I just did it."

"That might have been a better explanation said while you were still on the driveway."

"I'm spontaneous that way, cariño. Don't be mad."

"I know. Just . . . do what you have to do."

I pause. "I thought you'd tell me to get my ass home." Isn't that what old ladies do? I'm fucking confused.

"Are you secretly off fucking some club bunny?"

I jump off the stool. “No. Of course not.”

“Well then, I trust that what you felt you had to do was more important than coming inside the house, and that when you get home, you’ll explain that reason to me. Assuming I’m still awake. If not, it can wait until breakfast. I found some soup in your cupboards. I’ll save you some.”

Can’t help the smile that forms. “Thanks, Catalina.” I draw out the last two syllables.

“Now get on with whatever it is you’re off doing so you can get back here soon.”

“I will.” After saying our goodbyes, I hang up.

“The dopey look on your fucking face is thoroughly entertaining,” King says.

“Fuck you,” I say, but I don’t put any weight behind it.

“You sure you want to do this?” King asks Rae.

She smiles, then reaches up and ruffles his hair. Normally that shit would make me puke. But I think about how it felt when Catalina washed my hair, and I suddenly understand why King’s a different man around Rae.

“You make her cry, hurt her in any way, stress her out, or otherwise piss her off, you and I are gonna come to blows,” King says.

Rae nudges him to the hallway. “You will never know because what happens between a therapist and their client is confidential so go back upstairs and wait for me.”

When King disappears up the stairs, Rae smiles. “You seem like a different person than the one who arrived at my door in Michigan,” she says.

I sit back down on the purple stool. “I’m sorry for that, Rae. Real sorry. The whole thing was a dick move.”

She studies me for a minute. “Thank you for saying that . . . wait, what’s your real name?”

“Colton.”

“Thank you for saying that, Colton. I appreciate it.” Rae pulls out the stool next to me. “Why don’t you explain how I can help?”

“You meant what you said to King? That what I say to you is private and just between us?”

When she nods, I give her a rundown. About my childhood. About my sister. About how I joined the club. And Rae listens. Really listens. To all of it. By the end of it, I feel like I just poured my soul out onto my president’s floors.

“When you were young, we didn’t understand ADHD and ASPD in the way we understand them now,” she says. “If we had, you would have had so much more support than you got, Niro. I’m sorry the system wasn’t equipped to help you, and that the attempts made only made you feel worse about yourself. I’m also deeply sorry you lost your sister, Lacey. And that it led to the loss of your relationship with your mom. None of those things could have been easy. Carrying that amount of trauma must hurt immensely.”

Tears sting my eyes. I don’t remember the last time I cried. “Don’t be nice to me, Rae.”

“Look at me, Colton.” Her tone is stern, like a schoolteacher, but I respond and look up at her. “I’m not saying these things to pacify you. It’s genuine. My heart hurts for you in every word. I know you think you don’t feel anything because of the ASPD, but there’s nuance to all the Cluster B disorders, including yours.”

“I hate that term. Cluster B.”

Lying, irritability, lack of remorse and empathy, increased aggression and impulsivity.

“I misjudged you when I first met you. I apologize. Cluster B personalities don’t tend to show guilt and have limited regard for right and wrong. A higher percent of Cluster B personalities ends up in prison. They break the law, repeatedly. It’s estimated that somewhere between fifty and seventy percent of incarcerated men have ASPD.”

“So, the definition of me then.”

“Yes. And no. You have *incredible* insight into how your actions affect others when you want to. I felt how much King’s father meant to you, and I heard the grief you still carry for his loss when you just spoke about him.”

I rub my hands together. “Can you fix me, Rae?”

She places her palm on my knee. “You don’t need fixing, Niro. But I can give you tools as to how you regulate your behavior. There are drug options we can consider. Mood stabilizers. Typically, a person’s belief system combined with their environment and the stresses they carry creates their thoughts. Those thoughts lead to behaviors that cause your actions. In ASPD, you go straight from stress to action, thanks to lack of impulse control. We can work on that.”

I nod. I like the idea that I’m not broken.

“And, if you agree, I’d like to help you process everything that has happened in your life through a new lens, one that allows you to leave things

in the past.”

“Like what?”

“Grief, Niro. Camelot wasn’t just your president; he was the closest thing you had to a father. Knowing the man you are, how protective you are of Uther, I can only imagine the layers of grief Lacey’s loss has left behind. And rejection. When you are ready, we can think through your relationship with your mom. Maybe even think about steps you might want to take to connect with her or let her go with love, knowing that she was doing her best.”

“I’m a bit shit at words,” I admit.

“On the contrary, the way you’ve expressed yourself was very powerful. Would you consider journaling?”

I look at Rae like she just grew two heads. “Fuck no.”

Rae smiles, and I see for the first time how genuinely pretty she is. “I didn’t think so. I’ll see you every Wednesday morning at nine, starting next week. I don’t want any excuses. The only time you miss is if you are away on a run, and even then, we reschedule. You put in the work with me, Niro, and you’ll feel like an utterly new human being.”

“Is there anything I can do quickly? I want Catalina to stay. If I change or something, she—”

“I rarely cut off my clients in therapy. But given this is an unofficial discussion in my kitchen and you helped King kidnap me, I feel like I can. It’s wonderful to see you want to work on yourself, but you can’t do the work for someone else. You have to do it for you. Is there a chance Catalina will appreciate your efforts and love you for it? Absolutely. But even if you do this work, she might not stay for reasons that have absolutely nothing to do with you and everything to do with her home being the other side of the country. You can’t define your own success by whether she stays. You can’t conflate living your best life with her presence. You can’t control anyone else’s destiny. Only your own.”

I want to argue, but I can’t. Rae’s words makes sense. I actually like the way she breaks things down. “I see why you’re good for Prez.”

“We have our moments. But we’re in it together. Go home to Catalina. If you feel like it, tell her what we discussed. Share your journey with her. That kind of deeply intimate communication is the foundation a good relationship is built on.”

I stand and straighten the legs of my jeans. ““Night. And thanks, Rae.”

“You’re welcome. You’ve changed in a very positive way in my eyes

tonight, Colton. I like it. Oh, and yesterday, King gave me a lesson on my bike, and I noticed the patterns on it looked like Rorschach tests. He realized he'd forgotten to tell me it was your artwork. It's beautiful and so very thoughtful. Thank you for your artistry."

"Glad you liked it."

"I loved it." She squeezes my hand, and it's not weird.

I open the kitchen door and walk down the hallway with Rae. King is sitting halfway up the staircase.

"Night, Prez," I say as I open the door and step onto the front porch.

"Hey, Niro. Wait up." King follows me outside. It's cold, but he tugs me into his arms and hugs me. Hard. And without thinking, I put my arms around him too. "Ballsy move, facing up to shit. I've got your back."

I'm starting to believe it might be a back worth having.

CATALINA

Neva: *Were you able to find anything else out?*

I look at the message on my phone. She's at a motel, about five hours outside Barstow. Texts have been infrequent given the long hours on the bike.

I pick up my phone and type. *It's what I thought. I have Papá's cut.*

I hope she reads between the lines, because I'm not typing out that the club killed Papá in a text.

The home reno show I'm watching is just about to do the big reveal when I hear the door slam shut.

Gotta go. Niro's home. Will message later. Cx

"Cat?" Niro shouts from the hallway.

I don't have time to reply before he's followed the sound of the television and enters the room. I've never seen a man as happy to see me as Niro is. He walks behind the leather sofa, then rolls his whole body over the top and drops down so he's lying on top of me. His weight is resting in his arms so he doesn't crush me.

"Hi," I say, unable to resist matching his grin, despite the sadness I feel in my stomach.

"Never been so glad to come home." His lips meet mine, and I sink into the kiss with him.

In the warmth of his touch, I have a vision of a life I didn't think was possible. One where a man accepts me for who I am. Where I can share with him what I do, without him thinking I'm unstable or something. A life filled with the kind of love you dream about, a relationship built on respect.

And great sex.

The kind that's hard to find when you're like me.

"You always feel so good," Niro says as his lips drag a trail of kisses along my jaw to the back of my ear.

"It might be hard to make me feel good tonight," I tell him honestly.

He lifts himself and kneels between my legs. "Want me to try?" He kneads my thighs gently, more of a massage than anything sexual.

"Where did you go, Niro?"

He sighs. "I want to manage my ADHD and ASPD better. I went to speak with someone who can help with that. I have an appointment every Wednesday morning now and for the foreseeable future, unless I'm out on a run. It's going to take a while, but I'm gonna work on it."

In truth, I figured that was what his leaving in a rush was about. "How do you feel about that?"

Niro smiles softly; it's a peaceful one. "I feel like it was time. Now back to my question. You want me to try to make you feel better? Or do you want me to just carry you upstairs and tuck you into bed? Because I'm not a total dick. Not gonna make a move on you when you're grieving."

It's poor form to think of an ex-lover when another man is kneeling between your legs, but I can't help but think about the day I returned to Felipe after killing Ilya Volkov. I didn't want to have sex with him, but I let him coerce me into it. I capitulated to keep the peace. All because Felipe's ego needed to reclaim me and prove his future old lady would do anything for the club.

"I think I need the opposite of kindness, Niro. I have this contained ball of fire in my gut that I'm scared of letting go of in case it decimates everything in reach, including the two of us. You say you want the me who is clawing her way through my chest, but I'm scared of who she is."

Niro runs his hands up my thighs until his thumbs stroke the seam of my leggings. "What happens if you let it go?"

I grip his wrists. "I don't know. I cry. I fight back. I get angry."

"So, fight me," Niro says, climbing off the sofa.

"What? No."

He grabs the low coffee table and moves it over to the wall. He shoves the two leather armchairs out of the way too, until the center of the room is clear. Grabbing the back of his Henley, he tugs it over his head and throws it to the ground, then opens his arms wide. "I mean it, Cat. You think I can't

defend myself against you trying to take me down?”

“It’s not about whether you could or couldn’t. I don’t want to hurt you.”

“Are you hurting, babe?”

I move to the edge of the sofa. “You know I am, but—”

“Then let me help you. Share your hurt with me. Physically. Transfer it to me and let me carry it for you.”

As tempting as it is to stand up and fight him, I can’t. “I won’t hurt you on purpose, I—”

Before I can finish the sentence, Niro grabs my ankles and tugs me hard, so I fall off the sofa and land on my ass.

“What the hell, Niro?”

He stands over me. “Fight me, Cat. And say *sodium* if you want me stop. Seems appropriate seeing you tried to knock me out with it.”

“I’m not going to—”

This time, he grabs my feet and flips me onto my stomach before dropping to his knees on either side of my hips. His lips graze my ear before he bites down firmly on the soft lobe. His teeth clash with my piercings. “Fight. Me.”

My heart rate spikes, and my limbs start to shake with adrenaline. I try to wiggle my hips to free myself, to get out of this situation before I do something reckless. But Niro grabs my wrists in his hand and pins them over my head.

“You can do better than that, cariño. Do it, Cat. Give me the part of you that wants to fight me right now, just to prove you can, because it turns you on. Give her to me, Cat, because I’m rock hard at the thought of winning and fucking you as a reward.”

He rolls his cock between the cheeks of my ass, and even though we’re separated by denim and my leggings, I know he isn’t lying. He’s aroused, and if I’m truthful, so am I.

When he nimbly jumps to his feet, I assess his speed. He’s quick. Very quick for a man of his size. As I roll over to look up at him, he reaches for my hands and tugs me to my feet. When our mouths meet, the kiss is hungry. His tongue seeks mine. And just as I sink into it, Niro shoves me away, firmly, such that I lose my balance and topple back onto the sofa.

“Niro,” I gasp.

He bites down on his lower lip as his eyes slowly glance down my body and back to my face. “I can do this all night until you fight me.”

I'm not sure what ignites me, but I jump to my feet and press my chest to his. "Stop pushing me to do this. I don't want to fight you."

He touches my cheek gently with one knuckle. "Yes, you do. You're more alpha than most men I know. Can fight better than a lot of them too. But here's where you gotta bend. It's okay to need aggression. It's okay to want to be soft. You really don't want to fight me, I'm not gonna make you. But I can tell by the way your tits are heaving, how you're sucking in air, that you're excited by the idea. Can tell by the way your pupils are wide, by the way you're gripping onto my biceps now, like you can't let go that you want this. Tell me no, Cat, and I'm taking you upstairs to bed, for sleep or sex. But if you want consent from me that you can fight me as foreplay, you've got it. It's a kink I didn't know I was interested in until right this minute, and I can't wait to try it with you."

He's right about all of it. I drop low, hook my foot behind his knees, and bring him to the floor. "Remember, you asked for this," I say before trying to grapple him in a bow-and-arrow choke. It's messy. The hold requires a lapel to hold onto, but he's shirtless.

Just as I think I'm going to land the choke, Niro takes a rapid inhale and uses the force of his expanding ribs to loosen my grip. We roll on the floor, Niro grunting as he hits the edge of the sofa with his lower back.

The more we grapple, the weaker my hold on the anger inside gets.

"Fuck," I say as tears sting my eyes. My father's voice echoes in my ears.

Las lágrimas son debilidad.

I've always believed him that tears show weakness. But now, I feel like I can be anything I want, show anything I want in this room. So I don't stop them. Instead, I throw my fist at Niro's face. And while he dodges, my fist glances off his cheek. A cheek that has only just lost its bruising from the pistol whip I gave him.

God, what am I doing to this man?

He's letting me win. I know it. He's giving me what I need. An outlet for the anger I carry.

He's not telling me that how I feel my feelings is wrong.

He pushes me onto my back and tries to crawl over me, but I bring my knees up and use the soles of my feet hard on his chest, pushing him off.

When I try to crawl away, he doesn't let me. He grabs my feet again, tugging me to him. I grab for the edges of the rug, the feet of the chair, anything that will stop my slide to him. But I can't.

My lungs burn. My limbs ache with exertion.

My thoughts are simply in this moment with this man.

“Let me have her, Catalina.” Niro grunts. And I know exactly what he means.

From somewhere deep inside, I channel all the female warriors who came before me. This time, when we fight, it hurts. My back slams into the floor. I hear Niro curse as his shoulder slams into the coffee table. Something shatters, and I hear the pieces scatter over the floor.

Niro grunts as he lifts me, practically throwing me away from the shards on the floor. There’s the sound of our breath, the hits when our bodies collide. The scent of fresh sweat surrounds us. And I realize the tremendous pressure in my chest is deflating. As if someone is putting out the fire that burns in my heart.

When Niro pins me to the floor, I let him. And even as we try to catch our breaths, I place my hands on his face and tug his lips to mine. It’s messy. We need oxygen almost as much as we need each other.

Every part of my body sings in an awakening I’ve never experienced before. I hear every sound, feel every shift in the vibration between us.

“Catalina,” Niro says before reaching for the hem of my shirt. Feverishly, we strip each other’s clothes. “You’re everything.”

“You can’t mean that.”

He grips my chin for a moment. “I’ve never meant anything more.”

Niro grabs a condom from the wallet in his jeans and slides it on. “One day, I’m gonna fuck you without this between us,” he threatens as he steadies himself at the lips of my pussy and thrusts sharply home.

With so much energy thrumming between us, there was no way we could come together quietly.

“Niro,” I gasp as he hammers into me, hard and fast, a continuation of our fight. All high energy and lust and need.

The speed at which my orgasm commences its arrival shocks me, but this man clearly knows how to play my body. He slides his hands beneath my ass and grips my cheeks, spreading me wide. Unable to resist, I lift my knees to wrap my legs around him, holding him tight.

“You better come soon.” He grunts. “Because you’re gonna make me come so fast. Such a fucking sweet pussy.”

As if he conjured it with his words, I start to fall over the trippy edge. And when it happens, my whole body tenses as I cry out. And it’s no weak

orgasm, but one that shakes me to my very foundation. The world starts to spin, and I can barely breathe.

“Yeah,” Niro says. “Just like that.” His strokes become faster until he cries out my name and then lowers his chest and buries his face in my hair. I feel the puffs of breath beneath my ear as he continues to ease into me, slowing his pace until we are both lying there. I stroke his back in wide circles. He removes one of his hands from beneath me and slides it around my neck, his thumb easing back and forth over my cheekbone.

I check in with my body. I feel content. Despite Niro’s weight over me, I feel like I can breathe for the first time in days. “Thank you,” I whisper.

Niro raises himself up on his elbows and places his palms on either side of my face. “It’s okay to need to be fucked like that. You ever need me to do that with you, you ask me. And know I’ll be counting my lucky stars that I’ve found a woman who’ll let me take her this way.”

My heart squeezes, then eases. I realize I’m here to stay. “Next time, I won’t hold back.”

Niro touches his lips to mine. “Next time, neither will I.”

NIRO

There are many noises I'm used to in this house. There's the whir of the AC in the summer that seems to clunk on and clunk off as if offended every time it's needed. Sometimes, I hear the cry of gulls that have strayed too far from the shore.

But one sound I'm not used to? The sound of a woman crying.

I pat the side of the bed as I struggle to open my eyes.

Catalina isn't there, but the warmth in the sheets tells me she hasn't been long gone.

Rubbing a hand over my jaw, I force myself up into a seated position and yawn. There's a sliver of light in the hallway.

I tug on some jeans and head to the stairs, where I find her sitting on the bottom step. Slowly, so as not to scare her, I walk down the stairs and take a seat on the one that's two up from her. I slip my legs on either side of her and tug her back to me, holding her tightly as place gentle kisses on the side of her neck.

"What hurts?" I ask.

"All of it," Catalina says on a hiccup and starts to cry again. "I hate this."

I don't know what she means, but I want to. So I sit and wait it out while she cries. I bite down the need to drag her to her feet, to make her laugh, or go make cookies so she can eat away whatever is bothering her. I'm the master of distraction. It's served me well. I've been the class clown. The asshole. I've never sat with feelings of being needed by anyone, but for Catalina, I'm desperate to figure out how to simply be here for her.

Her shudders hurt me. I never thought I could feel something so deeply,

but the way every shake and shiver affects me, not just physically, but somewhere deep within my chest, shows me I can.

“I think I buried the pain to avoid caring,” I blurt. Then I curse myself for centering me in a conversation that should be about her.

“Can you teach me how?”

Her words surprise me, and I kiss the top of her head. “Not sure my way is the right one, Catalina. I feel like your way is better. You’ve let yourself love deeply. What you’re feeling now is painful. But offset against all those happier memories, would you rather have not loved your father at all? Would you rather have not trusted your friends? Would you rather not have had a home within the club you grew up in?”

Crying turns into jerky shudders as she tries to catch her breath. I wonder if she has any idea what her vulnerability does to me. Do I love that she’s a badass? Of course. But the feminine energy she’s sharing right now, the softness of it all, calls to me.

I bury myself in the thick hair by her neck that smells like sunshine and oranges as I tighten my hold on her. The more I hold her tightly, the more she calms. I think back to all the days when I felt utterly untethered, when my brain was on a tilt. How I wished I’d had something to ground me. Then Mom would hold me tight. And just that pressure around my rib cage would help bring things back into focus.

Catalina tilts her head to the side, and I press my lips to it, running a line of kisses up her neck to behind her ear.

“What’s going on?” I say finally. “What has you up at three in the morning this upset?”

Catalina sighs and turns slightly so she’s looking up at me. “I’m lost, Colton.”

The use of my real name makes me feel like I’m a superhero. “Tell me,” I encourage.

“My life makes no sense. I’ve spent it trying to become something valuable to the world I live in, yet as a result, I’m neither in nor out of the Los Reyes Motorcycle Club. I have no stability. The club pays me some money. But I’m neither in the life nor out of it. I thought I wanted to be fully in Los Reyes, but if they hurt my father, I’m going to want revenge on every single one of them. I want Perrito to take his last breath while my hands are around his throat. I live in Barstow and want to go home, yet I don’t want to leave here. I’m everywhere and nowhere. I guess I don’t know what I want

the rest of my life to be. I'm used to doing everything by myself, but I see how it could be different with you."

When she's done speaking, she lowers her forehead onto my thigh, and I stroke her hair gently. It's smooth and cool as it slips through my fingers.

"You're not lost, Catalina. You're stuck. There's a difference."

She lifts her head, and when those red eyes and tearstained face look up at me, I know I'd move heaven and earth to help her. "What's the difference?"

"You know exactly where you are. You're in Asbury Park, New Jersey. You're with a man who cares for you a whole lot more than he should. You're on a quest to figure out what happened to your father. You don't need to worry about basic needs because I've got you. There's a roof over your head for as long as you need it. I'm happy to buy food, especially if you are happy to cook it. You're not lost. But you are stuck. You've got hard decisions to make, and I know you'll make the right ones."

"You make it sound easy."

