

Amazon Bestselling Author



BEAST

Carol Dawn

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How it began

Five men work as a secret military protection unit for the United States Government. When the time comes for them to renew their contracts, they each opt out in order to start their own security company. Knowing that secrecy is best for their client's protection, they decide to disguise their security operation under the guise of a motorcycle club. I'd like to introduce you to the Phantoms MC.

President: Captain or Cap for short. He was the Captain of their team before and he's their President now.

Vice President: Axe! Axe is a countryman through and through. If he's not wearing a plaid shirt, then he's most likely in a foul mood.

SGT at Arms: Beast is large and intimidating. But it's all for show. Beast is the biggest teddy bear and is always smiling. But, when he's working, don't get in his way. He's not afraid to run you over.

Enforcer: He's seen only if he wants to be seen. He's called Shadow! But be careful, because it might not be your shadow that's following you.

Road Captain: He's the deadliest member of the Phantoms MC. He doesn't fear death. He IS death! You mess with his clients, or even worse, his family, then the Reaper will come for you. And he won't stop until his face is the last one you see.

Chapter One

Callie

Smiling, I switch the sign to open.

“We are so proud of you, baby sister.”

“I can’t believe you own your very own store.”

Rolling my eyes at my brother’s antics, I unlock the door.

“It’s not a store, Colton,” I tell him. “It’s a bakery.”

“It’s still a business,” Cooper reminds me. “And we are incredibly proud of you.”

My cheeks are starting to hurt with how much I’ve been smiling. I’ve been through so much and have worked so hard to get to where I am today.

“Are you guys leaving tonight?” I ask, not yet ready to open the door to the waiting customers.

“Trying to get rid of us so soon?” Cameron teases.

I have five older brothers, all of whom are overbearingly protective. But also incredibly supportive and simply all-around amazing brothers.

“I’m just going to miss you, is all,” I admit. “It’s been a real blessing having you all here for the week.”

“Christmas is around the corner, Callie,” Christian says. “We’ll be back before you know it. Now, open those doors. You have a line of people wanting their breakfast.”

“We won’t leave until after you close,” Caleb says. “We’re going to spend the day with Duncan.”

“No sweets,” I remind them. “Duncan is already goofy enough without all that extra sugar.”

“Sure, baby sister,” Cooper says, kissing the top of my head. “No sugar.”

Colton, Caleb, Christian, and Cameron follow suit and kiss the top of my head before following Cooper through the back and out the door.

I know one thing for absolute certain, when I get home tonight, Duncan will be so full of sugar he won't see straight.

With a shake of my head but a heart filled with love, I take a deep breath and open the door.

"Welcome to the opening of Callie's Corner Bakery," I smile at the small line of people. "Thank you all for coming."

I wait patiently as everyone files inside.

"This place is beautiful," the last person says.

I can't see much of her face, but her eyes crinkle into what I'm guessing is a smile. She's wearing black leggings, a long sleeve yellow shirt with a sunflower on it, white gloves, and a headpiece that covers everything but her eyes. Maybe she's covered for religious reasons.

"Thank you," I tell her.

"Umm, Callie," Sandy shouts from behind the counter. "I'm a little overwhelmed here."

"Excuse me," I tell the woman and head towards my one and only employee.

"What's wrong?" I whisper when I'm standing next to her.

"It's this register," she tells me. "It was working fine with the first order, but now it's frozen."

I glance at Sandy's hands and smile.

"It's because of the gloves you're wearing," I tell her. "The register works best with your fingers. I'll fill the orders as you take them."

With an embarrassed laugh, she removes the gloves.

"Sorry about that," she tells the older man, smiling back at her. "What can I get for you?"

The man places his order and I go about getting it ready.

By the time we've served the first group of people that arrived, many more walk through the door. Time goes by fast as I rush to fill the orders as fast as Sandy takes them. I'm in heaven. With each step I take, each order I fill, and each

satisfied customer, my happiness increases. I can only pray that the people enjoy my baked goods.

Personally, I think they're amazing. My rounded middle, extra chins, and big butt can attest to that. I'm a baker who loves to test her merchandise.

"May I talk to the owner, please?"

I'm walking over before Sandy answers.

"What can I help you with?" I ask.

The lady from before, with the shielded face, looks my way and the corners of her eyes crease. She must be smiling.

"I just wanted to tell you that my breakfast was amazing," she tells me. "Those coffee cinnamon rolls were the best I've ever had."

My belly floats on a cloud of happiness at her compliment.

"Thank you so much," I say. "That means a lot. Those happen to be my favorite."

"Mine as well."