I tip her chin and kiss her softly. "I know it can feel impossible. With ADHD, sometimes I find getting out of bed impossible because the options for the day are overwhelming. Is now the right time to get up? Am I still tired? What time did I go to bed? If I get up, am I getting dressed first or getting coffee, or should I shower because I might not get the chance later? The more options that are spread out in front of me, the more difficult it is to make a decision. Some days, my brain revs so far ahead of me and everyone else, I say shit that should come out five minutes from now and confuse the fuck out of everyone, including myself. I don't mean to make it sound easy. But how you solve the problem of being lost is different than how you solve the problem of being indecisive or stuck. If you at least call it the right the thing, you'll stand a fighting chance of coming up with a solution."

Catalina says nothing, but I can tell she's thinking about what I just said. Meanwhile, my head whirs. Did I say too much? Am I out of line? Will what I said make her dislike me? Am I pushing her?

No.

I didn't tell her I want her to stay in New Jersey. That I want more time to figure out what this is between us. I didn't tell her I'm catching feelings and want to know if she is too.

I'm falling in love with the man you are, Niro.

Those were the words she said to me before I bailed on impulse and rode to see Rae. I want to hear Catalina say them again.

She turns on the stairs and places her knees on the first step in front of me. Her palms smooth a line back and forth along my thighs. My cock is highly interested in the gesture, and I will her to slide those palms a little higher.

“In that case, I’m stuck and don’t know what to do next.”

“Have you ever considered talking to someone?” I ask.

Catalina wipes beneath her eyes. “Like who you spoke to tonight?”

“Yeah. King’s old lady, Rae.”

“Why would I want to talk to an old lady?”

“Because Rae is . . . ” I pause for a moment to think of the word. We met the day King decided to kidnap her. Crassly, I offered to fuck her. I didn’t even want to, but I just said it in the moment. Now she barely tolerates me, but I actually respect her. And I see the way she handles King. He’s a better leader now because Rae is . . . “She’s intuitive. A fully qualified therapist who seems to know how to reach people. She knows what goes on in this club. Saint is her brother. She understands the rules of keeping confidence. She’s the person I went to speak to.”

“I don’t think a therapist can treat both halves of a couple. Isn’t there conflict of interest or something?”

I shrug. “So, talk to her as a friend. She takes no bullshit either.”

“Has she killed anyone?” Catalina raises one eyebrow.

“Two that I know of. In one night. Defending King.”

“Wow. Okay. I have a bit more respect for her.”

I can’t help but laugh at that. “The fact she has a bunch of degrees and letters after her name and is super fucking smart and—by the way, some kind of Shakespeare wizard—means nothing. But that fact she gunned down two people makes you like her.”

She pushes against my thigh playfully. “For the record, I’d probably kill someone if they went after you.”

“That’s a hot image to plant in my brain, babe. You ever do that for me, and I’ll probably keep you in bed for a three-day fuck-fest straight after.”

Now Catalina laughs, and the sound eases some of the tightness in my chest. “If I kill someone for you, then you owe me at least four days.”

“Done. Next?”

“I need to avenge my father.”

“Again, done.”

“It’s as simple as that?”

I nod. "It's as simple as that."

Catalina looks down for a moment, then glances back up at me through dark lashes. "Thank you."

"What for?"

She glances around my entrance hallway. "For this. For earlier. For listening."

"I feel like I talked too much. I have a tendency to do that."

"What you said made sense. Feeling lost is a weak position. It's like the problem's out of your control. But needing to make difficult decisions feels tangible. Like I could do them. And I'd love to meet Rae. Maybe grab a coffee with her or something. Not least because I want to meet the woman who agreed to be the old lady of the president of a motorcycle club. That takes balls."

"I'll set it up."

Catalina presses her palms into my thighs and pushes herself to stand up, then offers me her hands to pull me to my feet. I don't need her help, but I take them anyway and let her, just because it feels like a sweet moment.

Now I'm so much taller than her, and she has to tilt her neck to look up at me. "Niro," she says, finally placing her hand over my heart.

"Yeah?"

"You don't talk too much. I like listening to you. I like the way you unapologetically think out loud. I like the way you frame things. You gave me some good advice tonight, and I appreciate it."

The words I want to say in response are momentarily stuck in my throat. So I scoop a handful of her hair at the base of her neck and kiss her soundly. I let her lips soothe mine, the pressure of them a slam against things that always feel frazzled. I just did something good. Intentionally. And she saw it.

More importantly, she saw me.

And I think that's possibly the first time someone has.

"And for now," she says, "I'm going to stay."

CATALINA

“Is he going to be like this the whole time?” I ask Rae as King sits at the bar of the Iron Outlaws clubhouse two days later. It’s late afternoon, and he’s been glaring at us since the moment Niro introduced us and got a prospect to make us coffee.

I arrived here on the back of Niro’s bike, a place I vowed I would never be. But he’s trying in all the different ways he can to be what I need. Which makes me equally determined to really question why I have some of my beliefs.

And I’ve always believed the back of a bike is a subservient place to be.

Yet Niro has never treated me as subservient. In fact, he leans into us being equals more than any other man I’ve met. He’s clearly more secure in his masculinity than most. But there’s also a chance he just hasn’t given a thought to what others might say about him.

Rae smiles and then sips her coffee. “Let me go deal with him,” she says, placing her coffee cup back down on the table. “Or we’ll never get any privacy.”

I watch as she walks over to King. I don’t know what it is, but there’s something quite sweet in the way his glare melts as he slips his hands around Rae’s waist before settling firmly on her ass. They are a contrast. Rae’s more of the pale complexion, versus King’s weathered tan. Her hair is in loose waves; his dark hair hangs over his eyes. She smiles; he scowls. And yet she’s wearing a leather cut with a rocker that proudly shouts she’s the property of King.

“If you don’t have any work to do here, you could go and start removing

the fence panels to make way for the new ones,” she says, her words clear in the empty clubhouse.

King looks to the window, where flurries swirl outside. “It’s snowing, Duchess.”

“Then go back home and strip that ugly paper off the downstairs bathroom. Or go over to Saint’s house and help him and Rose sand and stain the floor in their kitchen. Or go work with Vex in his closet on whatever scheme you’re cooking up. I don’t care. Just leave me to talk with Catalina. Alone.”

King glances my way, and I know he still doesn’t trust me as far as he can throw me. “She’s a member of a rival club, I’m not leaving you alone with her.”

“I’m not armed,” I shout helpfully.

“Once upon a time, you would have said the same thing about Iris, but it was lovely having her and Spark over for dinner last night,” Rae says, stroking his biceps.

King looks back at Rae. “We know a hell of a lot more about Iris now. She’s Spark’s property and knows the score. And we aren’t at war with her uncle. I’m not leaving you alone.”

Rae simply stands her ground. “I understand that this is all because you love me and want to protect me, but I don’t need your permission for a private conversation, sweetheart.”

I like the way she doesn’t capitulate. I’ve seen too many old ladies fold at the first sign of conflict. Rae doesn’t know it, but she’s modelling what I believe to be possible. That an old lady isn’t meant to be overruled; she’s meant to be respected and listened to.

Or perhaps the reason I haven’t seen this before is just because of the way Perrito ran his club, with all the staid machismo of an out-of-touch man.

“Fine.” King huffs as he stands and smooths the creases in his jeans. “But sit on the opposite side of the table, yeah?” He turns to me. “Hurt her, I’ll kill you.”

“Understood,” I say.

“*King*,” Rae admonishes.

He raises his hands and walks out of the bar area with the confident swagger so many of these men have.

Earlier, Niro left me with Rae and went to his room in the clubhouse, telling me to message him when we’re done with our coffee. Before King

left, he'd popped back out approximately four more times. Once to remind me which room is his, in case I need it. A second time to tell me to help myself to the cookies in the kitchen. The third time to ask if I wanted to go out for dinner tonight. And the fourth to ask me if I was warm enough.

I kissed him, reassured him that I was confident I'd find him, that I was still full from lunch, that I would make us enchiladas tonight, and that I was definitely warm enough in the large hoodie of his I'd borrowed.

Some might question why he wasn't there to have my back against his president. I kind of like that he trusted me enough to hold my own.

"He can be overprotective at times," Rae says as she sits, and I appreciate that she didn't make apologies on King's behalf. "Catalina. I'm thrilled to meet you. And I have to admit, I'm intrigued. I was curious about the woman who has Niro smiling for once."

"He thinks highly of you."

"He does?" She seems genuinely shocked by the answer.

I think back to the night on the stairs, what he said about her. "He said you're intuitive and able to understand the rules of keeping secrets."

Rae picks up her cup and holds it in her hands, blowing gently on the surface. "My profession and my nature have made me exceptional at holding multiple confidences, even if they conflict. Whatever you say to me will never be repeated. Not to Niro, and most definitely not to Uther."

"Uther?"

She waves a hand. "King. Uther is his real name."

Uther.

Huh.

"Bueno."

"Neither will it be repeated to my brother."

"Your brother?" I ask, wondering why it's relevant.

"Saint. He's my brother."

"Wow." Now that I know, I can see the similarities. Same hair color, eyes, and smile. "You're really wrapped up in the club then?"

"You have no idea." Rae smiles. "Do you feel like telling me why you are here? King has told me nothing. All Niro told me was that you needed a friend and I think that's a good boundary to stick to given who I am to Niro."

"Friend works." I smile at the thought Niro would go out of his way like this for me. So I tell Rae the whole story. How my father left. How he never came back. How I slept with Felipe to get details from him. How I'd do it

again in a heartbeat because I don't think I can rest knowing Papá's not been avenged. How I enjoy being an assassin and suspect my father's club is to blame for his death. How I worry that I will never find a place where my skills are treated as equal to those around me. How I'm worried about Neva, who hasn't responded to any of my most recent messages. How I feel lost. I correct myself, thinking of Niro's words. How I'm *stuck*.

Rae listens intently. She nods in the right places, holding space and silence for me to explore my own feelings as I speak. Even when I finish my explanation, she leaves a moment or two of quiet between us.

"Did I say too much?" I ask.

Rae smiles and shakes her head. "There is no such thing as saying too much or too little. It simply is what it is. And I heard a lot in what you said. I also heard a lot in the silence in between. Do you have siblings?"

"No. Mamá had issues conceiving and staying pregnant."

She sips her coffee. The way she does everything is measured. "Do you grapple with what is socially acceptable for a young woman and the life you're building?"

I think of having sex with Felipe. "Only superficially."

"Can you expand on that for me?"

I lean back in the chair and stare at the swirl of steam above my untouched coffee cup and think about how to answer. "I've seen my mom as an old lady, turning the other way when it came to my father's extracurricular sex life. I've seen club girls give up their best years for bikers who don't even want them because they are happily married but enjoy sleeping around—with or without their old lady's blessing. I've seen bikers throw away marriages because they're aging, doubt their own virility, and think banging a twenty-year-old proves something. It's all bodies being traded for some kind of security. Men sleep around all the time. And yet women who sleep around, who enjoy sex, who weaponize sex are called sluts, whores, tramps, harlots. So, yes. I feel a superficial level of shame because I've been told my whole life that this is not what good girls do, while being shown the exact opposite. But deep down, I enjoy what I do. I love the planning, the execution, the thrill."

Rae leans forward conspiratorially. "I think you and I are going to be the best of friends."

"Yeah?"

"Yes. There is a huge double standard in the way women view

themselves and the way society tries to put them in boxes. And it's not even really society. It's misogyny. And patriarchy. There's a trope in romance books called grumpy-sunshine. The problem is, when the hero is grumpy, he can be an actual on-page asshole. And readers inhale that like it's gold. In that instance, the woman is sunshine and readers understand her. But when it's a grumpy woman, reviewers find the character hard to connect with, cold. And the problem is internalized misogyny. We've been told we should smile more, pacify more, capitulate more. Keep the peace, smooth things over. When we read a character on a page who lives her truth, who doesn't smile on demand, who lives her life to the beat of her own drum, it's super tempting to label her as unlikeable. And the same happens when it comes to sex in the real world. Men are heroes if they sleep around, women are sluts. It's the most ridiculous construct." Rae stops abruptly and takes a deep breath. "I think you and I have lots to discuss. But I would be remiss if I didn't offer one word of caution."

"What's that?"

"Perhaps the unhealthiest thing for Niro is to be enabled. What you seek could be his downfall. We all know that given how Niro is behaving at the moment, he'll back you up in any revenge you undertake. He needs to learn how to manage who he is, not be encouraged to give in to those desires. Can you be what he needs without diminishing who you are? Do you need revenge more than Niro needs a soft and safe environment to grow in?"

The words hit me square in the chest, but she's right.

"I'm so angry," I say quietly.

"That's understandable. But processing grief and anger is very different than exacting revenge. It might be useful to separate the two so you can make progress here."

"I'm not prepared to let go of holding those who killed my father accountable."

Rae smiles softly. "Yet."

"When Niro said I should speak to you, I asked him how many people you had killed."

Rae's eyes go wide. "Why is that relevant?"

I shrug. "Because I wasn't sure you and I would find common ground."

"And now?" Rae lifts her coffee and takes a sip.

"Now, I agree with you. I think we're going to be good friends."

King reappears in the bar; this time he has other men and women with

him, Niro included.

Rae grins over the rim of her cup. “Splendid. I’m going out with some of the other old ladies for drinks before dinner. I think you should join us.”

“I think that’s a terrible idea,” King says, but a brunette with long hair steps forward.

“Cat. I’m Briar. Nice to meet you. Come with us. We’re all curious about you, which is a terrible thing to admit, but everyone is a little shocked that Niro has a girlfriend.”

“And I’m Gwen. You booted my fiancé, something I’ve been tempted to do on many occasions.” The women laugh, but Clutch looks offended.

I stand and place my hand ever so slightly in front of Gwen to nudge her behind me.

“Steady, cariño,” Niro says from behind me. “That’s not his pissed-off face.”

Clutch raises his hands. “Not my proudest moment, getting sent flying by a woman, but I’m not gonna do anything but laugh about it, yeah?”

Niro entwines his fingers with mine. “She’s just teasing him, Cat. Nothing we haven’t all said.”

Yet again, this club is resetting what I know. That an old lady must know her place. I can only imagine what Felipe would have done if I’d made a joke like that in front of his brothers.

“Cat’s growing on me,” Spark says as he faces Niro. “She armed?”

Niro looks at me. “Are you?”

He knows I am but lets me answer for myself. “Yeah. I’m armed.”

“You said you weren’t,” King says.

“I lied. You don’t trust me; I see no reason to trust you.”

“Let me see,” Spark says.

“No, because this isn’t show and tell,” I say. “Suffice to say I’m armed with options.” Niro tried to reassure me I wouldn’t need them for the clubhouse, but I feel naked without them.

Spark grins. “Iris, this is Catalina. She’s your bodyguard for the night.”

I don’t remember everything that Niro has told me about Iris, but the ones I do make the hairs on my neck stand on end. Abducted. Terrorized. Assaulted.

“My pleasure,” I say.

“Let’s go then,” Rae says, as she steps up onto her toes before kissing King’s cheek. “Who is driving us?”

“Martin is driving the van. Two other prospects are riding alongside.”

“Good. Let’s go.”

I watch as the women start to leave the bar.

“You don’t have to go if you don’t want to,” Niro says.

As he says that, Iris looks back at me to check I’m following. Jesus, I couldn’t say no now if I wanted to.

“I’ll go.”

Niro kisses my lips. “I’ll see you when you get home. Call me if you need me.” He takes a roll of cash out of his pocket and unfurls two hundred-dollar bills. “Have fun.”

I look down at the notes. “I have my own cash.”

“I know you do. But this is to look after the girls.”

King bats Niro’s hands away, then presses four hundred dollars into my hand. “If Spark’s getting you to look out for the old ladies, you should at least get paid by the club. A hundred each for Gwen, Iris, Briar, and Rae.”

The move confuses me. He was so against my actual presence not half an hour ago. Niro tips his chin, encouraging me to take it. Getting paid to work feels better than being given money by the man I’m sleeping with.

And with the thought I’m doing good, I follow them to the van.

NIRO

“**N**iro and *girlfriend* are two words I never thought I’d hear run together,” Clutch says, an annoying grin on his face.

“Says the man who dipped his dick into anything with open legs before Gwen came along,” I say, only half serious.

Clutch shoulder checks me. “Yeah, but that was before I knew what dipping it in Gwen Hills felt like.”

“For fuck’s sake, that’s my sister you’re talking about.” King groans, rubbing his hands over his face. “There’s not enough bleach in the clubhouse to rinse those kinds of images from my mind.”

I can’t help but laugh. I know Clutch does it to wind his best friend up.

“Says the man who told me how he was going to break my sister in front of me.” Saint’s tone could be taken many different ways.

“I was a fucking idiot. Almost want to shoot myself in the dick for what I was thinking of doing to her back then.”

“Hey,” I say. “I’m sorry for my part in that shit.” Saint looks up at me as if I just grew a second head. “What? I apologized.”

“I thought you were born without that factory setting,” Spark says.

“Must have been part of the *old lady* upgrade package he just installed.” King says.

“I’m serious,” I say. “We shouldn’t have done that shit to Rae.”

“Not sure you and King were doing the same shit to Rae,” Halo says.

Spark laughs.

I turn to Saint. “Anyway, you have my apology, for what it’s worth.”

Saint offers me his hand. “And I’m sorry for the shit I left you,

personally, in after I blew my cover. Let's call it all water under the bridge, yeah?"

"We're going to be hugging next," Clutch mutters under his breath.

"Seeing I'm solo, can I talk you into going to the studio and doing some ink for me?" King asks.

I feel guilty. I haven't been in much recently. King trusts me to manage it, but the truth is, I found a brilliant studio manager, Carlos, who keeps everything running smoothly. And I rarely take appointments. I just post on the studio's social media when I'm going to be in, and it's first come, first served for my time.

"Sure. How big a piece of work is it?"

"Text on my chest. The size of my pec."

"Couple of hours then. We all meeting back here after?"

"I'm game," Spark says. "I was just planning on tuning up my bike in the shop."

"Want a hand?" Clutch asks.

"Sure," Spark says. "Saint, you wanna come hang?"

Saint shakes his head. "There's a shit ton of flooring waiting for me to lay it. Might see how much I can get done in a couple of hours and then meet you back here."

Halo checks his watch. "I'll come give you a hand."

With a few more logistics exchanged, King and I make the brief ride to the tattoo studio. I'm guessing Chubs is responsible for the music today, because we're back in a seventies rock vibe. My chair is a masterpiece. Can recline into a bed, sit people upright. It's got places for arms and legs. Fucking love it and makes tattooing easier on the back, especially if it's a long session like a back piece.

"What are we doing?" I ask as King takes his shirt off, lays it over the seat, and leans back.

"I want text to fill my left pec, over my heart. Want it to say *none is left to protest.*"

I grab a piece of paper and place it over his pec, tracing a loose outline of where the text would fit. "You want cursive or something simpler?"

"Cursive. With flourishes, you know, like scroll things."

"I'm assuming black ink." Everything on King's chest is black and gray. He likes the simple aesthetic.

"No. Purple."

I look up at him. “Purple?”

“That’s what I said.”

I start to divide up the space, count the letters in what he wants. It comes together quickly in my head, but not the cursive King initially asked for. Once I’m satisfied, I show King. “I think calligraphy is going to work better than cursive. How about this? I can change it to cursive if you like it better.”

He studies it for a moment. “Perfect.”

I create the transfer and place it on King’s pec carefully. When I remove it, it looks exactly as I had in mind. “Go take a quick look and check you’re happy with the placement.”

King does as I suggest, and I see him grin. I gather all the supplies I’m gonna need. Within minutes, I’m underway, outlining the lettering. “I thought this was a threat. Like you’d kill anyone who went against you. Guessing the purple means it’s for Rae.”

“It’s a Shakespeare quote. *I love you with so much of my heart that none is left to protest.* That’s why it’s placed where it’s placed.”

I wipe away the excess ink with a tissue and continue. “You’re really all in with Rae then?”

“Yeah. She’s good for me. Always seems to know what I need and gives it to me, whether I like it or not.”

I look at the word *left* on his chest, and I feel a hole start to open in mine. “Cat says she’s going to stay for a while. We’ll keep trying to get to the bottom of what happened to her dad but, you know, we’ll see what she and I have too.”

King looks at me. “You’re happy?”

“With her? Yeah. In a way I never thought I would be. We both just . . . accept each other. We’re both . . . different.”

“Never could decide if *different* was the best word in the dictionary or the worst. Being yourself is the life we strive for. Being the one percent who lives outside the rules by making our own. But being different also means being judged. It can be a word used to ostracize and alienate.”

“Big words from you, Prez.”

He huffs. “Living with Rae, I’ve learned all sorts of new words. Like *pedantic*. She called me that just last week and I had to look it up after she’d gone to bed. But I’m serious. Being different isn’t bad.”

“You aren’t my kind of different, King. I’ve lived with being me my entire life. But now I’m seeing shit through a different lens. And somehow,

we fit.” I turn off the tattoo machine for a minute. “I don’t want her to leave, Uther. I need your help to make it happen. I want to give her the one thing she can’t get anywhere else.”

King looks at me. I rarely use his real name. It’s by the blessings of brotherhood that we call each other by our road names. “What’s that?” he asks.

“I want you to make her a brother.”

“No.”

“Hear me out. Los Reyes have used her as an assassin for years. And you didn’t see her when she killed Henley. She was ruthless. Cold-blooded. Predatory. Jesus, just thinking about it gives me a boner. If she were a guy, she’d be a prospect by now.”

King grips my shoulder, and I look up at him. “But she’s not a guy.”

“Why does that even matter?”

He raises an eyebrow. “You know why.”

“The club can change. We can edit the bylaws. I’ve been looking at our charter and—”

“Niro. Stop. I can’t authorize that.”

“You mean you won’t.”

“Can’t.”

I resume tattooing. “Did your dad ever tell you the full story of the day I got this scar?”

King nods. I feel the muscles in his chest relax. He thinks I’ve moved on from the topic at hand. “He did. Told me not to mention it to you that I knew. But remember that thing that happened in Des Moines?”

My second solo ride out for the club, and I’d screwed it up so bad. I was late and missed the delivery window. Then I fucked our contact’s wife when I’d gone looking for him. I was honest and told Camelot. He told me I had to finish the job. When I went back to the guy’s house, he was beating his wife, so I shot the fucker.

Which then ruined a hard-earned relationship and distribution arm for the weapons we run. We battled that organization for eighteen months.

“I do.”

“After that, I was pissed. I asked Dad why he kept you around. You were a walking liability. He told me.”

“Did you know he asked me what he could do for me, beyond letting me join the club? He said that was a given, seeing my then-bony ass was capable

of so much already.”

“What did you ask for?”

I look up at King. “I didn’t. I said I’d give it some thought and get back to your dad when I knew what it was.”

The color drains from his face. “Don’t, Niro.”

“Don’t what? Tell you that I’ve finally figured out what your family can do for me to repay the debt created when I saved your father?”

“Fuck’s sake, man. Make it something else.”

“I can’t. I want Catalina to become a brother.”

King puts his head back and closes his eyes. But as I ink right over his heart, I can feel his chest rise and fall a little faster as he thinks through what I requested of him. It’s his problem now, not mine. Even though I know it’s perhaps the toughest internal question he’s been asked as president.

Working in silence, I change my attention to what I’m inking. It’s important to him. And it will be important to Rae. I want her to know, when she sees it, that it’s my best work. So I take my time with the shading, freestyle the flourishes to bring balance. And there’s strategic highlighting with white ink to make the text take on an almost three-dimensional appearance.

When it’s done, I turn off the machine.

“Take a look,” I say, tipping my head in the direction of the mirror.

“Before I do, I need to say something to you as your friend, not your president,” King says. “Dad told me where you came from. I didn’t understand, as a prospect, why you got a room, and I didn’t. You want to know why you’re treasurer, Niro, and not the enforcer role you always wanted?”

My eyebrows rise. “How would you know that?”

King shrugs. “Dad told me. You’d just become a prospect, and Dad realized that you’d basically never had any financial freedom, and because of that, you’d never learned any skills with money. Dad watched as you blew the first big paycheck you ever got after you patched in. It took you four days to blow through twenty-five grand and get back to being broke. He knew you’d blow it all, so he made you work alongside Venom before he went inside, so you could become the club’s next treasurer. That way, he could teach you about money and cash flow, without you getting pissed off for being on the receiving end of another lecture. Dad wanted to give you your pride. The reason he never let you switch roles, was because he figured if you

had to reconcile the club's books every month, it might force you to remember to reconcile your own."

I swallow hard and look down at the floor. Maybe I know more about grief than I comprehend. There are so many ways in which Camelot looked out for me. Since his death, there's been a void. I have more in common with Cat than I understood.

"I've put a lot of chaos in the world, but I'm really trying to work on it," I say, my voice rough with emotion.

A hand hits my shoulder and squeezes hard. "I see it. It's good. I think Dad saw you, Colton, perhaps better than the rest of us do."

I look up at King. "Is it weird that I always kind of thought of you as the older brother I didn't have? When I first met you, you were so fucking cool. Already a prospect, but a shoo-in for becoming a brother. And your dad didn't want anyone to think he gave you a pass. Whatever anybody else got to do, you had to do ten times worse, or do it faster, or do it better. And you did it every single time. While I'm incredibly grateful to your dad, it's you I kinda wanted to be when I grew up."

King sits up, throws his feet down, and unfastens Camelot's watch, the one the club gave him when he became president. The one he was wearing the day I saved his life.

"Dad would probably want you to have this," King says, handing it to me. The noise and bustle of the tattoo studio fades into nothing as I look at the outstretched hand.

I reach for it but can't take it.

"Hey," King says, and I look up at him. "You've always been a pain in the ass, kinda a little brother's job, I suppose. And if we're brothers, and Dad was effectively your father, figure you should have something of his to honor your connection to him."

Instead of handing the watch to me, King fastens the Rolex around my wrist.

"We have no available positions, but Martin is likely to get his cut soon. Maybe you can train him to be treasurer. And then you and Bates could share the enforcer role, seeing you work so closely together. There's no way for Catalina to become a brother. But I'll figure something out that makes her feel valuable. I'll consider her killing of Henley as her prospect test and bring the proposal to the table for a vote. And I'll vote in favor."

I don't remember the last time I cried.

I don't remember the last time I felt the true sting of loss.
Which is maybe why my heart feels like it's been shredded in my chest.

CATALINA

Dancing is so not my thing. Briar and Rae seem set on truly letting their hair down, and I find myself watching them over on the dance floor as I stand by our table with the others, which is close to the bar. My eyes are on them as they move to the beat, and my ears tuned to Gwen and Iris chatting about doing something together when the men go on their ride out to Philadelphia.

It's a relief when the song ends, and they come back to join us. I feel better when my charges are in a group. Martin is standing a few feet away. The other two prospects are too busy flirting with two women over by the DJ.

"Who wants another drink?" Gwen says.

"Me, please," Briar says.

"I'm good, thanks," I say. I don't drink when I'm working, and I consider looking after these women work that's an honor. Senior members of this club have entrusted their old ladies' safety to me. I'm not going to blow it.

"I'll help you carry them," Iris says.

Martin steps next to me. "Gonna go take a leak. Back in five."

I wonder if Niro is a good dancer. I'm not talking waltzing or anything, although I wouldn't have guessed the guy was a baker either.

Three men move in around Gwen and Iris. At first, Gwen smiles. Not the joyous one that lights up her face, but a tight one. It's the polite smile all women have . . . the one they use when a man approaches them and their first instinct is to be nice, to not piss him off, to humor him until they can extricate themselves.

Two things happen in parallel. Iris slips her fingers through the keychain

on her bag, and I realize it's a weapon in the shape of a cat. Her fingers slip through the eye holes so the sharp and pointy metal ears rise above her knuckles.

At the same time, one of the men pulls a small syringe from his pocket, and holding it close to his leg, flips the cap off with his thumb.

By the time I get to them, one man has his hands on Gwen. There's shock on her face, but before she can respond, I grab the neck of his shirt and yank hard.

Iris juts out her foot and he trips backwards over it, his legs going over his head. The syringe skitters across the floor.

I hear the slur he calls me as he hits the ground. The boot I land between his legs causes him to shout out in pain.

One of his friends grabs me around the neck, and I clamp down on his elbows, lean forward fast, and flip him over my head. Gwen grabs a bottle from the bar and slams it hard against his skull.

Iris has already jabbed her keyring hard into the face of the third. Rae and Briar join us.

"He has a Brotherhood tattoo," Iris shouts, and Rae grabs her phone. I know she's calling King, but I want to take care of this myself.

Martin joins us, and two more men join the assailants. Club security arrives and it becomes a free-for-all. All I can do is get the women out of here.

"Door, now," I encourage. There are bouncers there. We are five women. I can tell them what happened.

And without questioning my order, all the girls follow me to the well-lit street outside the club near the doormen.

Iris instructs one of them to get a cloth napkin stuffed with ice which he does. When he returns minutes later, she hands it to me. "For the side of your face."

From my seat on the curb, I take it and gingerly place it on the side of my head and squint away from the flashing blue lights of the three police cars that arrive in minutes.

I'm actually more concerned about my nose. I don't think it's broken, but man . . .

Rae cradles her wrist. "I wish the police had been slower. I wanted King to get here first."

Briar, or Rose, as she is called at times, is lamenting how her heels hurt.

Martin is laid out on the pavement, holding his ribs and wincing. Howard and Clive, the two other prospects, have left. I'm guessing the club will never see them again. They ignored their charges and didn't notice we were getting our asses kicked across the club until it was over.

"It was kinda funny the way that guy's legs went over his head, no?" I say to break the tension.

Grins turn into tipsy giggles, turn into laughter. It's that wild kind of laughter that happens when you just got through an adrenaline rush.

"Almost broke my ankle tripping him," Iris says.

"I think we might be in trouble," Gwen whispers conspiratorially as we hear the roar of motorbikes that seem to be coming from all directions thirteen minutes later.

The lights on the front of the bikes almost blind me as they pull up, and I squint. "What the fuck happened?" I hear King say.

Looking up, it's almost comical. Grown-ass biker men, torn between picking their women up and squeezing them and glancing over to the police cars with faces that suggest vengeance against the men currently seated in the back.

Niro crouches in front of me, his face like thunder. "Who did this to you? Because I might have to kill the fucker."

"He's a man who might have severe difficulty impregnating anyone in the future," I reply. "They had a Righteous Brotherhood tattoo and a syringe of something nasty. I think they were going to try and drug girls to snatch them. But I'd rather have you out here with me than inside, where I can't touch you for the next lifetime, so don't you go killing someone in front of a cop."

Vex chuckles. "Great distinction, Cat. Killing them is fine, just not in front of a cop."

I try to grin but the action makes me wince.

Niro takes the ice-filled napkin from me and cleans up the blood I assume is coming from my nose.

King moves to Rae; Briar falls into Saint. Spark scans until he finds Iris and pulls her to him, looking into her eyes. "Are you okay?" he asks.

"We love Catalina," Iris says, then hiccups.

"Nice to know, little chick. But why is your ankle strapped up?"

"The club security guy strapped it up for me while we were waiting for the police. I tripped the guy who attempted to hurt Gwen," she replies.

Clutch tugs Gwen to him. "Some guy touched you? Did he inject you? He

in that car?” Clutch tips his chin in the direction of the police car.

“He didn’t inject me with anything, it fell out of his hand when he hit the floor. We’re lucky.” She puts her hand on his chest. “Catalina took care of them.”

I see Halo move into position between Clutch and the police cars to stop the VP if he makes a move.

“Catalina was like a Quentin Tarantino movie star,” Briar says, and pulls a fighting stance. Then she wobbles and Saint catches her. “They didn’t stand a chance.”

I can’t help but smile. Because, despite the turn of events, we’d had a good night.

“What happened, cariño?” Niro asks.

“Basically, what Gwen said. Once I realized what was happening, my only objective was to immobilize those men.”

“And I tripped one of them,” Iris offers again.

I nod. “She did. He went ass over feet. And it pissed him off. It took a few minutes to take them all down.”

“I may have smashed a bottle of champagne on one of their heads,” Gwen says. “Am I in trouble?”

“No,” Clutch says. “But that motherfucker is.”

He catches Halo unawares and pushes him to the side before trying to get to the police car.

“Not today, sweetheart,” Vex says, assisting Halo and gripping Clutch around the waist.

A police officer walks toward us. “King,” he says. “Didn’t realize these were your girls.”

“Ten grand if you let the five shitheads out of the back of those police cars and go back to the station,” King says quietly. “These aren’t girls. They’re old ladies.”

I see the blood drain from the cop’s face. “Shit. King. Look. I already got ’em for assault. I got the syringe, so once I get it tested, that will be direct intent. Plenty of eye-witness statements, including the bar tender and your girls. Let me handle it.”

“Twenty.” King doesn’t back down.

Rae steps to the club president. “Sweetheart, let him deal with it, please.”

“Thirty,” Clutch says.

“Jesus,” Rae curses. “You too. Stop.”

Spark joins them. “Forty.”

“Don’t even think about saying *fifty*,” I say to Niro. My joints ache as I move to stand. After fighting with Niro two days ago, and fighting again today, I’m sore. It’s a good kind of sore though. One that shows I pushed my body to its limits.

Niro shakes his head as he helps me to my feet. “Wouldn’t dream of it. Still gonna kill those fuckers.”

“We’re not leaving here until you hand us those men,” King says.

“Cut it out,” I whisper to him. “It’s a public place. Way too many witnesses. If the cops let those men out of their cars and they wind up in a hospital or anywhere else, the whole world will know it’s you. Let the police take them.”

Clutch grips Gwen’s face and kisses her tenderly. “Wanna kill that fucker for putting his hands on you.”

“Join the queue,” King adds.

“Catalina’s speaking sense,” Halo says.

“Plus, you’re all being real party poopers,” Iris says.

Briar loops her arm through Iris’s and chuckles at her words. “Party poopers.”

“Speaking as an impartial observer, they’re kinda cute when they’re drunk,” Vex says. “I hate cops. If any one of them gets itchy trigger fingers, you know they’re pointing that gun straight at me first. Can we get out of here?”

Rae nods. “Yes. This was a bonding experience of sorts. Now we old ladies know we’ve got each other’s backs. Well, Cat’s got more of our backs, but we did good, all things considered.”

Gwen turns to Iris. “That trip you caused was impressive.”

“And Briar landed that punch on the one Brotherhood guy with the Packers jersey,” Rae says with a grin. “The way his head spun.”

I nod toward her arm. “Next time, you need to punch from your shoulder, not swing with your arm. That’s how you break your forearm.”

King tugs on his hair. “There won’t be a next time. You can’t—”

“Next time,” Rae says, “we’ll be better prepared. Catalina drop-kicked one guy into next week.”

“She did,” Briar says. “You know how that feels, Clutch, yeah?”

“Fuck me,” Clutch says, shaking his head. “Will you all ever stop talking about this?”

“I used this,” Iris says, raising a knuckle duster in the shape of a cat with pointy ears. “I think there might still be blood on it.”

“Jesus fucking Christ,” Spark says, tugging it off her fingers. “When I bought you this, you weren’t ever meant to need to use it.”

“But she did,” I say. “And in a moment of chaos, she remembered she had it, pulled it out, and used it to protect her friend. I know shit happened to her, but you might want to trust your old lady a bit more. She’s stronger than she looks.”

“I think I might be sick,” Briar mutters.

Saint reaches for her. “We should get you home.”

“No,” she says firmly. “We were going to get hoagies and sit down by the shore while we sober up a little.”

“Oh, yes. Hoagies,” Gwen says, resting her head on Clutch’s shoulder. “Want to put me on the back of your bike and get me one with extra cheese?”

Clutch rolls his eyes. “Hoagies by the shore in fucking February. Glad we showed up, or we’d have been picking up frozen dead bodies in the morning.”

The bartender steps outside and nods to Saint, who steps over to speak to him. When he returns, he hands King a piece of paper. “The bartender caught wind of where they were staying. A motel down the shore, or in this case, the opposite direction to where the cops are taking them.”

King takes it. “If we all go, there’ll be too many witnesses. Spark and I will go,” he says.

Halo whips the paper out of his hand. “No offense, Prez, but you two have got old ladies who just went through some shit. I think what you meant to say was that Bates and I should go.”

King looks to Rae, and then nods. “You’re right. That’s what I meant to say. Find out everything you can. Just don’t get seen, and while it’s rare I feel inclined to help the police, make sure you leave any evidence behind for the cops to find. And what happened to Howard and Clive?”

“Chasing tail at the bar when it all went down,” I say. “They were worried you were going to kick their asses when you found out.”

“So, they left instead of being men about it?” Clutch huffs. “I’m gonna do more than kick their asses.”

“Perhaps we should let Catalina decide what to do with them,” Niro says as he winks at me. But there’s pride on his features. And it fills me with more warmth than words ever could.

“Agreed,” King says.

Briar looks down at her feet. “My toes look a really long way away.”

Saint sweeps her up into his arms. “As much as I want to take you on the bike, we should get you and Martin back in the van.”

We all look over to where a rather battered Martin is clutching his ribs. “Think I might need Switch to strap my ribs up.”

“Why can’t I ever be the one who decides what happens to bad guys?” Briar asks Saint.

Saint cups her cheek. “Remember the last time you and I had to deal with bad guys?” He tips his chin at King. “You confused them with a take-out delivery and buzzed them in.” And I’m guessing there’s a story behind it that I don’t understand.

But a bubble of laughter begins, rippling through the group, until everyone is laughing.

“I don’t get it,” I whisper to Niro.

“Saint was an undercover ATF agent.”

I do a double take. “What? Why is he here?”

“Long story. But he is. We’ve moved on as a club with him in tow.”

It gives me a whisper of hope. The Outlaws seems so forward thinking. The club has moved beyond the stronghold of homogenous men. There’s some diversity. Hell, Vex is a much-respected member of the club and a Black man and there are two more men of color in the prospects. And they’ve flexed the rules enough to accept a former ATF agent. And tonight, they paid me to look after the old ladies, which I did. Maybe they could learn to see me as valuable.

Niro slips out of his thick leather jacket, revealing his hoodie. “Don’t care how fucking cold it is, you’re coming on my bike.”

“Is that a promise?” I ask playfully as I slide my arms into his thick lined jacket. It smells of him and is warm.

“Cariño, don’t. If I get a boner in this windchill, it might snap off.”

Arrangements are made for the van, bikes, and people. Niro holds my hand as he leads me to his bike. He’s parked next to King. I’m guessing he already bundled Rae into the van. I like that Niro looks out for me in his own way but doesn’t treat me as too precious to exist outside of typical old lady boundaries.

“Hey, Cat,” King says, pulling on his helmet. “You did good.”

“Thank you,” I say.

Niro tilts his bike for me to hop over, and I climb on, snuggling close against his back. I tuck my arms tightly around his middle. He's going to be cold riding into the wintery weather with only a hoodie and whatever is beneath it. But in the same way he lets me be who I am, I'm going to let him be who he is.

As we pull out of the parking lot, I think about how I first arrived at the clubhouse and how my life has changed in such a short period of time.

If I weren't so fucking happy right now, I'd wonder if it were all too good to be true.

NIRO

I never realized how good a day could feel if you start it naked underneath soft and warm blankets and wrapped up in someone you really want to be around.

Catalina has replaced strong espresso coffee and warm cinnamon rolls as my favorite way to start the day. My addiction to her is way stronger than the one I have to caffeine.

My phone pings with the sound reserved for King, and I throw out an arm to reach for it.

King: *Church. One hour.*

It's only eight o'clock, it's not even properly light outside.

I put the phone down and wrap my arms around Catalina again. "Babe," I whisper.

"Mhh-hmm," she mumbles, as I bury my nose into the hair by her neck.

"I gotta go, but I really want to fuck you first."

Catalina sleepily rolls over and opens her eyes. "Persuade me," she says.

I kiss her lips. "Can I just show you?"

"Sure, but don't forget it takes a girl a hot minute to get warmed up."

I move to my knees and pull out something from the side table that I got for her the other day. Padded leather handcuffs. I had my initials stamped on them. "Remember what you said in the clubhouse the day we napped?"

"I said a lot of things."

I kiss her lips again because they're soft and plump with sleep. "I asked if I needed to cuff you to the bed. And you said that if I cuffed you, we were definitely fucking."

Catalina grins. “And you replied that God loves a dirty girl, and I said there was no God and nothing dirty about knowing what you love in bed.”

I hold out the cuffs. “Were you serious?”

She raises her hands above her head and grabs the ironwork of my headboard. It makes her tits rise and stand proud on her chest. “No. I was being provocative. I’ve never let anyone tie me up before because I’ve never trusted anyone enough.”

“And now?”

“I trust you.”

I lean over her and slip one wrist into the cuff. It’s a buckle, not a key, and I check how tight I’ve fastened it by slipping my finger beneath the leather. I don’t want this to hurt her. I loop the other handcuff through the ironwork and wrap it around her free wrist.

When I’m done, I sit back on my heels and simply take her in.

“You’re a fucking work of art,” I say, stroking my hands over her torso, along the lines of her ribs, the underside of her breasts.

“Niro.” My name comes out on a shudder.

“Get my finger wet,” I instruct. She welcomes my finger inside her mouth, and I swipe below her tongue, collecting her saliva. “Now open your legs.”

Her pupils go wide as she does as I say. I deposit the saliva over her clit. Circling, then sliding back and forth. Her nipples peak. Goosebumps ripple over her skin. And her hands grip the bedposts.