I'm startled by the deep southern voice from the man standing behind her. When I look up, kind eyes look back at me.

"We're really glad you've opened your business so close to our home," he tells me. "We really needed a small place like this."

"You wouldn't be hiring, would you?" the woman asks.

"Baby, we've talked about this," he tells her.

"No, you've talked about this. I ignored you and made my own plans."

"I wasn't planning on it unless business increased," I admit.

"We're going to need the help, Callie," Sandy tells me. "If this morning is a small taste of what's coming, we're definitely going to need the help. You won't be able to help serve out here when you're going to need to be in the back baking."

“You don’t need to work, Marisol,” the man says, glaring down at the woman’s head.

“Do you have experience?” I ask her, trying my best to ignore the intense stare the man is making.

Her eyes lose their light and her head drops.

“No,” she whispers. “And I can’t really remove these items of clothing while the sun is out.”

She proceeds to explain that she has a skin condition that makes her skin react badly when exposed to the sun.

I have her step to the side while Sandy takes the order of a couple just walking in.

“You know what,” she says. “Never mind. This whole thing was silly and I’m just taking up your time.”

She turns to leave, and I reach out to grab her shoulder. I’m only able to reach her with my fingertips because the counter is still between us.

“The windows,” I say, gesturing toward the large floor-to-ceiling windows on the front of my building. “They’re laminated glass. My brothers made me purchase them for safety reasons. They’re harder to break and they’re pretty much sound proof. But it also prevents UV rays from entering without stopping the natural light from the sun.”

“Really?” the man says, interest clear in his voice. “Where can I get those?”

“What are you saying?” the woman asks.

“Well, Sandy’s right. We’re going to need help. And, with tempered glass, you wouldn’t have to be covered all the time. You could work behind the counter without fear of being burned and get to enjoy the light at the same time. If that’s what you want to do, that is.”

“So, I can work for you?”

I smile at her excitement.

“Can you come by around three this afternoon?” I ask. “After today, we’ll open at five every morning and close

around four. But I close at two today and that gives me plenty of time to train you. If you're still interested."

The woman, who the man called Marisol, laughs and jumps up and down in excitement. "I am so very interested," she says. "I'll be here at three."

"I'll see you then," I smile.

She walks away with a pep in her step, but the man continues to glare at where she was standing. When his glare turns to me, my heart skips a beat.

But his face softens, and he smiles.

With a nod, he turns and follows the woman out of the building.

"Well, that was interesting," Sandy says from the register.

"Yes, but now we have help. What was that last order?"

"A large black coffee and one of your famous coffee cinnamon rolls."

"They're not famous," I tell her. "They're just delicious."

The door's bell dings and in walks half a dozen more customers. With a smile plastered on my face, I get back to work.

Chapter Two

Callie

“Thank you again for giving me this opportunity,” Marisol says. “It feels so wonderful to be able to work and not have to worry about my skin.”

“I’m sorry that life has given you such a hard curveball,” I tell her.

Marisol is a very beautiful woman. I guess her parents are both black, but because of a medical condition she was born with, her skin, hair, and eyes are not able to make color. So, she has very pale skin, white hair, and, in the right light, red eyes.

I’ve been working with her now for the past few hours. She’s smart and has mastered not only the order filling but the register as well. I give her a week and I bet she can help me prepare the baked goods like a pro.

“It’s not all that bad,” she tells me. “Thomas has done so much to help me live a normal life. Shoot, he’s already out looking for those windows to install in our home. Thank you for giving him that information, by the way.”

I smile. When he came to drop Marisol off, he charmed me into giving him the information on the window installation. I was more than happy to hook the man up.

“He really loves you,” I say, feeling a little envious.

What would it be like to have someone love me so fiercely?

“Yeah,” she smiles. “So, what’s next?”

“Girl, you are all set,” I tell her. “You know exactly where everything is, what all the food and drinks are called, the prices and the ingredients. Not to mention that you know how to work the register better than I do. I think you are ready to run this store on your own.”

Marisol blushes, her pale skin turning red before my eyes.

“I like to learn new things,” she tells me. “I’m really excited to start tomorrow. I’ll go ahead and call one of the guys to pick me up. Thomas sent a text saying that he had to drive several hours away to get those windows.”

“He could have just ordered them online,” I laugh.

“Yeah, well, he’s an overprotective male. I’m sure he will even have them installed in the house before I wake up in the morning.”

I laugh even though I’m filled with jealousy. I’ll never have a man like Marisol’s. Being a fat woman doesn’t give me many options. That type of sexy isn’t remotely interested in this type of body.