I love watching the way she reacts to me. It’s the only way she’ll let me play with her. The only time I can manipulate her to where I want her. Needy and desperate for me.

I guess that hot minute she needed has passed, because she’s wet as I ease my finger into her softness.

Her back arches off the bed, and I hear the rattle of the chain between the cuffs against the headboard.

“My dick buried deep in your pussy is one of my favorite things. Throw in being ten seconds away from coming, and you calling out my name, and there isn’t anywhere else I want to be.”

I speed up my strokes, adding a second and third finger. My thumb presses against her clit. When I remove it, she cries out. “Niro.”

“Save that orgasm. I want to feel you squeeze the cum out of me,” I say as I reach for a condom. I slip it on, and then roll Cat onto her side. She lifts

her leg over mine as I settle behind her. She's so open to me, and yet her movements are restrained.

My cock aches.

I coil my hips and thrust into her too fast for how early in the morning it is, but what started off as a desire for a lazy fuck is becoming something desperate.

"Feels so good," I mutter against her neck as my lips brush the soft skin there.

"Please, Colton."

Love it when she uses my real name too. I'm starting to realize he isn't a man I need to run away from and hide behind a road name. Because Catalina seems to like all the pieces of me as much as I love the way her pussy feels as it tightens around my dick.

I place my fingers against her lips. "Spit on them," I instruct.

"Really?"

"Yeah, babe. Fucking hot."

She does as I tell her, and I move back to her clit. Her body tenses, her back arches. The chains rattle again and blood surges to my cock.

"Yeah, squeeze me, Cat. Milk me. Fucking love it when you do." And with those words, she goes over the edge, tugging at my dick so hard, I come seconds after she does, losing all sense of timing and self.

The world tilts a little, and I close my eyes, sucking in a breath as I become aware of the sweat between our bodies.

There are lots of things I never thought I'd be.

A boyfriend. Such a wild fucking word. Just to be someone's anything is wild enough. But to be specifically Cat's is incredible, because she chose me, flaws and all.

Being part of a family is another thing. A real family. I see Camelot's watch on my desk, illuminated by a thin sliver of weak morning light, forcing its way in through the gap of my curtains. I think about King and our conversation after I inked him.

I can't say my definitions of things have changed overnight. I'm not suddenly flooded with emotion. But there's a . . . sincerity . . . to the way I feel.

I groan as I slide out of Cat, reaching for the condom. She's not on birth control and says she doesn't want to go on it, so it's not as if simply getting tested would remove the need for them.

Last night, I had a kinky-as-fuck dream that I knocked her up intentionally. She looked fucking hot with my kid in her belly. I always thought there's no way in hell I'm cut out for kids. I can barely keep myself alive and sane. Have never understood whether any of my shit is genetic, and wouldn't want to pass it on to a kid if it is.

But I can't help but think the two of us might be good parents eventually.

Good parents who do bad shit.

The thought makes me smile.

I deal with the condom and undo her cuffs.

"I liked that," she says.

"I liked it too."

I glance at the time. It means I have forty minutes to get cleaned up, eat, and get to the clubhouse.

"You have to go?" Catalina says. I love her post-sex voice. It's raspy.

"Yeah, babe. But stay in bed a while longer."

I kiss her forehead when I leave.

I'm the last to get there, as usual. I would've had time to eat, shower, and leave, but then I thought about baking Cat some cookies for when she woke up. And then I realized we were out of sugar because I used it all. So I ran to the shop. And then, well, it was already five after ten.

"Sorry," I say as I settle into my seat.

King starts. "I need to take a vote on some changes to the club structure I'm proposing. Niro is second on the agenda."

I look at King, and it takes me a moment to realize what he's about to do. My chest squeezes so hard that for a moment I feel like I'm having a heart attack. I have to force myself to take a breath in as I nod.

King smiles. "We've always prided ourselves as being a progressive motorcycle club chapter. While other clubs for example have retained a homogenous racial identity—"

"Homogenous?" Bates says. "You swallow a dictionary?"

"Rae," Halo says without missing a beat. "He swallowed Rae."

No one misses the double entendre.

"Shut up and listen," I say. "It's not like this is the most important thing we ever discussed at this table or anything."

Switch raises an eyebrow. "Since when do you care about paying attention at this table?"

I know it's said with humor, but I'm not in the mood. "Since King is

about to propose Catalina joining the Iron Outlaws,” I say, getting ahead of myself *and* my president’s agenda.

“He’s going to what?” Wrinkle asks from the end of the table.

“If you let me finish what I was saying, it’ll make more sense,” King says. “I checked the charter and ran through it with our lawyer. It clearly says that only men can be brothers. It doesn’t define what a man is, but any way we position it, that definition does not mean Cat.”

My heart plummets. She needs to be a brother; she needs to feel fully part of a club, not like some disposable asset that can be turned on and used when required. That’s the current deal she has with Los Reyes.

“But,” King says dramatically, “there is scope to open the classifications. The pipeline has always been hang arounds, prospects, brothers. There is absolutely nothing that says we can’t insert another classification and set the rules for what that classification does or doesn’t have access to.”

“What are you saying? Because I’m fucking confused,” I say bluntly.

“I’m saying we can create criteria between prospect and brother.”

“What, like *sister* or something?” Switch asks.

King shakes his head. “I’m thinking something non-gendered, so in the long-term we don’t have to keep redefining. Something that shows a person’s importance to the club, outside of brotherhood. It’s an open floor until we’re ready to vote.”

“No,” Wrinkle says. “It’ll make us a laughingstock. I don’t care how badass she is; she’s not joining the club in a professional capacity. She’s at best just club pussy.”

“Watch what you say about her, old man,” I say. “Doing my best to not climb over this table and choke an apology out of you.”

“For fuck’s sake, Dad,” Halo says. “The club’s evolving. In what we do and who we are. Women are getting into the most intense levels of service in the military, makes sense they should be able find a home someplace else too.”

“Yeah,” says Switch. “But you and I both know men who got injured on the battlefield because their natural reaction is to protect the women they’re serving with.” Switch looks in my direction. “I’m not saying no, but we do need to think about the psychology of having a woman with us, when we do some of the things we do.”

“Fair,” King notes.

“How does it work with her being a part of the club and also possibly an

old lady?” Spark asks.

“She will *definitely* be my old lady,” I say.

Spark raises his hands. “Don’t need to snap at me. It’s a valid question. Part of the reason our club works is because club business is just that. Club business. None of us bridge that. But as we saw the night they went out for drinks; the women think of her as one of theirs. How does that sit when they know there is something going on, but we won’t tell them? Are they going to call up Cat to try and get the skinny from inside?”

“Cat wouldn’t tell them,” I say.

Clutch eyes me evenly. “Yeah, but you’re biased and in no position to be objective. Of course you’re going to think she can do this. The question for the vote is: do the rest of us?”

“To clarify, this isn’t just a position for Catalina,” King says. “It’s a position for any other person we can’t see a full path to brotherhood for, but would want them to feel respected and valuable enough to be a close member of the group. Cat’s the only example we’ve got right now.”

“What if we went down current membership requirements for brotherhood, see which things do and don’t apply, then figure out what new things we’d have to add?” Bates says. “Let’s start with the wearing of identifiable colors. Would this new role get a cut?”

“Prospects and brothers all get a cut, so why wouldn’t the people in this new group?” I ask.

“Fair,” Vex says. “So she gets a cut. But have you thought through what it means? She can’t wear club colors *and* a ‘Property of’ rocker patch.”

The question stops me in my tracks for a minute. Does it really matter to me that she wears a property patch? “Perhaps there is another way to arrange all the rockers and patches on our cuts. So, imagine it’s club colors on the back, but as this new classification doesn’t include ranking roles, maybe where the rank usually goes on the cut, she can wear a smaller property patch.”

“We need to stop aiming all the questions at Niro to solve,” King says. “Like I said, this should be a new position for anyone we think deserves it. Cat deserves the choice.” He looks at me. “And you can’t be pissed off when she picks the club colors you want so badly for her instead of a property patch.”

“Fuck,” I grumble. “I want Cat more than I need a patch on her at all. She’s mine. I’m hers. I’ll settle for a ring.”

Clutch looks shocked. “You’re gonna marry her?”

“Patch her. Marry her. Knock her up maybe. Get my kid to marry your kid so we’ll be in-laws for the rest of our lives. How’s that sound?”

“Fucking awful,” Clutch says. He’s serious for a heartbeat, and then we both start to laugh.

“Does she have to prospect?” Vex asks. “To become whatever we call this?”

King rubs his hand across his chin. “No, but for anyone in the future to join this classification, their contribution to the club and the life has to be proven and vouched for. You could say she’s prospected for Los Reyes her entire life. And she killed Henley.”

There are a few gasps around the table, and I realize that neither Bates, King, nor I had told anyone else. “Yeah. She did. After pretending her car had broken down to get into his house. She’s cold-blooded.”

“And she stayed and protected the women when Howard and Clive abandoned them last night,” Spark adds. “I woke up this morning terrified that it would set back Iris’s recovery from being kidnapped, but it seems to have strengthened her resolve that she’s more capable than she gives herself credit for. So in a roundabout way, Cat’s already helped me and the club. That makes me more amenable to figuring this out for her.”

“Next you’ll be saying these new members can come to church and get a vote,” Wrinkle says, folding his arms across his chest.

“Why shouldn’t they?” Halo asks. “If they are running club business.”

King shrugs. “President’s choice. If it’s purely to do with the brotherhood, then church will be just brothers, if it’s to do with the club and club business more broadly, why not?”

“Your dad would be ashamed,” Wrinkle sneers.

“Kinda like how I feel about you right now,” Halo says and folds his arms too.

I lean forward and respond to Halo’s dad. “Says the guy who knocked up a club girl at your age. You’re fucking joke, Wrinkle.”

“Steady,” King says, and I know he means me. *Shit*. I want to give them every reason to vote yes for this, and yet I’m getting up in Wrinkle’s face. I hate not being able to control my instinctive responses at times like this when they risk fucking everything up.

“I need to backtrack to this being about Niro and Catalina for a second,” Bates says. “I think we owe it to Niro to make this work. Even if this was a

one-of-a-kind set of colors. For as much as Colton has been a dick at times, we've all known why. We've used him when it suits us, we give him the most morally bankrupt work the club has to do. His death toll is likely higher than anyone else in the club. We've . . ." He turns to look at me. "You okay if I say your diagnoses?"

"If you think it'll help, use whatever the fuck you want." I'd lie naked on the table in front of them all while they stabbed pins in me if I thought it would make this all happen for Cat.

Bates nods and squeezes my shoulder. "We've used his anti-social personality disorder to get him to clean up our shit. You might not have known its name, but you know how it presents. Impulse, lack of remorse. The club has benefited from it many times over. Psychologists group ASPD as part of Cluster B personalities because they like to prey on others' weaknesses."

"How do you know this shit?" Saint asks.

Bates tips his head my way. "He's the closest thing I have to a brother. Why wouldn't I research it to help him? The best bit about Catalina? She doesn't have any weaknesses . . . at least, none that Niro can prey on. She's his equal, it's a balanced relationship. And she seems to accept him exactly as he is—which, for the record, we should too. We owe it to him to make this work."

My mouth goes dry as I try to swallow. I hate all this focus on me. My knee bounces up and down. I stand and walk to the window facing out to the bar. I need a drink. Which reminds me I haven't collected the receipts for all the alcohol. And the dishwasher needs replacing at home. I wonder if I should get a new one.

Bates stands. I see his reflection in the window, then he moves closer and shoulder checks me. "Sorry," he says. "We've taken advantage of you."

King stands too. He moves to my other side. "Bates is right. We have used you against yourself. I'm sorry too."

"Fuck off," I say, before I can stop myself.

"There he is," Clutch says with a laugh.

I shake my head. "You're all assholes."

"Maybe," Bates says and sit again. King does the same. And I see everyone waiting for me to sit back down.

I think about something Rae said. About intimacy between men being important. I thought she meant sex and told her there was no way I was

fucking King. She didn't laugh but explained how vulnerability isn't a bad thing.

"I find it hard to accept that kinda shit," I admit.

"Get over it," Halo says pragmatically.

"Helpful," I reply.

Clutch places his elbows on the desk. "How about this? *Crew*, as a title on a top rocker. Bottom rocker says *Iron Outlaws, New Jersey*, like a brother's cut. Criteria involves more than five years' involvement in the motorcycle club world and at least one recorded kill on behalf of the club. They start on a quarter of a share of the monthly profits. President's discretion to increase the share every year to seventy-five percent. They pay a similar percent in dues."

I do the math. I made about four hundred thousand through the club last year. A quarter of a share puts Cat at about one hundred. "It's a low ball. She should get paid per job then too. If it's something specific. She's good at espionage and covert assassination. If we ever use her in that specific capacity, for something only she can do, we should pay her."

"No," Wrinkle says. "I'm against. Dead fucking against. And if you check in with Track, I bet he's against too."

"Incarcerated brothers don't get a vote in this." King looks at Wrinkle. "I think the difference between my way of mind and yours is the continuum. We got to future proof the club. We need to evolve. I think this gives us room."

"Can we do a non-binding interim vote to see which way people are leaning before I have fucking heart attack?" I say, standing up again. I need to move, to call Cat, to go into the kitchen and bake shit, or to rip the old wallpaper off the hallway at home or something.

"First, anyone got more questions they need to ask?"

King's question is met with the shaking of heads. I've never been more terrified of an outcome in my life.

"Let's make it the actual vote," King says. "Yays?"

Hands start to rise. Bates is first, Halo and Clutch second. Slowly but surely, the majority of the club raises their hands and every one causes my heart to thud loudly in my chest. I raise my own and see King raise his. He has the audacity to wink at me as he does it.

"Nays?" he asks, lowering his hands.

A few hands rise. Mostly old-timers.

“Motion passed. Time to update our bylaws.”

I put my head in my hands, and the world gets a little bit spacey.

A hand touches my shoulder. “I think you better call your woman,” King says.

CATALINA

I walk into the Iron Outlaws clubhouse with much apprehension. I even took the time to thoroughly arm myself before I rode over. Niro sounded . . . odd . . . when he called me. There was no playful banter. Nothing like the usual Niro. Just the request to appear at the clubhouse as quickly as my bike would carry me.

I steel myself, lowering my shoulders and rolling my neck from left to right, before I step into the bar area. All the men are in church, but Niro is standing against the doorframe, his arms crossed. He tips his chin to the baskets on the table outside. I drop my phone in one, and my obvious weapons in the other.

“The other knife and that nine-millimeter SIG you holstered under your hoodie,” he says.

I look at all the people in the room. “Niro,” I whisper. “What is this?”

He points to the containers of weapons. “No one in the room is armed. And it’s hopefully good news.”

My heart rests a little at his words. I didn’t think he would set me up. No, I know he wouldn’t. “Okay, I trust you.”

Niro smiles at this and meets me by cupping my cheeks and kissing me in front of his men.

“This is bullshit,” I hear Wrinkle say.

“Then you’re free to leave,” King replies. “Come in, Cat.”

I do as he says, and Niro stands by my side.

“Why do you love Niro?” King asks.

“I’m not sure that’s any of your business,” I reply. I look up at the man

next to me. The one who has, through his steadfast actions, given me a soft place to land where I can allow myself the feeling of being protected yet allowed to be who I am.

And I wonder if I've actually used the words yet. I feel it. He feels it in his own way. But it's like the words are too precious, too permanent for us to whisper them yet.

Even though we treasure each other equally.

King grins. It's strange to see the president smile at me. "I'm gonna need an answer, sweetheart."

I roll my eyes. "If you're not fucking me, feeding me, or funding me, please don't call me *sweetheart*. Why do you need an answer?"

"Because Niro wants to claim you as his property. And this is your chance to confirm you want to be."

I look up at Niro. "You think you could have discussed this with me before you discussed it with them?" I ask.

Niro grins too. "There was a risk you wouldn't agree."

"There's *still* as risk I might say no." But the mischief I see in his eyes makes me imagine, for a heartbeat, what it will be like to have our child look up at me with the same glee in theirs.

"We both know you're going to say yes. And this is the dance you do before saying yes, so you can be independent and shit." He squeezes my hand.

Before I met Niro, I thought that the world already decided what I deserved. That I was supposed to feel grateful to insecure men like Felipe, that I was lucky to get any of his attention. That I was somehow the lucky one for getting a piece of him.

Yet, here Niro is. Putting himself out there for me, in front of his club.

"You're not exactly talking her into this," Clutch suggests from the other side of the table.

"In-laws, remember?" Niro says, and I have no idea what that means.

"You need help with the words to ask her?" King says, but I can hear the laughter in his tone.

"Not from you. I don't need some loved-up Shakespeare shit," Niro replies. He turns to face me and slides his hand around the back of my neck, massaging it gently. "Is she here?"

"Who?"

He places his lips to my ear. "The girl trying break out of your chest. I

want her to say yes to me.”

When he looks at me, I realize she is. “Yes,” I say quietly, and then repeat it loudly. I turn to King. “He’s my everything. My equal in all things.”

Niro moves to kiss me but can’t because Bates suddenly jumps on his back. “Fucking yes.”

A loud whistle ricochets around the room. “Sit your asses down,” King says. “We have more business. First, congratulations on becoming an Iron Outlaw old lady, Cat.”

“Thank you,” I say as Niro sits and pulls me onto his lap. I quickly stand. “I am so not sitting on your lap at the church table.”

Clutch tries to hide his laugh. “I like her.”

Wrinkle stands. “Here, you can have my seat because I can’t watch this.” With that he leaves the room, the door rattling in the frame when he slams it behind him.

“Was that because of me?” I ask Niro.

“Of a fashion,” King answers for him. “Sit in his chair anyway. You’re effectively a traitor to Los Reyes now.”

“That word sits heavy on my heart. And I’m not quite sure it represents what happened. *They* were traitors who killed my father. This isn’t being a traitor. This is revenge. At some point, I’m going to need to go and find out what happened to him by taking out Perrito, Felipe, or Mateo.” Even as I say it, I remember Rae’s words of caution. Processing anger and grief is not the same as revenge.

“My vote is Felipe,” Niro says. “I’ll happily cut his dick off.”

Bates slings his arm over Niro’s shoulder. “We don’t need to cut the dick off every guy Cat has banged.”

“Jesus Christ,” Switch says. “Don’t talk about Cat like that.”

Clutch shrugs. “If we do what we’re about to do, Cat doesn’t get out of the shit we give each other.”

Niro shrugs. “I don’t care if she knows I want to kill every fucker who touched her before I did.”

“Shut up. All of you. Look, what the hell is going on?” I say. “Oh, and no, you’re not cutting anyone’s dick off, just like I’m not sticking my knife through the throat of every club girl here. We both have pasts. Get over it.”

Niro winks at me. “Whatever you say, cariño.”

I shake my head. “Why am I here?”

King leans forwards and temples his fingers. “How extensive was your

career with Los Reyes?”

“Why?”

“Humor me,” King replies. “I can assure you it’s in your best interests.”

I don’t know how to take that. Does it mean my ability to stay alive is based on it? Wait, why would Niro claim me first? Unless it’s because he wants to use old lady privileges to protect me from whatever King wants.

Dios.

“Extensive. From when I was young, my father taught me to protect myself. I always knew I wanted the life he had. This.” I point around the table. “I wanted the brotherhood you have. I wanted to live outside the law. Make my own rules. Be the one percent. So I learned how to be helpful.”

“Without giving us names, tell us,” King says.

“I’m around twenty-eight for Los Reyes.” I don’t over describe. While I believe Niro wouldn’t set me up, I still can’t be sure I’m not being recorded. I don’t add the word *kills* to the *twenty-eight*. “I’d like to think all were deserved.”

“Niro says you’ve done espionage.”

I look over at Niro and raise an eyebrow.

“Trust me, babe.” His shoulders are relaxed. I’ll assume it’s with reason.

“Yes. I can get where you guys can’t. I have experience particularly with Russian crime families that like to move weapons and drugs through Mexican ports.”

Clutch leans back in his chair. “You should just tell her, Prez.”

“Niro asked me to make you a brother,” King says.

My heart drops, and I can’t process the thoughts as quickly as they slam into me.

A brother?

Niro asked.

I’m here, so that must mean something.

Or maybe it was just the old lady thing.

Just the old lady thing.

“Que?” It’s all I can come up with. So many words in two languages at my disposal, and *what* is all I’ve got.

“But we can’t do it,” King says, taking all the wind out of my sails. In two seconds, a wave of hope crashes over me and then dissipates into nothing. I didn’t realize it was possible to inflate and deflate so quickly.

“Oh.” But the thought remains that Niro asked. I look to him, hoping he

can see how grateful I am.

“Fuck’s sake,” Clutch says. “Stop drawing it out and just fucking tell her.”

“Tell me what?” I look to Niro again. “What do they need to tell me?”

“Catalina Flores,” King says. “We want you to be part of the Iron Outlaws. The charter is set in stone to only include men as brothers. But we understand that having you work with us but keeping you at a distance wouldn’t live up to the respect we expect of each other as a club. So, we’re creating a new position. Crew. Above a prospect. A sign of enduring commitment to the cause, in this case, the elimination of an enemy. A seat at this table when the decision revolves around club business, but not brotherhood. Salary starts at a twenty-five percent cut of a share, and it includes an annual increase, at the club’s discretion.”

“Are you okay with this?” I say and look at Niro.

“I wanted you to have a bigger reason than me to stay,” he says.

Everyone in the club looks at him as he says this. There are bewildered looks, open mouths and wide eyes.

“Yes,” I say to Niro first. Then I turn to King. “Yes.”

“Good,” says King.

And then all hell breaks loose.

“Welcome to the club, Cat,” Clutch says, squeezing my shoulders.

“Thank you.”

“Doesn’t mean you all suddenly have to maul her,” Niro grumbles.

Clutch winks and raises his hands. “Says the guy who made a pass at Gwen.”

Spark chuckles. “Says the guy who ignored his president’s orders to keep his hands off Gwen.”

Niro looks at me. “It wasn’t really a pass, more of an ill-timed jest.”

Switch grins. “A fucking jest?”

“You guys better watch what you say in front of my old lady, because while she is supremely chill about us both having history, I’m pretty sure none of yours are,” Niro says.

“That’s fair,” Saint says, raising his hands in surrender. “This is me welcoming you to the club without touching you.”

I grin.

I’m picked up and then promptly put down when Niro threatens to murder anybody who lifts me off the ground or hugs me for longer than he

feels appropriate.

Bates steps around the table. He looks cautious. “Remember when you got back from killing Henley, and I said to Niro that you could be the greatest thing that ever happened to him or that you could be his end?” he says.

“I do. I’m sorry for the part I played in that. Running after Henley. I was clutching at straws trying to find a place to belong.”

Bates smiles. “I get that. I’m glad you turned into the greatest thing to happen to him, Cat. I think we both want the same thing for Niro, yeah?”

I glance over at the man who is smiling at me. “Yeah, I think we do.”

He steps forward and hugs me. “Then welcome to the club, Cat. I feel like we’ll end up spending quite a bit of time together.”

I hug him back. “I look forward to it.”

“One last thing,” King says. “Because Vex has some news.”

Vex passes a brown envelope across the table. “I was able to break the encryption on the laptop you retrieved from Lobo’s house. You were right, Cat. I believe Perrito did give the order for your father’s death. He knew he couldn’t just kill Pensa outright and decided it would be better to let other men die in a clean-up operation. Your father had been quietly trying to rally support for a formal vote to lobby the mother chapter for official status. The others who rode out with your father that day made it known they were going to vote with him. I don’t have every detail down, but it seems like the nomads were meant to kill the permanent club members after taking out King and Gwen. They weren’t expecting our ambush.”

Overwhelmed, I reach for the envelope. “Thank you,” I say to Vex.

I open it and find a map of an area called the Pine Barrens with marked routes, there’s a list of the ride-out party, screenshots that appear to come from my father’s phone of him trying to rally members to vote with him. There are even payment records to the nomads and codes to wipe encrypted files.

It’s the final piece.

I also realize it’s going to draw a line between Neva and me. Maybe it already has. I can only assume she’s angry I didn’t return to Barstow with her. She’s not answered my calls or messages for days. Mamá says she’s seen her a couple of times, but not anywhere they could actually talk.

“I need the support of the club to deal with Perrito,” I say to King.

“No,” King says.

“Why not?”

“Because the Righteous Brotherhood are rebuilding their infrastructure right under our noses. And a cross-country war with Los Reyes is the kind of thing that needs more planning and resources than we have capacity for at this point. It would leave the club vulnerable here, and my priority is Jersey. I’m really sorry for your loss, Catalina. I know the pain of losing your father to Los Reyes. But focus on the life you’re building here, not the one you left behind. Show us we made the right choice voting you in as crew.”

I take a deep breath. Then another. I want vengeance for my father, but the rest of my life is forever. I don’t want to jeopardize what I just gained. “Understood.”

Niro suddenly stands. “Give us an hour.”

He steps around the table to my seat—Wrinkle’s seat, takes the envelope in one hand, and then my hand in the other.

“Thank you,” I say. To the club. “For everything.” My voice cracks as I look at the room of men who respect me.

“An hour,” King says. “And then we baptize you into the Iron Outlaws with as much tequila as you can handle. Welcome to the club, Cat.”

NIRO

Two days later, I pull up at the shop about forty minutes later than I planned. It's frustrating because being on time is something I've been working on. But somehow, I always overestimate how many tasks I can fit in before a certain time. Like this morning, I started some laundry, but then I noticed the light bulb needed changing and we were out of bulbs. So I opened my phone and ordered some online, but then I saw Spark had started a new group text about taking Iris's brother on another camping trip.

The kid's autistic, mostly nonverbal, and he likes watching camping videos. Which then made me think about whether I actually put away my tent properly the last time I used it. And that's how Catalina found me putting up a tent in the living room when she came to say goodbye to go run some errands.

The only thing I'm never late for are my appointments with Rae.

I raise a hand to Carlos. "Sorry. Sorry. One of those mornings."

"No worries. How's Catalina? Has she recovered?"

"Just about. She was the cutest, hungover mess." I can't help but grin at how drunk she got. She drank tequila like it was water at the party to welcome her. We danced and played pool until she couldn't stand up. All the brothers stayed the night at the clubhouse. The club girls came. No old ladies. All the taken men behaved but drank hard.

And I was the only one who got to make out with my old lady.

Rae, Iris, Briar, and Gwen shocked the shit out of us by showing up to cook breakfast. Said it was their contribution to welcoming Cat officially to the club and a one-time deal. But I got the feeling they kind of enjoyed it.

“Anyway, I’m here. What have you got for me?”

Carlos grins. “Think you’re really gonna hate it, to be honest.”

I roll my eyes. “An ink virgin?” Holding their hand through the whole thing while they wince and ask if it’s almost done yet like a five-year-old toddler on a road trip is supremely annoying.

“Yup. Not a single tattoo on their entire body.”

“Please tell me they want something interesting done.”

“Sounds like it’s gonna be a decent size. A back piece. You might find the subject interesting, but I’m gonna let you speak with the client directly.”

I furrow my brow. “Since when did you start being vague?”

He holds up a steaming cup of coffee. “Since I haven’t had any espresso. Ran out at home.”

“Make me one of those, would ya? I’ll go see what I’m doing.”

The red velvet curtains are closed when I walk toward my booth, and I pray that whoever is in there doesn’t have a hairy back I’m gonna have to shave before we can start.

“Hey,” I say as I walk in. “What are we going to be doing for—Cat?”

She’s sitting on the bed, legs astraddle, which makes me think about what she looks like when she’s riding my dick like she’s a cowboy and I’m the only bull in town. I hop on so I’m facing her and kiss her like I haven’t seen her for days, not an hour. My mind flits in a thousand directions. Happiness that she’s here. Hope that she really is my first client of the day. I try to stay present in the moment as our tongues meet and I feel her sigh.

“So, I’m a cute hungover mess, am I?” she says. The smile tells me she’s not mad. I’m getting better at reading cues.

“The cutest.” I bop the end of her nose with my fingertip. “Why are you here?”

Cat takes my hands and squeezes them. “You are making all kinds of progress on things you are doing for us, and I wanted to do something that showed what you mean to me too. So I thought I’d give you what you’ve sacrificed on my behalf, to allow me to be who I am.”

I’m too struck by the look in her eyes to try and guess what it is. “You don’t owe me anything.”

“I know. That’s what makes this perfect. I want a *Property of Niro* patch on my back.”

My eyes go wide. That’s gonna hurt. “Babe, I can’t put you through that. It’s a lot of black shading.”

“Oh, yes, I know. Typically, it would be. But I don’t want a traditional one. I want a pretty one. I want color, and things that represent my heritage and who you are. We can always take off our cuts, but I want you closer than a piece of leather.”

My mouth goes dry. She doesn’t just want to be with me. She wants the world to know she’s mine. And more importantly, she’s telling me I’m hers. “Yes.”

“Yes, what?”

I lean forward and kiss her. “Yes, to all of it. I fucking love this idea. Yes, I want to do it. And, yes, I can make it pretty as fuck, but it still won’t be half as pretty as you are.”

The smile I get tells me two things. First, Rae is right. Complimenting the right woman in the right way will light her up from inside. And second, I did it without thinking, which is progress.

“I like it when you say things like that.”

“I like when I—”

“You need any help getting set up, boss?” Carlos asks, dropping off a set of my favored needles.

“I need you to fuck off, is what I need.” I keep my eyes on Catalina.

“What he means, Carlos, is thank you for asking. And it’s going to take him a while to draw up what he wants for me.”

Carlos grins. “I like you better than him.”

“If you like being alive, you’ll stop thinking about her.”

At this, Carlos laughs, and Catalina joins him.

“Assholes,” I mutter, biting back a grin as I climb off the bed and grab a sheet of paper. My pencil is sharp, and I start to sketch.

“I’m guessing you’re not going to mind shaving her back,” Carlos continues. He glances to Catalina. “He hates that part usually.”

I look up. “Told you stop thinking about her. Especially stop thinking about her naked back.”

Carlos salutes, flips me the bird, and leaves the room.

“How big do you want this, cariño? A full back piece is a lot for a first tattoo. We could do something small, on your shoulder maybe.”

Catalina moves to the desk and looks down at my outline. “If I were a prospect, to prove my worth, I’d have to do something hard. That kind of hard is usually killing someone, stealing something. That kind of hard comes easy to me. It costs me nothing. I kinda like the idea that this is my test. I

want to prove my worth, to the club and to you. I don't know about the Iron Outlaws, but ink generally gets removed at Los Reyes if anyone goes rogue."

"Same with this club. Did you know that's how King and Rae got together? He told her if she didn't stay with him, he'd remove Saint's ink with a knife. This was right after we found out he used to be ATF."

"What?" Catalina asks, and I hear the pitch of anger immediately.

"Steady. This was before King and Rae fell in love and got all schmaltzy with each other."

Her stance changes, and I'm certain with one more word from me, she would have ridden out to lob my boss's dick off with the knife attached to *her* side. "Schmaltzy?"

"You know what I mean. All romantic and shit."

She moves to stand next to me. "Are we schmaltzy?"

I turn my head to look at her. "Definitely not."

"Foxy?"

"Nope."

"Hopelessly devoted?"

"Stop," I say. "We're romantic in a let's-go-fuck-shit-up-together kind of way."

"Can't help but think Bonnie and Clyde had the same kind of energy."

At this, I laugh. "I kinda like that though."

"Of course you do."

"Hey, are you seriously okay with a crew position? I'm sorry we couldn't make it brother."

She shrugs her shoulders once. "It's more than I've ever been offered. And it's progress. I'm going to be the best ever crew member, until such time as the club finds a way to vote me a brother."

I run my thumb over her lips. "What if they never do?"

"I don't want to believe that. But I'll find a peace with being the most senior crew member *and* your old lady. We'll be together, living our best life. It'll be enough, and it won't stop me from striving for more."

"I understand that. I'm sorry King said now wasn't the right time to attack Los Reyes, but I promise you that with every breath in my body, I would help you kill every last one of them if you wanted me to. Maybe not today, maybe not this month or year. But at some point in the future, I'll help you."

"Thank you," she whispers as her eyes glitter with tears.

I kiss her until I start to get a boner, and then I playfully push her away. “Let me draw this for you before I flip you over the desk and rail you senseless.”

Catalina swipes beneath her eyes as I pick up my pencil. She watches as I sketch ideas, research things on the computer, and bring everything together. I learn the flor de Tonalá is a motif used on pottery from the region her family is from. She tells me her grandmother has a vase with the design in blue and white. I start there. With colors and flowers. I back the flowers with the pads of the nopal cactus. Wide and green and synonymous with Mexico. I play around with my font choice until I’m happy with it, and write *PROPERTY OF* in a sans serif font, then *Niro* in script with a flourish.

“What do you think?” I say, showing it to her.

“I love it. To show the legacy of it, do you think you might be able to ink my mamá and papá’s initials into one of the cactus leaves, and *IOMC* for the Iron Outlaws Motorcycle Club on another?”

I grin. “Of course.”

I incorporate her requests, prepare the transfer, then look at her. While I love the idea of her being half naked while I tattoo her, this is a shop that usually caters to bikers and a rougher crowd. The curtain provides some privacy, but there is still a chance some numbskull will wander in here.

I slip my button-up shirt off. I’m rocking a T-shirt beneath because it’s fucking cold outside still. “Take your top and bra off,” I say, trying to not to overthink it when she does. Perfectly perky and pointed nipples distract me before she covers herself with her arms.

“Here.” I slip her arms into my shirt the wrong way around, so her front is covered, leaving the back open to me. The sleeves hang down her arms, and I roll them up so she can use her hands.

Once the transfer is on her skin, I help her lie down.

What she doesn’t know is that I’ve drawn and positioned the tattoo such that if it is more pain than she can tolerate, we can leave it at one flower and two nopal leaves and it will still look great.

I stroke my fingers down her back gently. “You know, you can bail. Permanent ink like this, it’s a lot. It’s a life commitment. While it’s hot as fuck seeing my name on your back, and though I hope you and I go the distance, I’ll understand if you need a cooling-off period to decide.”

Catalina turns her head to look at me. “I love you. I don’t need a cooling-off period.”

Her words hit me hard. It's the first time either of us have said them. My mouth is dry, but my chest feels like it's about to crack open.

"You mean everything to me," I reply. "You wanting to put this on your back for me is perhaps the most amazing thing anyone has ever done for me. You're going to be connected to me forever."

"That's the point."

She doesn't ask me to say I love her back. Her eyes don't show disappointment that I didn't. I don't know why I can't.

"Forever with you is a blessing I don't deserve." I roll my stool a little closer to her face so I can kiss her. "You know I'm going to need to fuck you tonight, right? You on your knees, me looking at my name on your back."

"I wouldn't expect anything less."

And with that, I begin.

It takes hours. Partly because it's a lot of ink. Partly because I can tell when Catalina is reaching her limit. Like me, she's not used to sitting still doing nothing for long periods of time. But also, I can feel it in the way her muscles move beneath my fingers. They start super tense as her nerves take over, then adrenaline kicks in and the pain of the tattoo becomes almost Zen-like. Then they stiffen again, or she twitches as I move around her back so as not to focus on one area—which can feel unrelenting, especially by the spine. Once that happens, I say that I need a break, so she doesn't have to.

I know my woman is being brave for me.

I don't need her to tell me when she needs a moment.

In between inking sessions, we drink coffee and step outside for a breath of frigid air. Halo and Spark stop by with money from the deal we ran last night for the Irish. Money to be laundered through the tattoo studio as the day's take.

Cat shows them her back. Halo tells her it's hardcore.

Before she lies down again, I kiss her. Make her soft for me.

And I realize I'm doing all the shit Rae suggested without really thinking about it. Things for Cat's comfort, things that show her I don't take her for granted.

I'm not sure why I can't seem to do that for anyone else but her.

With her, there's an ease to it.

Maybe it's because she's never expected me to change for her. She accepts me as I am, which makes me want to be better.

Her tattoo makes me realize I should get some ink for her on me, show

her this connection goes both ways. I try to think through where there's room on my body. I could get a nopal leaf to match hers. Or ink her name on my ring finger.

Six hours later, I can tell she's done. Catalina looks sleepy, and I'm somewhere between horny as fuck and exhausted. What she doesn't know is that the outline of my name is deliberate. With the pattern weaving through it, the letters can be made to disappear at some point in the future if she hates it. And the inverse, which I pray is the outcome, I can color the letters in more fully to make them stand out.

It needs about three more hours' work for it to be truly complete, but I'm done for the day.

Because my woman just had my name tattooed on her back. And I need her to know just how much that means to me by taking her home and taking care of her.

CATALINA

When I wake up, the bed is empty, but on the pillow is a stack of folded black clothing. I grab the one on top. It's a woman's vest, and I can't help but smile. It's a lightweight bulletproof vest to be worn under clothes. All of them are.

There's a note on top. The script is utterly beautiful, and it simply says, *Happy Valentine's Day - Colton.*

I count them, and there are seven vests. One for every day of the week.

It's a sweet gesture. I got him a new industrial blender. I'm not sure the deal is fair, as I benefit from both gifts.

I reach for my phone on the bedside table and see the time. Nine thirty. But there is already a slew of messages.

Gwen: *Happy Valentine's Day, ladies.*

Iris: *Ahh! And to you, babe and all you other babes.*

Briar: *Everyone getting spoiled?*

Rae: *Umm, I got a flight to England and a trip to Shakespeare's Globe Theatre.*

Me: *Hopefully there are two tickets involved.*

Rae: *LOL! Two airplane tickets to England. One ticket to the Globe. King said it will be a cold day in hell before he'd sit through a Shakespeare play. What did you all score?*

Iris: *I got this. Meet Macushla. Mac for short.*

She's attached a photograph of a gorgeous puppy that hasn't yet grown into the size of its paws.

Briar: *Omg, I want to meet him so bad.*

Iris: *He's going to be trained as a service dog.*

Gwen: *I got a box of . . . cough . . . *toys**

Rae: *I love this almost as much as the puppy.*

Me: *Says the girl going to England*

Rae: *What did Niro do for you?*

I can't help but smile at Niro's take on Valentine's Day.

Me: *He bought me seven vests to wear under clothes that are supposed to slow bullets.*

Iris: *Oh my god, he's like Spark. I swear protection disguised as gifts is his love language.*

Briar: *That's kinda swoony. We got each other half the wood flooring we need for the bedroom. Not the slightest bit romantic, but the house reno is taking forever. I gave him six boxes. He gave me six boxes and an IOU for a trip for two to Vegas next year.*

Rae: *That's romantic for my brother! He once bought me a bathroom scale for Christmas.*

I can't help but laugh.

The scent of coffee reaches me, and I climb out of bed and tug on a T-shirt from Niro's drawer. There are a pair of deuces on the front, but the fabric is so soft and worn and smells of Colton. It reaches my knees, so I don't add anything else.

When I go down the stairs, I'm met with the most glorious sight. Niro is shirtless, wearing a pair of jeans, and spreading flour over the marble counter. I slide my arms around his waist and kiss his shoulder. "Happy Valentine's Day." I see the mixer in use, coated in flour. "You like it?"

"I probably should have waited to open this, huh? But it was there, and I kept fixating on it. Tried to do other things since waking up but couldn't get anything started because I knew what was in it was for me. I debated not opening it about twenty times. Then debated coming to wake you up. Even walked upstairs twice. And then the next thing I know, I'd pulled the wrapping paper off, which made me feel bad that I didn't wrap yours up."

The words all come out on a long whoosh. "It's okay. I'm just glad you like it. I was going to say you could exchange it if it wasn't right, but I guess it's too late now."

He lifts his arm so I can slip around in front of him. "You look utterly fuckable." His lips press down on mine.

"What are you making?"

“Cinnamon rolls.”

“Can I help?”

Niro grins. “Absolutely.”

“Let me go wash my hands.” I step over to the sink to wash my hands while Niro disappears upstairs. I wonder why until he reappears with a step stool and a condom.

“Up you go,” Niro says, after placing the stool in front of the floured marble, encouraging me to step on.

“Get the dough out of the bowl. It’s been rising,” Niro instructs. His words are breathy against my ear as his hands play with the hem of my T-shirt.

When his hard dick presses up against the ridge of my ass, I smile. “Seems like the dough isn’t the only thing that’s been rising.”

His gruff laughter reverberates through me. “Focus on rolling that shit out.”

“Are you going to help?”

His hands slide beneath the T-shirt, rising higher and higher until he cups both my breasts, his thumbs massaging my nipples. “What do you call this?”

“Not helping,” I reply, but I reach for the rolling pin.

“You want to make a long rectangle.”

I do as he says, but it’s hard to focus. One of his hands slides up to hold my throat gently, and the other slides between my legs. Maybe I should be concerned about body fluids around uncooked dough, but I can’t think of anything once he swirls the tip of a finger in my wetness, and then slides it inside me.

I gasp and involuntarily press back against his denim-covered erection.

“So fucking wet. I love it. Keep rolling but hold onto the counter for a sec.”

Niro drops to his knees behind me and tugs the stool away from the cupboards a little. The squeal that escapes me surprises me. And then Niro’s tongue is all up my personal places. Between his licks and sucks and mumbles about how good I taste, my knees start to shake.

“I hope you’re rolling that dough,” he says when he comes up for air.

“I can barely remain standing,” I reply.

Niro chuckles and returns to his task, which now includes using his finger deep within me.