“Since the sun is setting, I think I’ll go outside and wait for whoever is picking me up,” Marisol says. “Would you care to come and sit with me?”

I mentally go over my closing list. With Marisol’s help, we have everything washed and put away and reading for closing.

“Sure,” I say. “Let me just grab my things.”

Grabbing my purse and keys, I set the alarm to the building and shut and lock the door.

“I can give you a ride home,” I tell her. “I don’t have the best car in the world, but it gets me to where I need to go.”

“That’s very kind, Callie,” she says. “Maybe next time I’ll take you up on that offer. If I leave now without Thomas knowing, I’ll get the lecture to end all lectures. I’m surprised that he even left me here without someone to guard me.”

“Who says you were left alone?”

The unfamiliar voice startles me, and I jump back, dropping my bag and keys.

“Beast,” Marisol grins. “How long have you been here and how did I not notice?”

“I’ve been here since Axe left, Mari-girl,” the man smiles. “And you didn’t notice because I didn’t want you to.”

Beast. Marisol called the man Beast and boy, oh boy, is he. I have never in my life seen a man so freaking huge. He makes me feel small, and that's saying something.

"Excuse me, ma'am."

I spin around and see a man walking up the sidewalk.

"Can I help you?" I ask.

I get a bad feeling from the newcomer but shove it aside. He's wearing rugged jeans and a leather vest with nothing beneath it. His skin is a mess of tattoos, scars, and dirt.

"I was wondering if I could have a word with you about something?"

"Umm, give me just a moment," I say. "I need to see my friend off, and then we can talk. May I ask what this is about?"

"Just business," he smiles. It's almost as if he's trying to appear friendly.

And failing.

"Alright," I smile back.

I turn to tell Marisol to head home with her Beast friend and to come back bright and early tomorrow. But they're gone.

Hurt swells in my chest that they would leave without so much as a goodbye.

Rolling my eyes, I can't help but laugh at myself. You literally just met them, woman. Stop being such a sensitive loony.

"It looks like your friend already left," the man says. "Can we talk now?"

"Umm, sure," I say, not feeling sure in the least. "But just for a moment. I really need to head home and get some sleep."

"It won't take long," he says. "My name is Cody Smith, but you can call me Roach."

"Roach?" I ask.

He points to a patch on his vest. A motorcycle wheel spinning out on a paved road.

“I’m the new appointed president of the Rubber Bound MC,” he says proudly. “I’ve come to make you a deal.”

Feeling a bit off about this whole encounter, I grab my purse and keys from the ground and take a few steps back.

“What deal?”

“We will pay you a substantial amount of money if you rent out the extra section of your building.”

What?

“Oh, that space isn’t for rent,” I tell the man. “Honestly, it’s not fit for living. It’s just a simple room built over the bakery. There isn’t a bathroom or kitchen. It was probably used for storage at one point. Which is exactly what I use it for now.”

The man, Roach, looks at me for long moments before smiling and lifting his shoulders.

“I understand,” he says. “But listen, if you change your mind, we would be willing to pay you a thousand a month just to rent out that room. We looked at the building before you purchased it and it would be perfect for what we want to use it for. Don’t worry, no one will actually live there. Here’s my card. You can reach me at any time.”

He holds out his card, and as I reach for it, he pulls it closer to his body. I stretch my arm as far out as it will go and wait. I will not walk closer to this man.

“Here,” he laughs, placing the card in my hand. “I’ll be in touch, Miss Childers.”

“Callie,” I say, slightly panicking as to how this strange man knows my name.

With a nod of his head, greasy hair falling over his forehead, he turns and walks away.

“What a strange and horrid encounter that was,” I mutter to myself. “Reminder to have extra lights put in and to not let my girls go out at night alone.”

I’m not really too concerned about myself. But Sandy and Marisol are prime picking for someone looking to attack a

woman. They're both beautiful. Not to mention skinny. I guess that's one positive thing about being fat. I'm not the right type of woman these creeps want to attack.

That doesn't make it any less scary, though.

"Another note to self," I say aloud. "Buy pepper spray and park the car closer to the building."

"Not bad advice."

Screaming, I fall to the ground, losing my purse and keys.

Again.

"You have got to stop doing that, Beast man," I say, recognizing Marisol's friend's voice. "How in the world do you move around without making a sound, being as big as you are?"

Beast takes a step closer, arching his brows.

My face heats with embarrassment as I realize what I've just said.

"I didn't call you fat," I rush to say. "I just meant that you're very well built. Not fat, like me. But, big, like the Hulk."

I flex my arms to show him what I was talking about. Instead of the smile I was expecting, he glares down at me. He strides forward and extends his arm.