I can’t think. Can’t move. I’m scared of falling off the stool, and I’m

scared of losing the orgasm that's edging closer. "Niro," I gasp as I come.

No sooner is it over than Niro stands, frees his cock from his jeans, and covers it in a condom. "Roll. The. Dough."

I grab the rolling pin and do as he says while he inches inside me. It takes a moment to find the right spot on the stool, micro adjustments as I widen my stance without falling off. And as soon as his cock breaches my lips, I know I'm going right back to the place I was a few minutes ago, chasing the glorious edge he always seems to take me to.

"Like this," Niro says, placing his hands over mine on the rolling pin like he doesn't have me impaled on his cock. His hips move slowly, in time to the motion of the rolling. Moving deeper in as we roll forward, inching out as we roll back. The tension between us winds so tight, I fear I might snap.

There is nowhere for me to move. My stomach is pressed up against the counter. Niro pushes the rolling pin out of the way and grabs a bowl filled with a sweet mixture. "Sugar and cinnamon," he says, his voice filled with need. "Sprinkle it evenly. I'll slap your ass if you don't."

I do my best to spread it evenly, although it's hard to think when Niro's fingers start digging into my hips. "Please," I beg.

"Not until the cinnamon rolls are ready to put into the oven."

"That feels like too many steps away." My last word comes out on a gasp.

"If your greedy cunt wants another orgasm, you better roll that dough lengthways into a log. And remember your safe word is *sodium*."

My hands shake. His strokes are growing longer. A fast slide in, a slow slide out. I do my best to do as he says.

"Now get the knife. I know you're good with them," he says.

"Niro, please," I beg as I try to move my hips.

"Mmm. You feel so good, Cat. Love the way your cunt squeezes me. Now cut the fucking dough and put us both out of our misery."

I do as he says. They're uneven, so unlike my usual knife skills. But who has the time to get a ruler to measure out thickness when their boyfriend's dick is buried deep inside them?

I slam the knife down. "Now they're done. Please."

"Good fucking girl," he growls. He grips my hips and slides me to the left of the neat rolls. Then he pushes me chest down into the spilled sugar, cinnamon, and flour. My toes barely touch the stool. Niro's hand fists my hair, holding my cheek to the cold marble, which turns me on even more. I try to find something to grab hold of, but there's nothing.

“Best pussy I ever fucked.” Niro grunts as his thrusts speed up. “Want you to show me how much you want my cock, Cat. Squeeze me. Milk me dry. Let me see that face of yours when you come all over me and coat me with your cream.”

I can’t turn my head, just look up at him. He looks wild. And so fucking hot, I can barely stand it. So, I do as he instructs. I keep my eyes on him as he finally sends me over.

Again.

This time it feels as though my whole body detonates. “Colton,” I gasp.

“Ah, fuck, I feel it.” He grips handfuls of my ass and pummels into me as he leans his torso back so he can watch. A hand slips beneath the T-shirt, raising it. “Love seeing my name on your skin.”

I can’t catch my breath as I ride out my orgasm. My knees shake.

“Your cunt wants this as much as I do. Fuck.” He stiffens, and I feel his cock throb inside me as he comes. “So...fucking...good.”

Finally, he releases my ass and slumps down over me. His lips are tender as they brush my shoulder, my neck, and finally my lips. Then he pulls out of me, steps back a little, and helps me stand and turn on the stool to face him. He boosts me onto the cool counter and caresses my cheeks gently.

“You scare the shit out of me, Cat. You’re so fucking perfect, I don’t even know where to start. I wasn’t expecting to find a woman I could ride with and fight with and fuck like that. Didn’t think I’d ever find a woman who gets why my club is my life. Didn’t think I’d be fucking someone in the middle of making cinnamon rolls, but sometimes life takes the strangest turns.”

I move a curl off his forehead. “You’re pretty special too.”

“No. You don’t get it. I never thought I’d do this.” He circles his finger in the air. “Life with another person. I keep thinking about things. Like I’m gonna fuck it up. I can’t decide if I’m somehow managing to fake this. Like, it feels unusual and . . .”

He looks over my shoulder as he rubs his jaw.

“I know who you are, Niro. I love who you are. And I love who you’re becoming. And I promise to always try to understand you, even if you say things that hurt me. We can press pause. Maybe *sodium* can be our word for that. Whether it’s sex or conversation. If something is overwhelming us, we use *sodium* and take a minute.”

“You want kids, Cat?”

The question comes out of nowhere, but I realize we should have talked about it before I agreed to be his old lady. “Maybe someday. But not for a long while. Not when I just found out I’m going to get a club cut. I have a burning need to ride out for my club many more times before I have to worry about a little one at home. You?”

“I always thought never. But I’ve visualized you knocked up with our kids, and it wasn’t as terrifying as I thought it might be.”

I smile. “Not terrifying, huh?”

His lips brush mine. “No. Not terrifying. In fact, I bet we have a fighting chance of raising happy little humans. Now go shower all this flour and sugar out of your hair while I cook these cinnamon rolls.”

Wide hands grab hold of my waist, and he lifts me down off the counter.

“Hey, Catalina,” he says when I reach the hallway.

I turn to face him. “Yeah?”

“I love you. And I really think I mean it.”

The words make me smile. I’ve been reading about ASPD. I know how hard it can be to trust feelings. “That might well be the best Valentine’s gift you can give me. Even better than the bulletproof tanks and cinnamon rolls. And I love you too.”

CATALINA

And just like that, time goes by. It's nearly a month since I arrived here, looking for my father. I've ridden out with the club. And I've done a cash drop-off with Saint. Niro was pissed he didn't get to join us, but King told him we weren't the Bobbsey Twins who had to go everywhere together.

Niro sulked. Think he might have called King the c-word. And during my time with Saint, I learned the story of how an ATF agent blew his cover to save Iris's life and to protect Briar.

Niro sulked again when I told him I needed to tell Neva and Felipe I was leaving California. I didn't expand on why. But he felt vindicated when no one replied. I felt...nervous. Call it a sixth sense, but I couldn't understand it. Neva and I had been friends for so long, and Felipe had been so insistent we should be together. His messages telling me to get my ass home stopped. Not that I cared.

I've been snowshoeing with Gwen, which I find utterly ludicrous but good exercise. Rae and I meet for coffee a couple of times a week. She's less therapist, more friend. And Briar and I went to see a movie together.

But as I lie in bed, alone, I think about the part of my life I've tried to move on from.

I miss Mamá. We talk all the time. She's met Niro virtually. We decided to keep the fact we're Outlaws quiet. She knows he's a tattoo artist and I'm happy. Next week, a company is packing up my house to move all my stuff here.

I think about the hole losing Neva's friendship caused, and yet am

grateful for the way the other old ladies have filled it.

But I'm still not over the fact the club killed my father.

I didn't want to believe it. But there is enough detail in the envelope Vex gave me to be certain that when the club rode out that day, they had absolutely no intention of bringing my father back with them.

And for that, I want to burn them all down.

This was Perrito's doing. It was his ego, his need for control and power, that stopped the club from doing the right thing and registering with the mother chapter.

Maybe what I need to do is travel to Mexico and find the current Los Reyes president. It's a long way. And dangerous. The mother club is based in Tijuana. But maybe if I go there and explain, perhaps they'll take on Perrito. After all, it's significant lost income as the Barstow club sidesteps club dues and oversight while continuing unauthorized use of the Los Reyes name. Plus, murdering their own members goes against the motorcycle club and Los Reyes code of honor.

It's too early to ask the Iron Outlaws to help me again. But I'm confident Niro would in a heartbeat.

I pause at that and mentally repeat it.

Yes, I'm confident Niro would in a heartbeat, and that makes *my* heart beat faster.

Last night, Niro went on a weapons run to the Philadelphia chapter, which would culminate in a brothers-only party. While I may be welcome in New Jersey, I am not welcome there. Not all club chapters are as forward-thinking as this one. Part of me wanted to press to go with them, but as much as I want to fully insert myself into the club, I'm smart enough to know that the first woman let in through typically closed doors needs to tread lightly.

I have a cut and a path. It's a marathon, not a sprint. And I'm picking my battles. I want to be where the action is, not where the boozing is. Although I did warn Niro that I would cut off his dick and feed it through the garbage disposal if I got so much as a whiff of him banging club girls—or anyone else for that matter.

Niro grinned and told me both him and his cock would miss me, and he promised to keep it in his pants—unless he had the urge to jerk off in the shower while thinking about the way my new tattoo looks when he's fucking me from behind. Then he showed me the tattoo of my name around his wedding ring finger, and I melted a little. Okay, I melted a lot. And all

thoughts of other people fled from my mind faster than I could strip Niro out of his clothes.

He'll be back tonight, and I'm looking forward to seeing him for dinner. In the meantime, I'm going to make use of the club's gym equipment and get a good workout in. Maybe one of the prospects will spar with me.

My phone rings, and it's an unknown number. I debate ignoring it, but at the last moment, I open it in case it's Niro.

"Hello."

"Hey, Cat. It's Spark. Can I ask a huge favor?"

I smile. This is what I wished for. A favor between club members is a big deal. "Sure. What's up?"

"Iris was on her way home from dropping her brother off at her uncle Cillian's place in Brooklyn for a few days, but her car broke down on the way back. I called a truck, but she's anxious waiting by herself. Can you go get her and bring her home, if I deal with the car?"

I can hear the stress in his voice. Spending time with Iris and Briar, I've learned more about what they've gone through. I hate that any kind of violence has touched them. And I've also met her lovely younger brother, Michael. It's amazing the way Spark and Iris help him navigate his autism so he can live his best life. "Sure. Send me her location. She good to ride on my bike?"

"Yeah. I checked. She's in jeans, but if you have extra leathers, I'd appreciate you making sure she's wearing them before she climbs on. Niro says to borrow anything of his you need. He says . . . what the fuck, brother? . . . fine . . . talk to her, but don't hold her up from getting to Iris."

There's the fumble of a phone and muttered curse words. "Hey, cariño," Niro says, finally. His voice is a little rough. I'm guessing it's lack of sleep. Ride hard. Drink hard. I try not to think about the *fuck hard* part of the trilogy.

"Hey, sweetie. You having fun?"

"No. Because my cock misses you."

Despite the crudeness, there's a flutter in my chest. "Well, don't let him substitute anyone for me."

"He wouldn't. He's become a pussy connoisseur, a sommelier of cunts. And only yours will do. It's the champagne of all female—"

"Okay," I say with a laugh. "I get it."

"You cool getting Iris?"

“Yeah. I’ll get her. Better go so Spark can relax.”

“Okay. But for the record, if you didn’t have to go get Iris, I’d be talking you into phone sex right now. It’s not just my cock that misses you.”

My heart skips a little beat. “That’s good to hear.”

He pauses for a moment. “Felt good to say it. Guess Rae’s right, as usual.”

He’s met with Rae twice now, and each time Niro comes home, he shares just about everything they talk about.

“What’s Rae right about?”

“Sharing shit about how I feel with you . . . how it’s a good thing.”

“Yeah, Rae was right. For the record, I miss you too. But think about how good the sex will be when you get back.”

“Not helping my boner.”

“I think you know how to help your boner. One palm and some lube.”

Niro chuckles. “Go get Iris. Take an extra helmet for her. And drive safe.”

“I will, I promise.”

As I hang up, I realize I kind of like this. It would be too easy to fall into a codependent pattern where we live, sleep, eat, and work together every day. Not going with him on the weapons run has given us both some space, and we’ll have the fun of coming back together.

It takes about twenty minutes to get to Iris, and she waves to me when I fly past her on the opposite side of the highway. I have to make the turn at the next exit to get to her. As I do, I swear I see the guy from the club—the one with a needle—drive past me in a gold sedan headed in the opposite direction. My instinct is to turn around and follow him. But I can’t leave Iris alone. I pull over to the side of the road, and call Martin, the prospect. I tell him where I am and what I saw, and he sets off from the club to do what I can’t.

“Cat,” she says, her voice heavy with relief, as I climb off my bike. Once my feet are on the ground, she throws her arms around me.

I hug her in return. It feels . . . normal. “Come on, let’s get you home.”

“Can I borrow your phone to call Spark and let him know you’re here? My battery died about ten minutes ago, and he’s probably climbing the walls.”

I find Spark’s number and dial before handing it to her.

“Hey, no, it’s me. My phone died . . . I’m fine . . . honestly . . . yeah,

sorry I worried you. You can spank my ass later for not having the portable charger with me.” Iris laughs at whatever Spark says in response. “I’ll hold you to that. So I just leave the car? . . . Okay. Yeah, I’ll let you know when I’m home . . . Love you too.”

She ends the call and starts to wriggle into the leathers I brought her. They’re too big, but it’s better than not wearing any. “I think I just gave him a heart attack.”

I offer her the extra helmet. “What about you? Are you panicked?”

Iris looks up at the sky for a moment. “No. In fact, I feel a bit more like me, Cat. A little less scared of . . . well, everything.”

“That’s really good.”

She smiles, and when she does, I can see why Spark is so taken with her. “Yeah. It is.”

On the way home, I feel a sense of foreboding trickle down my spine like ice water. I check the mirrors for the gold sedan but don’t see one. When we get to Iris and Spark’s home, I pull up on the drive. “Wanna come in for coffee?” she asks.

It’s a Sunday. I have no major plans beyond working out. Laundry, maybe. “I’d love that.”

We remove our coats and boots by the door and step into the open-plan living area. I love the photographs of Spark and Iris dotted around the place. Spark goes from being the intimidating sergeant at arms to a doting partner in a heartbeat. In nearly every photo, he’s looking at her like she’s the sun rising.

It’s prompting me to take more photos of Niro and me.

We make our way to the kitchen. “I can’t believe I get to live here,” Iris says. “I used to live in a shithole, until Spark *convinced* the landlord to fix it up for me.”

She makes air quotes with her fingers around *convinced*, and I can only imagine how convincing Spark could be if he wanted to. Iris starts to make the coffee.

“Is Michael staying at your uncle’s?” The man I now know is basically the head of the Irish mob.

“Just for a few days. But he was missing Spark this morning. Spark’s so good with him. So’s Niro. I’ve never really understood why Michael is so taken with him, to be honest. Niro is just so . . . oh God, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean he isn’t a good person or anything, it’s just—”

“It’s okay. I think maybe the misunderstood understand each other.”

Iris closes her eyes for a second and takes a deep breath. Only the sound of bubbling and dripping coffee fills the room. “That’s beautiful.” She opens her eyes. “It strikes me that maybe that’s why you and Niro get along so well. You defy all the rules of what the club is about, and yet they’ve embraced you, and you deserve it, Cat. You’re one of them, and yet one of us.”

“One of us?”

“The old ladies. I don’t know anyone else who straddles both spaces. And it takes a confident man to deal with that. You’re right. Maybe for years, no one has properly understood Niro, and that prickly exterior of his is to keep us all away.”

“Beneath it, he cares deeply.”

Iris grins. “Don’t they all. They strut around in their leather vests and project this utterly fearful image, and then you find out they’re all squishy in the middle.”

“I doubt they’d appreciate being called squishy in the middle.”

Iris pours us both a cup of coffee and offers me cream and sugar. “Yes, but they’ll never know I said that. Old lady code of silence, right?”

I knock my cups to hers. “I’ll drink to that.”

I stay for about an hour until Iris has to leave for yoga with Briar. They invite me to join them, but yoga is so not my thing. Lying around, bending into a pretzel, and trying to not think thoughts that keep rattling around . . . no thanks.

I’d rather find my Zen punching the shit out of a sand-filled bag.

When I leave, I lift my face to the weak sun. March and spring are just around the corner. You can smell it in the air and see it in the first tiny buds on some of the trees.

I text Niro to let him know I’m headed home via the shore, seeing it’s a nice day, and ask him what he wants for dinner before starting my engine.

There’s a special kind of joy that comes with knowing where you’re supposed to be, and also knowing you’re welcome there.

The ocean is churned up as I travel down the shore. I hope I can persuade Mamá to come visit in the summer. I think she’ll enjoy it. And who knows, perhaps I could persuade her to move here.

I’m hoping Neva will come to her senses and travel with Mamá, but there is so much distance between us now.

I try not to care, but I wrestle with the image that she’s cozying up to the

men who killed Papá while shutting me out. Eventually, it will become unforgiveable.

I'm so distracted by the thoughts of Neva and my family that I don't even notice the bikers ahead of me. Out of habit, I scan for Niro but quickly realize it's not the Iron Outlaws.

As I get closer, I see their rocker patches. *Barstow, CA.*

Then Felipe's unmistakable helmet.

I try to slow my bike to a stop, but they pull out around me.

Riding three wide is reckless, requires huge concentration. I hate being in the middle—where you're at the mercy of the two bikes on either side of you. Felipe is to my right. Nudillo, Neva's dad and the club enforcer, is to my left. Perrito and Mateo are in front of me. Two more behind.

Whatever reason they are here must be serious.

This is a nontraditional formation for a ride out.

I feel like a prisoner.

I start to brake, to slow my bike in a way that notifies those behind me, but Felipe sounds his horn, and I look at him.

He shakes his head and tips it in the direction of Perrito before making a slicing motion across his own throat.

With care, I reach into my pocket and press my panic alarm and pray to God that Vex receives the signal, wherever it's connected to.

And that Niro can find me.

NIRO

“He’s not going to like this.” Clutch’s deep baritone travels along the corridor outside the room I crashed in last night after the weapons run. Bates slept on the floor, but he’s already loading up his bike. I shove the last of my things into my panniers.

The bed was comfortable enough, but Catalina wasn’t in it, so I slept like shit. Can’t wait to get back home and see her tonight. It’s less than a ninety-minute ride home from Philadelphia, faster maybe if King’s in a rush to see Rae. I’ll have Catalina naked and on her knees as soon as I’m through the door.

Seeing my name inked on her back does something to me. It’s more than feeling horny as fuck. She trusts me enough to let me own her, and owning her looks different for her and me versus my brothers and the other old ladies in the club. The more freedom I give her, the more she becomes mine.

I never thought I’d get myself an old lady, so I can’t say I ever gave much thought as to what having one would feel like. But being with an old lady as capable as Cat, one I don’t have to worry about? An old lady who is strong makes me feel . . . proud.

I pick up my phone to tell her we’re leaving, and I see the message about dinner.

I want to eat you for dinner. And maybe lasagna after that.

When I look up, I see King and Clutch come through the door, followed by Vex and Spark.

“Brothers,” I say.

“You know where Cat’s at?” King asks.

My heart rates spikes. “Headed home. Why? What the fuck is going on, King?” I ask.

Vex steps forward. “She took Iris home, but it looks like she never went to your place. Her panic alarm went off five minutes ago, and according to its location, she’s headed out of Asbury Park. You have any idea why?”

My head starts to spin. I understand what Vex is saying, but it makes no sense. “No. Wait. We need to go. Does Iris know anything?”

Spark shakes his head. “Iris said they had fun. Said Cat showed her the tattoo you did. That she was in a good mood when she left.”

Clutch stands to attention. “Try calling her, but we need to get underway just in case.”

I dial her number and wait as it rings through to her voicemail. “*Hey, it’s Cat. Leave a—*”

I hang up and dial again. “*Hey, it’s Cat. Leave—*”

And again. “*Hey, it’s Cat—*”

King puts his hand on my forearm and lowers my wrist.

I tug on my leather jacket, close up my panniers, and grab my helmet. “Where is she now?”

Vex looks down at his phone. “She’s out past Howell Township. You sure she didn’t mention anything about going for a ride? She could have set the alarm off accidentally.”

I think back to the conversations we’ve had in the last day. I don’t always pay enough attention to the details. Not because I’m not interested, my mind just doesn’t seem to store shit the way I want it to. We talked about a trip we want to take to a beach somewhere. Maybe the Dominican Republic? And there was boring shit . . . her changing banks to one here, how she had to toss the bananas we keep in a dish this morning because they were really brown, how the weather was changing.

I feel my grasp on reality sinking away, diminishing beneath the shadow of pure fucking fear. “Whatever is happening, she’s not leaving me. Someone must have taken her.”

Vex nods. “We got some cafes down the shore that have exterior security footage.”

“We do?” I ask.

“Part of the security package we offer to local businesses.”

“Get it,” King says. “Whatever it takes.”

“Gimme five to call ’em.”

“We don’t have five,” I say, pushing Clutch out of the way as I try to get to the door.

Spark steps in the doorway to block me.

“I’ll kill you if you don’t get out of my fucking way,” I shout.

King grips my shoulder. “Steady.”

“We need to go prepared,” Spark says.

“Prepared? You’re the sergeant at arms. You’re meant to protect everyone, and that includes Cat,” I yell. It’s a deliberate low blow to the man who has spent his life protecting others.

“I fucking am,” Spark says. “Listen to me. There are a handful of scenarios, complicated by the fact we don’t know exactly where she’s headed. First, she’s on a highway. She’s riding. Which means she’s alive. If someone wanted her dead, they could have done it by now. So, she’s either riding on her own accord or whoever has her wants her alive. Which means we need to go in prepared. We have no idea how far we’re going. If we drive off and we’re not dressed right, armed right, or ready with a plan, we could end up fucked or unable to rescue her when we get there. They could be driving all the way back to California. We need a minute to equip ourselves properly.”

I turn to face my president. “I can’t just sit here and wait.”

King nods. “I know. Halo will work with Vex to take us straight to her. For once, I’ll let the two of them lead the ride so we can switch routes if we need to cut off whoever is with her. Switch is packing up a medical kit just in case. The brothers here are helping us prep. Saint is working with Knuckles and the brothers here to borrow arms from the shipment we dropped last time we came. When we ride, we ride as one, and we’ll be ready for whatever happens next.”

Doubts flood in for just a moment. I could have told her I love her more often. Perhaps I should have been more affectionate. Rae suggested putting a timed reminder in my phone to say something nice to Cat until it became more natural for me. I think of all the moments we’ve shared the last couple of weeks. The beating we gave Howard and Clive together, her joy at getting her cut, how she wanted her mom to come visit, and the way she curled up by my side in bed every night. “She isn’t leaving me.”

The words almost choke me.

Clutch shoulder checks me. “Keep the faith, brother. We don’t know for sure it’s something bad. Less than an hour from now, she might see us all

headed toward her and wonder what the fuck we're doing."

Spark grabs me and pulls me in for a rough hug. "But in case it's not, you helped me get my woman back, so I'm here to help you get yours."

"Technically, you helped me kidnap my woman, so I have your back," King says.

"And I don't have a woman, thank fuck. But I've got your back anyway," Vex says.

"We ride out in two minutes." King palms the back of my head and brings his forehead to mine. "We'll get your girl. But if you do anything other than what I instruct, you're on your own. You understand me?"

I know what he's telling me. To not drive off. To not try and do this on my own. "I understand."

"Good, now let's go."

Assuming is the worst thing I can do, but after I push past the fears that Cat's leaving me over something I didn't do, I realize it's more likely Los Reyes came for her. They had time to plan, pack up, and ride out. Why she went with them is unclear, but I'm relatively certain it wasn't of her own volition, hence the panic alarm.

I think about the way we made love before I left. The idea of never doing that again with her stops my heart as sure as being hit with defibrillator paddles.

Bates arrives back in the room we shared. There's a steaming cup of coffee in his hand, and he shoves it at me. "Don't give me any of your shit. Just down this. I'm making keeping you on your bike my responsibility."

I realize I never really apologized for the time I disregarded his feelings when I took Catalina to kill Henley. "I shouldn't have pulled that shit I did," I say before chugging the hot drink. It burns my tongue, but I ignore the pain. "I shouldn't have gone on that job with Cat and left you behind."

"Yeah. You shouldn't have. I appreciate you apologizing, but it makes no difference today. Someone's got your old lady, so we go get her. Together, like it's always been."

I place the cup down and grab my bags. Bates is right about going together, and I let the heat from the coffee warm my chilled bones.

"I fucked our friendship over for an impulsive moment that had more to do with me than anyone else. I mean it when I say I'm sorry."

Bates studies me for a moment. "She's good for you. Gets you, right?"

"Yeah, she does."

“So why is it so hard for you to understand that I get you too?”

I pause for a moment. That’s progress. It’s something Rae taught me. Taking a moment allows my instinct to respond with a glib, reckless answer to pass and gives me time to process what I’m really thinking and feeling. “Guess I always felt like less of a brother. The way I came into the club was different. My relationship with Camelot was different. I always felt like I got something I didn’t deserve. It was easier to listen to Catalina tell me I’m more than the sum of my pieces. And talking to Rae is helping too. Maybe it was easier to have women tell me that than to believe I was really part of the brotherhood I so admired.”

Bates’s eyebrows rise. “Fuck me. It’s like talking to a whole new person.”

“The urge to tell you to go fuck yourself is still high.” I’m embarrassed by the compliment. Overwhelmed, even. I’m still shit at putting words to the feelings swirling through me. “My immediate response to things is always going to be the same, but I can take charge a little more now. Same guy. Same thoughts. They don’t go away. Just pausing and going a couple of steps farther in my head before I engage my mouth.”

When we reach our bikes, Bates slaps my back twice.

As I fasten my panniers, I attempt to lower my heart rate, to center myself on the one thing I have to do today: to gain ground on Catalina and whoever she is travelling with.

King is next to me, his bike packed. “You doing okay, Niro?” he asks.

“No, I’m fucking not.” I feel like an ass for snapping at him. “Sorry.” So much for pausing.

“I understand. Have your brothers ever let you down?”

I look around the lot. Halo is layered up and checking everyone’s bikes. As road captain, he has final say on who can go and who can’t. Switch is on his bike, ready to go. Spark is handing out some additional small weapons. But they are all here for me.

“No.” Then I voice the thing I’ve been unable to say to anyone else. “What if they hurt her? I’ve seen what men are capable of. I’m one of them. What if Perrito has taken her in some kind of scheme? Or what if Felipe wants to win her back. Or shit, what will he say when he sees the freshly inked *Property of Niro* patch on her back? He’ll cut it off her, or his club will.”

“If they hurt her, we bring her home and we help her heal. It’s okay to ask for help, to rely on us, your brothers. We’ll catch you, Niro. Every time.

Always have. Rae has this way of talking about shit. Thought it was bullshit when she first talked to me this way, but it makes sense. If she was here, she'd probably say something along the lines of it being okay to feel everything you're feeling. The panic and worry for Catalina are valid. But wallowing in those feelings won't help you. Now is the time to lean into who you are to get her back. Use that hyperfocus of yours to stay regulated and on track in finding her. This is the day to be who you are."

I suck in a breath before pulling my neck warmer over my face. "Thanks, King."

Vex runs out of the clubhouse like his ass is on fire. He shows King the security footage on his phone.

King closes his eyes and takes a deep breath. "Los Reyes have Cat. They surrounded her on the shore. They're headed west, straight towards us. We ride fast. Halo and Vex lead." I notice Vex giving Halo an earpiece so they can talk while on the move.

Halo calls out that we're to mount our bikes.

Bates nods. "See you on the road."

As I watch him mount, I realize I've had family all along. I've just never named them.

CATALINA

My mind is racing. What weapons do I have? My 9 mm SIG is holstered beneath my hoodie. I have a knife in each boot. On my bike, there's the dipstick that's been modified into a stubby blade. I have a five-shot 0.22 caliber pistol in the toolbox. There's the small knife hidden inside the silver peanut on my keychain. And there's a bloodsucker, a knife in the shape of a slim tube, in my pannier.

But there are six Los Reyes and only one of me, and no amount of weaponry is going to change those odds.

The life I was building in Jersey flashes before my eyes. Camping with Niro. Margaritas with the old ladies. Long rides for and with the club. Proving I'm worth the chance they are willing to take on a woman.

No matter what, I won't go down without a fight. Or at least a fight I have a chance of winning. If I try to break out of the center of this ride pattern, I stand more risk of injuring myself. In this formation, I'll only take down my bike and one other. And even if for a millisecond I could cut through, I'd have six guns aimed at my back before I could get ahead.

We weave our way out of town into a never-ending wooded area, where tall trees loom ominously on either side of the road. Civilization seems farther and farther away. I wish I'd spent more time learning the territory. I'm unfamiliar with exactly where I am. For a while I could track it. The lefts, the rights, keeping the shore to my left. But the shore has long since disappeared, and the turns have been so frequent we could be anywhere.

I break down pieces of my plan. The first is to appeal to Felipe, to stay alive with his protection. I'll do whatever it takes. The idea of him touching

me makes me feel ill. There is only one man's hands I like on my body. But if it helps me live, I'll do it.

Prayers feel useless, but I say one anyway. I pray I'm fast on my feet, and even faster in my head.

I pray that they're drained after long days of riding.

I pray for courage, and that if this is the end, that it's painless.

And I pray that Niro and the club realize I'm in trouble and ride like the wind.

After forty-five minutes of riding, we pull down a tree-lined trail. The trail has been used; the snow compacted. I see Mateo's rear tire slip, and I thank God for the snow tires Niro insisted on fitting my bike with once I agreed to stay on as crew.

Eventually, we pull to a stop. It's cooler beneath the trees. No sun gets through the dense pine branches. I'm more prepared for the elements than they are. I'm wearing a thicker coat, thermal clothes, and one of the vests Niro got me for Valentine's Day.

This must be the notorious Pine Barrens I've heard the club refer to.

The men are off their bikes quickly, but I take my sweet-ass time. Every second I drag this out is a second more Niro has to get here.

"Must be some grade A pussy, you traitorous bitch," Perrito says.

Felipe tugs his jeans up and proceeds to light a cigarette. "Te extrañé, Lina."

I don't need to know that he missed me or hear the way he always shortens my name. But there is something cold about the way he says it. Kind of like the way a cat toys with a mouse.

In dangerous moments, I've learned to say nothing. Existing only in the most fragile of ecosystems, I've learned that sometimes it's better to listen and learn.

I add something to my prayer. I pray that I'll get the chance to kill Felipe first, Mateo second, and Perrito last. I'll want him to know it's me who killed his sons.

Perrito postures ahead of me. "Off the bike, Catalina."

I kick my leg over the seat and swiftly swipe the dipstick blade. I dig my hands into my pockets and breathe a sigh of relief when seemingly nobody spots what I did.

Felipe reaches to steady me, and it takes every ounce of self-control to not shake out of his grip. Now is not the time to be a martyr. He pulls my

helmet off and tucks a curl back from my face. It makes me want to hurl. Instead, I look up at him, keeping my face schooled. “Is Neva okay?”

“She’ll heal eventually.”

I spin and turn to face Mateo. “What did you do to her?”

“We persuaded her to tell us where you really were,” Mateo says. His dark eyes narrow. “After I did a deal with her father. Nudillo paid the club for her poor choices and handed her over to me. Permanently.” He lifts a hand, removes his riding glove, and shows me the wedding ring. “Not quite the start to married life any of us intended, but she’ll adapt.”

“God, you are morally bankrupt.” I face Perrito. “Why are you doing this?”

At a speed that belies his age, he steps up to me, his thick fingers digging into my cheeks. “Because you humiliated me, my club, and my son. Because Neva told us you’ve been spending time with an Iron Outlaw who took out eight members of our club. Because your father was an asshole. The apple does not fall far from the tree.”

“You use the Los Reyes name, but you don’t truly stand for it. You sent those men to their deaths. If the Outlaws hadn’t done it, you planned to have the nomads kill them anyway.”

Perrito shoves my face away and I stumble.

It’s hard to breathe. Panic creeps through my veins faster than the icy chill of the wind. Forcing myself to take in deep breaths, I focus on a spot in the distance.

“What are you going to do to me?” I ask.

“Funny you should ask.” He turns and walk away from the bikes, and Felipe spins me around. His cigarette dangles from the corner of his mouth as he yanks my cut off my shoulders and tosses it to the ground.

Felipe grabs my arm, dragging me after him. The other men fall in around us.

“Felipe,” I whisper. “Somewhere inside you is a good man. You’re more than the product of your father. Please help me.”

“Let’s go,” Perrito shouts.

Felipe glances down at me.

“Please.” I try again. “This is so fucked up. If I meant to you as much as you say I do, you wouldn’t do this to me.”

“You *do* mean this much to me,” Felipe hisses. “Or you did before you humiliated the fuck out of me and left me for a rival club member. And you

meant a lot to the club too. You just couldn't see it in your quest to be equal. No man wants a woman like you for a wife. I'd marry a fucking brother before you."

The other men chuckle.

The words wound. All my life I've been rejected for being exactly who I am.

But I remind myself Niro wants me, and he's twice the biker, twice the outlaw, and twice the man Felipe is.

When we get to the clearing, Felipe pushes me to my knees. "You could still make a fine house mouse though. Clean up my shit. Cook for me. Let me fuck you when I want it. Although might have to run some bleach through that pussy of yours, given an Iron Outlaw has been dipping his infected dick in it."

Mateo laughs. "Appropriate that Felipe and I subjugate you and Neva, no?"

I'd rather choke.

Words tumble through my brain in response, but I force myself to keep them inside.

I can recover from verbal humiliation.

I can recover from being beaten.

But I can't recover from being dead.

So, I look at Perrito. "Why not just shoot me on my bike? Why bring me all the way out here?"

He taps a cigarette free of the packet, puts it to his lips, and lights it. Smoke drifts up into the air. "Cleanup will be a hell of a lot easier. And we can have a bit of fun first."

I hear Mateo laugh but resist the urge to turn and look at him. Instead, I press my arm to my side and feel the pressure of my gun. It's reassuring.

Perrito crouches in front of me. "You always were smarter than anyone truly gave you credit for. And you're the same as your father. Couldn't let sleeping dogs lie. Trying to find out what happened to him. You won't let this rest, and I can't take the risk that you'll continue where your father left off."

"You killed him," I admit. "I already know that. I know who did it, and I have Papá's cut. You had someone else do the dirty work and shoot him though. Why? Too much of a coward to do it yourself?"

"We don't owe you answers."

“Humor me.”

Felipe tugs my phone from my pocket. “Looks like lover boy has been trying to get hold of you. He holds it up to my face and takes a picture.

“What are you doing?” I ask.

“Just letting lover boy know where you are,” he says with a chuckle.

Perrito jumps to his feet, and in a move that shocks me, slaps Felipe. Not a punch, not a threat, a flat-palmed slap. The sound ricochets off the trees. His head spins to the side. When he straightens, blood trickles down his chin.

“What the fuck?” he curses.

“It’s your fault we’re in this mess. You and your goddamn mouth telling her the club came here six months ago. And for what? So she’d suck your fucking cock. I’m embarrassed by you.”

I look behind me and see the pitying looks on the rest of the club members’ faces.

Neva must have told them how I got the information. I can’t imagine her going down without a fight which must have been brutal. I’m proud of her bravery, even if the outcome for me is still the same. Dissent and distrust are powerful tools and she wielded them perfectly.

I hope she’ll be able to get away from Mateo and heal.

Perrito takes my phone and looks at it. “It sent, you idiot.” He drops it to the ground, and stomps on it. “We had the advantage of taking her by surprise. If they didn’t know we had her before, they do now. I don’t know how much of the background you got in that image, but they can check the photograph’s location data or might recognize it. You fool. You’re lucky I don’t fucking bury you with her.”

“Perrito,” I say to get his attention. “Was this really just about being an official club or not?”

“Your father always wished he’d been the one to lead the club. He tried to undermine me for years.” He takes a long drag on his cigarette. “Yes, he made plans to go back to Mexico. Planned to petition the mother chapter for control of the club. It bothered him that we kept the profit. He said we were using the Los Reyes name and not giving back to the club as was the spirit. Like we broke some kind of honor code. But you know what, Catalina? We like the profit. We like it a lot more than feeling honorable. Brotherhood doesn’t pay the bills. If you’d left things alone, we wouldn’t have had to do this.”

My heart lurches. I wrap my arms around myself as if cold. When the

time is right, I'll grab my weapon. "What about Mamá? She'll ask questions about why I haven't called, why I haven't come home."

Perrito shrugs. "Possibly. But in a week, she'll be dead. Neva's first act of contrition once she's well again will be going over for coffee one morning and pouring something special into your mother's cup. Something that won't last in her system. Mateo will then break her arm and neck and place her at the bottom of her staircase, as if she fell. But I promise you; by then she won't feel a thing."

"No," I shout and stand to my feet.

"Your father didn't get to be buried in the sun as was his wish. Neither will you," Perrito shouts.

Felipe reaches for my shoulder to shove me back down as I dip into my pocket and pull out the dipstick knife. In three fast moves, I stab him in the side, the chest, and then place the knife at his jugular with enough pressure that the skin splits before he manages to get out of my grasp.

With a yell, he launches us both to the ground in a battle only one of us can win.

NIRO

If there is a single mark on my woman when I find her, I'm going to chop up every single motherfucker there into pieces. I'll wrap their fucking entrails around the tree trunks.

Vex has been raising his hand the last few miles. Five fingers, four fingers, three fingers.

We must be close.

I've never really thought about how I usually dismount my bike, but suddenly I'm thinking in fractions about the most effective way to get off the fucker and into a fighting stance. Don't even care what happens to the bike today, as long as I'm off it as soon as I see Catalina.

One finger goes into the air.

I might even use it like a bowling ball. Ride through whoever has her and take them down like bowling pins. I'm a medieval knight on a powerful steel horse, and they don't stand a chance.

We don't have a formal plan. We've just ridden hard. Years and years of experience riding in this formation means we've been able to maintain speeds most others couldn't. There are no prospects or green riders on this ride. Cars move out of our way when they see us in their rearview mirrors.

And I'm relieved that if Los Reyes had to take Catalina anywhere, it's here. I've buried more people in the Pines on behalf of the club than any other member. I know this place like the back of my hand.

Both Halo and Vex extend their left arms, palms facing back, to indicate we need to stop. But when we do, I don't see Catalina. "Where the fuck is she?" I say.

“She’s a mile away,” Vex says.

“Then why the fuck aren’t we riding?” I shout.

“Because we don’t have an attack plan, and we should make one that includes stopping and getting our weapons out. Because as soon as they hear our bikes, they’re gonna act,” Halo says.

The brothers do as he says, pulling their weapons from holsters and hiding places on their bikes.

I turn to King. “We need to ride in there. Go now.”

King stares at the map on Vex’s phone as Vex points something out quietly.

“Split up. I’ll take Niro, Bates, Vex, and Switch with me. Clutch, you take Spark, Saint, and Halo with you. Take the left here and come around behind where they are.” He points to a junction on the map and looks up at Halo. “Send Wrinkle an updated location for the van.”

I know this is the right thing to do—make a plan, be thoughtful—but I can’t wait. “Fine, I’m going.” I jump back on my bike.

“For fuck’s sake,” I hear King curse. “Let’s go.”

I pull out, and a strange thing happens. King does not overtake me. He simply settles in slightly behind me to my left. When I look over at him, he tips his chin ahead of us, encouraging me to go on. When I pull up to the trail, the first thing I see in the distance is Catalina sitting over Felipe with her hands around his neck. The second are the guns all aimed in her direction.

Hold on, smart girl, I’m coming.

Then the sound of our bikes alerts them to our presence, and all hell breaks loose.

Bullets fly our way and theirs. It’s hard to steer, dodge, and fire at the same time. I hear a bike behind me go down, but I can’t turn, not now. Not when I see Felipe try to grapple out of Catalina’s hold.

The sound is deafening. Cracks of bullets, the metallic vibration when they hit our bikes. I don’t know the men I’m facing, and I have no qualms when I hit one of them with a bullet and see him fall to the ground. One of them manages to get back on his bike and drive farther down the trail, and I’m relieved to know anyone fleeing will run into my brothers.

Now there are four of them left, and Catalina.

I’m getting closer, but before I can get to them, Mateo aims a gun at Catalina and fires.

I see her shoulder jerk as he walks toward her. She’s grappling with

Felipe, but Mateo raises his gun again.

Time slows. I want to yell but can't. The back end of my bike flips out as I increase my speed to reach him. I know I'm going to go down, but so is the bastard about to shoot at the one person who is more important to me than my own life. My knee hits the ground with so much force, it feels as though my femur breaks in two. But I manage to angle my bike such that the rear wheel smashes into Mateo's legs, and he goes airborne as I let go of the handles. The bike skids across the snow, wheels spinning, but I manage to get from beneath it and roll to a stop.

I pull the knife out of my boot and jam it into Mateo's jugular twice.

Fucker tries to say words as he gurgles. I pull on the fingers that currently hold his gun until they snap. And then I reach for his weapon and shoot him dead.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see King and Perrito in a fistfight. The roar of bikes tells me the rest of my brothers are headed toward us. But my only thought is Catalina. Felipe has his hands around her throat now, and while she claws at his wrists, he has her pinned. Her eyes are wide, her face red. But I see her patting the snow around her searching for something. Then in a series of lightning-fast moves, she stabs him in the throat four times. Blood pours from Felipe, dripping down on her, but all I can think is she's alive.

Seconds feel like minutes as Felipe hovers over her, his eyes wide with the knowledge he's about to die.

Ignoring the agonizing pain, I hobble over to her, dragging my injured leg. I kick Felipe off her, nailing him as hard as I can with my steel-toed riding boots. Pain fires up my body, making me gasp for air.

I swear I hear his skull crack, but I know he's already dead.

Then I fall to my knees next to Cat, ignoring the blistering pain that ricochets up my leg. I pull her to me, hiding her face against my chest as my brothers take care of the other men.

"I'm here. I got you."

"I wanted to kill Perrito," she gasps in-between deep breaths of air.

"King," I yell, when he's finally subdued Perrito on the ground. "Let Cat."

He knows what I mean, and Bates and King drag Perrito to his knees in front of her. "Do it well for both of us, sweetheart," King instructs.

I hand my gun to her, and she takes it instead of reaching for her own. She rises to her knees and points it at Perrito. "I killed Felipe. Mateo is dead.

Your line is gone, you worthless sack of shit. This is for Eduardo ‘Pensa’ Flores.”

She fires until all the bullets are gone.

When she’s done, her breaths become sobs. Deep, painful tears. The kind that came when she sat on my stairs. She falls back into me, and I hold her tightly, wishing I could carry all this for her. I kiss the top of her head and stroke her hair.

“I’ve never been so certain I was going to die,” she says as her body shakes.

“You’re safe, love. I promise. It’s all over.”

Finally, the only sounds are that of my brothers trying to regain their breath after the fight. Bates is drenched in blood, knives in both hands as he looks around. Crimson seeps into the snow. The scent of gasoline lingers in the air from damage to bikes. Switch is tying a belt around Vex’s leg to stop the flow of blood.

“We need to get Vex to a hospital. I can’t fix this kind of internal bleeding,” he says.

“Wrinkle should be here any minute with the van,” King says. “Vex sent him the precise location when we stopped back there. How’s your girl?”

Catalina wipes her eyes and looks up at King. “I’m good.”

King crouches in front of her. “You did good, Cat. But your man’s in a world of hurt, and we need to get you off him. And you need to get your shoulder checked.”

Cat scrambles out of my lap. With the blood coloring the snow next to my leg, I either shredded my knee in the skid, have a broken bone that pushed through the skin, or got shot.

As I acknowledge that, the pain comes flooding back into my consciousness with such ferocity, I lean to one side and puke in the snow.

“Dios, Colton.”

I lie down as everything in the world has suddenly gone woozy as shit. Catalina’s palm presses on my chest. And I hear the whispered words that tumble from her lips as she worries about me. And despite the trippy feeling of losing my battle with consciousness, I know I’d do it all over again for her.

Thirty-six hours later, with a cast the full length of my leg that’ll prevent me from riding while I recover, I’m sitting in a temporary wheelchair Switch got me. Catalina wheels me into my home, and Bates and King follow her in with my shit from the hospital. After Switch confirmed in the van that I

hadn't been shot, I was dropped off at the hospital under the guise of a bike accident. Which wasn't totally untrue.

Cat's bullet wound was a deep graze. We pretended she was on the back of my bike, and both of us looked at the doctor blankly when he suggested it looked more like a bullet wound. Eleven stitches over her bicep sorted her out.

Vex is alive, but it was touch and go. He's had surgery, and most of the blood in his body has been replaced at this point. He'll be okay, but he's got a long road ahead.

Clutch has confirmed my bike is irreparable, and I'll need to get a new one. Catalina joked that I could ride around on the back of hers when I recover.

Bates found it funny.

I found it funnier when I punched him.

Sure, I was still half drugged up from the surgery, and it didn't hurt him worth a jot, but it made me feel better.

"How are you doing there, champ?" King asks when we're all in the house.

"Like I was run over," I admit. "All of me hurts."

"That's what you get for being a hero," Bates says as he helps me transfer from the wheelchair to the sofa with the chaise on the end.

Catalina grins. "I wish we could replay the moment you started to skid. It happened too fast for me to process in real time."

"Won't be doing it again, if that's what you were thinking," I grumble. "So don't be getting held hostage again."

King laughs as he places our stuff by the stairs. "Not for a while at least."

Spark and Iris step in through the open door. We're neighbors of a sort, living minutes apart. "We brought you dinner," Spark says.

Iris places a container down on the hall table. "Thought it might be easier than trying to figure out what to cook tonight."

"Thank you so much," Catalina says.

"You need anything?" Spark asks.

"Yeah. For everyone to fuck off," I say. Then I take a breath. "Sorry. Meds. I'm grateful for all your help. But I really need some quiet. The last couple of days have been more than my ADHD-brain can deal with."

"Understood," King says. "You need anything, Cat, just message me, yeah?"

Catalina nods. "I will."

There are hugs and shoulder slaps. I'm also at my peak of people touching me. Doctors. Nurses. Friends.

When the door closes, I breathe a sigh of relief. I close my eyes in the middle of the living room and listen. There's no beeping. No machines. No waking me every two hours to check for a concussion. I tried to tell the hospital I hadn't hit my head, but they believed my lie that I'd come off my bike and therefore must have taken a hit.

Catalina slips down next to me and plants a kiss on my pec. "You okay there?"

"Sorry about all this," I say, looking down at the cast.

"You saved my life, Colton. And this"—she taps her nail gently on the top of the cast—"is temporary. It's my pleasure to help."

We sit together quietly until an idea strikes me. It's difficult to wrap my head around what the next few months will look like as I heal, but I know there's one thing I really want to do. "I had a thought."

Catalina looks up at me. "Yeah, what's that."

"Date me, Cat."

She looks at me as if I've lost my mind. "What?"

"You heard me. I've been thinking. We skipped everything. You're already my old lady. Let's go back to the beginning. I know it's going to be a pain with the cast and everything, but let's do it right here in our house for now. We'll picnic in the back garden. I don't know, watch movies or something, and I'll try to get to second base. I might need help with more date ideas because I obviously suck at them." Catalina's silence makes me second guess myself. "Never mind. It was a stupid fucking idea."

Catalina climbs to her knees next to me. "It's not stupid. You can teach me to bake. And we'll work out together as you rehab."

Relief seeps through me. "Yeah. Things that aren't to do with the club and the life. Things that are just ours."

"Things that are just ours. I love that."

I smile and run my knuckle down her cheek. "Can we start tomorrow? I need to sleep off all these painkillers."

"You want me to help you get upstairs to bed?"

I shake my head, and Catalina grabs the blanket off the back of the sofa. "I've got you," she says as she places it over me.

And I fall asleep, knowing that she does.

EPILOGUE: NIRO

MAY

“**L**ook at you, all ready to dance the fucking polka,” Clutch says as we walk around the back lot of the clubhouse.

No cast. No crutches. Nothing.

I can finally walk, as long as the weather isn't damp, and when my knee doesn't ache.

“Came on the bike,” I say. And it was a bit of a journey to do that. I've only been cast free for a few weeks. There's no doubting my leg is weak. Hell, my whole body is. I've done my best to train my upper body, but shit is hard with a full-length leg cast healing a broken femur and shattered kneecap. I'm a mash-up of internal fixation with metal rods and good old-fashioned bones knitting back together.

I've started physio, strengthening my leg back up. They say it's going to be a few more months before I'm back to how I was, but I'm ready to get back to work on all fronts.

The bit I didn't admit to the club until the bike I'd agreed to buy from King sat on my driveway the first time, was that I'd had dreams. No, not dreams, fucking nightmares. Falling off the bike into never-ending slides along the ground. Breaking bones, losing skin. Catching fire. Killing myself. Killing others.

Whenever I'd woken up in a sweat, I'd taken a deep breath, drunk some water, and blown it off. Until I found I couldn't bring myself to put my leg over the seat of my new bike.

Admitting it to Cat was hard.

She suggested I get used to it in stages. Just sitting on it without even

starting it.

She also encouraged me to talk with Rae, who I still meet every Wednesday without fail. We've never missed a session, even when I called her a cunt one day because she pushed me too hard. Instead, the following week, she met me with a behavioral code of conduct. I signed it and then gave her a pretty notebook I ordered online that had Shakespeare quotes weaving through it. We never mentioned it again.

I've learned through research that it's really hard to be a therapist to someone with ASPD. Our deactivated attachment systems mean we have a strong belief we don't need anybody. And there are times when I still fall back into utterly believing that. Sometimes, old patterns of arrogance and impulsivity return. But some days, I can really tune into how the person I'm spending time with is feeling, and it feels like a little bit of witchcraft.

This is my life, and I'm starting to make sense of it.

Apparently ASPD symptoms ease in your forties for reasons no one can actually explain. Which means I've got at least another decade, maybe a decade and a half, of this level of symptoms, and I want my relationship with Cat and the club to survive it, so therapy it is.

I still won't journal though.

"You're doing great. Even the doctors said you were doing amazing," Cat says, squeezing my hand.

"Thanks to you," I say.

"And Bates."

Yeah. My best friend totally stepped up. Came and kept me company when I was stuck with my leg up. And after I admitted my issues with the bike and my nightmares, he came around and sat on his bike next to mine while we chatted. Then it started to feel a bit like old times. And on the day I finally felt like turning the engine on, he fucking cheered.

But no one has been there for me the way Cat has.

We're finally getting some excitement in our sex lives again, because a full leg cast seriously limits your options. But the best thing to come out of this has been getting to truly know each other.

When Perrito and the rest of the Los Reyes men didn't return to the Barstow clubhouse, the men guarding Neva finally gave up and let her go. She came with Catalina's mom to visit four weeks ago. We didn't tell them what happened, even though Neva insisted we must know something about the club. Her father was still part of Los Reyes after all.

But she reassured me that if I was the reason he hadn't returned to the club, she was grateful. The man had effectively given her to Mateo with his blessing to beat the shit out of her.

King and Vex wave me over, and I walk to them, not letting go of Catalina's hand.

"I got what you asked me for," Vex says. He taps something into his phone, then my phone vibrates in my pocket.

When I open what he sent me, I feel remarkably calm. An address I've been looking for. My mom now lives in the Bronx. Not a million miles away. I've decided I'm going to do the work to convince her to talk to me. When it comes to blood family, we're all we've got. Rae is helping me prepare for it. Giving me words and shit I wouldn't come up with on my own. And helping me prepare for the possibility of her not wanting anything to do with me.

"Thanks," I say.

"I'm thinking of taking a ride upstate. Everyone's favorite Irish mobster has a business proposal for us," King says, meaning Iris's uncle, Cillian. "You feel like doing the ride with me?"

"Fuck, yeah. I do. I'm ready," I say.

But I'm not. Not fully. I'll probably be exhausted and sore by the time I get there and back. But I want to start putting the final piece of my life back together.

King eyes me carefully, as if he can read my thoughts. "We'll take it steady, yeah?"

"Yeah."

I think about the road to New York. Which makes me think about how gas stations get made. And—

Stay present.

Stopping the thought train is progress.

Spark hands me a beer and offers one to Catalina, and suddenly I'm inspired. "Hey, can I have a minute?" I shout.

King whistles to get attention. I look around the lot. Everyone is here. All my brothers, all the old ladies, even the club girls. With everyone's eyes on me, I feel like a dick, but I push through.

"Listen. Since wrecking my leg, you guys have all really stepped up for me. You know, helping with shit at home, and bringing meals and stuff. I just want to propose a toast to all of you because I couldn't have done it without you. Given I've been a dick to most of you at some point, I'm kinda surprised

you bothered. But I'm grateful."

I'm met with silence.

Catalina rubs a circle on my back.

And then everyone breaks out in applause and cheering.

"You're welcome," King says. "And you're not really much of a dick anymore."

Spark laughs. "I don't know. He's still about forty percent dick."

Bates raises a beer bottle in my direction.

When everyone is immersed back in their conversations, I take Catalina's hand and drag her to our room in the clubhouse. She's made a couple of changes. Just before I officially stepped down as treasurer and handed the job to Martin, who we now call Ditch, she offered me a deepthroat blow job in return for a new mattress. Of course, I accepted and bought us a new bed frame as well, with storage underneath it, seeing as the two of us share the space now.

It takes two seconds to back her up against the door.

Five seconds to kiss her.

A whole minute to strip her.

And then I lose track of time because I'm spending it lost in the body of the woman who grounds me when I need it. The woman who makes me laugh when the world feels lonely.

"Fuck, I'm so grateful for you," I mumble as I kiss her breast. When I suck her nipple into my mouth, she arches against me.

Her hands thread through my hair. "Good. Now you can show me just how much with that tongue of yours."

I look up at her and burst out laughing. It feels good. "Yeah, cariño. My tongue can't wait to show you how grateful I am. Neither can my dick." My lips meet hers, and I kiss her, softer than she was likely expecting. "When you kidnapped me, did you think it would end here?"

She places her palms gently on my chest. "Never in a million years. I came here to honor my vow to Papá, to bring him home. I had no idea I'd stay here permanently."

"I had an idea. To help you keep that vow." I pull the surprise out of my cut. "Here."

She looks down between us. "I'm naked."

"Got nothing to do with opening an envelope."

"I like it when you're naked too," she says.

“Fine.” I strip everything off and kiss her again. “You better open that envelope, or my cock is going to take control of the proceedings.”

Catalina chuckles. I’m only half serious.

She does as I say. “Plane tickets to Guadalajara?” Her eyes fill with tears.

“I thought we could cremate your dad’s cut. Take it as ashes to avoid any conversations about its condition and sprinkle them in a place that was important to him. That way, at least a small part of him returns home and you can keep your vow to him. Because if the club meant so much to him that he was killed trying to do the right thing by it, then his cut really was an important part of him. You know this.”

She cups my cheeks. “I didn’t think I could love you any more than I do. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” I manage to say before her lips meet mine, pressing my cock against her. “You feel like saying thank you to him too?”

Catalina starts to laugh. “Yes, I’ll say thank you to him too.”

I kiss her again. “Good. Because he loves you just as much as I do.”

EPILOGUE TWO

BATES

I pull up my bike outside the Iron Outlaws clubhouse, glad to be home in New Jersey. A long ride is good for the soul but bad for the body. Switch and I have just completed a round trip to Dallas to build connections with the newly formed Fort Worth chapter.

My lower back aches as I climb off my bike and remove my helmet. “I need a beer,” I announce. “Or tequila. Or both.”

Switch groans and reaches to touch his toes. “Whose idea was it to do a thirteen-hour stretch?”

“I think it was yours when you shook me at three a.m. and said you couldn’t sleep on a lumpy mattress, princess.”

“I’m too fucking tired to ride to my house,” Switch says. “So yes, beer, and hopefully pussy, and then I’m gonna sleep like the dead in my room here.”

I check my watch. Four in the afternoon. “Wonder which of the girls are kicking around. Dibs on Penny if she’s in.”

“Bastard. Fine. Let’s go see if King is in first.”

We step inside the cool clubhouse. Riding in eighty-degree sunshine was everything biking should be, but I’m ready for some shade, some tequila, and someone to suck my dick.

The old ladies sit on the opposite side of the bar. They’ve all got a copy of the same book on their lap, in their hands, or on the table in front of them. And they’re laughing their asses off. Rae notices Switch and I walking in and waves.

I smile at her and then see King in his office.

“How was Dallas?” he asks as we step in.

Switch drops into his seat at the table. “They got a good setup. The lot they bought outside of Fort Worth will serve them well.”

“You got ’em straight on defenses?” King asks me.

“Yup. We went through security, defenses, and shit. Switch walked them through emergency triage and set up a medical station within the clubhouse. Told ’em to try and prospect some guys from any of the medic corps.”

“Good deal. Thanks for that run.”

Laughter breaks out in the clubhouse, and King is momentarily distracted as he looks through the window at his old lady. I really hope the two of them make it, but in my experience, good women like her change their minds about men like us.

“They’re running a book club and take turns choosing the book. This month it’s Briar’s turn, and she picked a book she designed the cover for,” King says. “Did you know there’s a whole line of books in the romance genre about motorcycle clubs?”

“For real?” Switch asks.

King shrugs. “I don’t know, guess some women get lady boners for bad boys.”

“Speaking of boners,” I say. “I got plans to find Penny.”

“Think they’re all hiding out in the kitchen. Club girls are still a touchy subject for Gwen, if you remember the shit they did when she first arrived. She’s made it clear to them that if the old ladies are in the bar, they need to be somewhere else.”

I roll my eyes. “No offence, Prez, but between your twin and your missus, they’re fucking with the vibe of the club.”

“Understood. I’ll speak to both of them about coexisting.”

Switch smirks. “Good luck with that. I’ve seen the way your old lady ties you up in knots.”

“Fuck you,” King says, but the tone of his voice is lighthearted. We all know what a sucker he is for his woman. I remember what that feels like.

When I step into the bar, Iris waves me over. “Bates. I just commented how you look like the guy on the cover of our book.”

Playfully, I kiss my bicep and strike a pose. “You think I should be on a cover, sweet thing?”

Briar laughs. “I had to work with what the author wanted. Don’t let it go to your head.”

“Let me see it,” I say with my hand out.

Rae gives me her copy. It’s got little sticky notes poking out of the pages.

“You color coded your smut notes?” I ask.

“No shame in my game,” she says. “Blue is for romantic moments. Pink is for hot sexy moments. Green is for quotes I loved.”

I take in the cover and get what Iris means. The guy does look a bit like me. Same fair hair, same light tan skin. Spark gives me all kinds of grief for wearing sunscreen and shit. But I don’t want to have skin the texture of old leather when I’m fifty. Our eyes are the same shape. Kind of uncanny actually. But what hits me most is the tattoo on the shoulder. It’s not mine, but it is. The font is different. It’s not in exactly the same place. I touch my shoulder where *Fortune Favors The Bold* sits beneath my skin.

But it’s only when I take in the name of the author that my heart drops as all the blood rushes to my head. It’s written by Vi Graydon.

Graydon. My last name.

And Vi. My . . . I shake my head at the thought that Viola was once everything to me. The woman who would rather leave me than marry me. The fact she’s using my name as hers when she refused to take it in real life burns.

I turn to the back of the book and read the blurb.

Can a bad boy biker ever be the right guy for the good girl?

Travis “Fortune” Rogers is a biker on a mission.

Fortune.

I have memories of Viola and I in bed in the days after I got my ink. *I should call you Fortune now instead of Miles.*

There is no way on earth this is an accident.

The woman who left me because she didn’t feel like she could be part of my world is now writing about it.

I open the book to a green sticky note and read.

“You can’t stop me from becoming who I am.”

“I don’t want to stop you from being who you are. All I can do is save myself so you don’t take me down with you.”

I remember her yelling that at me a year after I started prospecting with the Outlaws. After my first brush with the law.

Rae said the pink ones are for sex. I flick to one.

For a big man, he’s gentle. He knows this is my first time. And while I can’t imagine this is fulfilling the needs he has, he’s doing his best to fulfill

mine. And my heart falls for him just a little more at the gesture. Fingers slip beneath the strap of my sundress.

My chest cracks open as I remember our first time, and how soft the pretty yellow cotton straps felt in my hands as I nudged them off her shoulders. And my surprise at just how much softer her skin was when I kissed it.

To torture myself a little more, I find a blue sticky note.

Self-preservation has never been my strong suit. I'm terrible at making decisions under pressure. And I know letting this man who is treading a path of violence touch me is a terrible mistake. But the tumble into him is everything I need right now, and I can no sooner stop myself than I could halt the earth spinning around the sun.

At the back of the book, there's a note to follow her on her social media platforms.

Suddenly all thoughts of Penny and tequila leave my head.

Because if the woman who broke my heart thinks she can tell the world about us for profit *and* change the story to the happy ending she never gave me, she has another thing coming.

Preorder Bates and Viola's story here.

WHO WANT'S KING & RAE'S CHASE SCENE?

I'm so grateful to you all for taking the time to read Niro and Catalina's story and would love you forever if you would rate or review or share it if you loved it. It really makes a difference to me.

If you've loved this series, and want to sign up for my newsletter, you'll get a newsletter exclusive bonus scene of King and Rae's chase scene. In *The Bonds We Break*, Rae reveals her chase fantasy. And finally, King delivers on it.

You can access it by signing up for my [newsletter here \(https://newsletter.scarlettcole.com/thebondswbreak\)](https://newsletter.scarlettcole.com/thebondswbreak). Don't forget to double opt in or you won't receive it. Be warned ... it's scorching. (You'll need to sign up again to get it if you are already on my list.)

And, yes, book six is Bates's story. I do a LOT of research for my books. Often, it's actually my favorite part of writing. And they say write what you know. So I started to wonder about the idea of a romance writer and a biker. How could they meet? Which led me to thinking about what would happen if they were in love once, and the writer turns their story into a best seller. What would the hero do if he found she'd written the happy ending she wasn't prepared to give him? Hence, Bates and Viola's story was born.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Scarlett Cole is a contemporary romance author that calls both Toronto, Canada and Manchester, England home. A born city dweller, she periodically quashes the urge to live in the country by hiking up a mountain to remind herself that living away from people would terrify the pants off her.

She believes everybody deserves their love story to be told and loves her heroes on the rough and rugged side...and usually tall (because she married one of those 6ft 6" men you read about in romance books!). She's an A-type personality and Scorpio star sign, so good luck getting her to do anything she doesn't want to.

When she isn't writing, she's happy to talk about hot men and expensive shoes while drinking a cold gin and tonic. Don't bring up olives. As far as Scarlett is concerned, they are the devil's food. As long as you don't bring up olives, she's happy to hear from you any time.



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