Oh, he wants to help me up. Well, that's not happening. I can't just gracefully glide to a standing position. I'm a big girl. I need to get on my hands and knees and work my way into standing.

"Give me your hand, woman," he demands.

"I can get myself up," I say. "Just give me a second."

Instead of giving me the second that I asked for, the man grips my arm and pulls me to my feet as if it was no big deal. He didn't even grunt.

"Hm," I smile. "I'm both embarrassed and impressed."

I'm embarrassed because he knows how heavy I really am and impressed that he didn't make a single noise lifting my big

butt off the ground. But I don't think it's a good idea to tell him that, considering he's still glaring at me.

"Where's Marisol?" I ask.

"She's in my truck," he says. "Where it's safe. Two things I need to say before leaving. Did you know that man?"

"Man? What man?"

"The one wanting to rent your space, sweetheart. Do you know him?"

"Oh, greasy-haired, scarred face man? No. I've never met him before today."

"Stay away from him," he demands. "Do you understand? That bastard and his rag-tag group of wannabe bikers are no good."

I nod my head in agreement. I don't plan on ever seeing that man again.

"What's the second thing you wanted to tell me?" I ask.

"If you ever down yourself about your weight again, you won't be able to sit on that juicy ass for a week."

With those parting words, Beast turns and walks into the darkness. It's not until I'm in my car and pulling out of the parking space do I hear his truck start up. I see his headlights sitting in the same spot as I turn the corner, taking me to my small home.

"Did he just threaten to spank me?" I ask out loud.

What a strange thing to say to a woman you've just met.

So, why did it make me all hot and bothered?

Chapter Three

Beast

“Are you alright, Beast?”

I reach over and pat Marisol’s knee in response.

Am I alright? No, I’m not. I’m beyond furious and confused as hell. The second I saw the Rubberhead walking our way, I lifted Mari up and carried her to my truck. She must have sensed something because she didn’t complain.

“Don’t get out of this truck, Mari-girl,” I told her. “Lock the doors.”

Once I knew she was safe, I made my way back to the curvy goddess currently talking to that fucking biker wannabe. I only caught the end of their conversation before he walked off.

“Another note to self,” the woman said. “Buy pepper spray and park the car closer to the building.”

After she talked badly about her body and I threatened to tan her ass, I walked to my truck and sat there until I could no longer see the taillights of her car.

Maybe threatening to spank her ass wasn’t the smartest thing I’ve ever said, but I wasn’t thinking straight. Her body is absolute perfection. Her rounded stomach, wide hips, large ass, and fluffy cheeks are the most beautiful thing I’ve ever laid my eyes upon.

There isn’t a single thing skinny or even chunky about that woman. She has curves for days and plenty of cushion for all the pushing.

My version of perfection.

“Who was that man?”

“Not someone good,” I admit. “What’s her name?”

“Callie,” Mari answers. “She’s my new boss. She’s really sweet.”

“Hmm.”

“Is she going to be okay? She didn’t look too happy when she was talking to him.”

“I’ll make sure that she is, Mari-girl. When is your first day?”

“Tomorrow morning,” she says, a smile clear in her voice. “Bright and early. I’m really excited. Callie said that I’m practically ready to run the entire store.”

“I’m not the least bit surprised, Mari-girl,” I say, trying not to sound as distracted as I am. “You’re a very bright woman.”

We made the rest of the trip to her house in silence. Pulling in, I push all thoughts of Callie to the back of my mind as Axe rushes up to the car.

“We have a huge fucking problem,” he says. “They found the new client that just hired us yesterday, dead in her home.”

“What happened?” I demand.

“Police said she killed herself, but I have my doubts.”

“Why?” I ask.

Mari exits the truck and presses against her man’s side. His arm wraps around her waist while he hands me a picture.

“They took this at the scene.”

The image is of our newest client sitting in a tub full of red water, both of her wrists slit wide open. On the wall behind the tub was a symbol written in what I can only assume is the woman’s blood.

“What’s this mean?” I ask.

“Not sure,” he tells me, clearly worried. “Missy is looking into it. In the meantime, I’m going to need to go with Cap in the morning to meet with the police. We still have some connections that might be able to give us information that hasn’t yet been released.”

“You can just drop me off at Callie’s Bakery early if you want,” Mari says. “I don’t mind waiting for her to get there and open up so that you won’t be late.”

“Not a fucking chance, baby.”

“I’ll take you,” I tell her. “Besides, once Axe finds out who met up with your boss, you’ll never be able to go there on your own, anyway.”

I ignore the excitement coursing through my body at the thought of seeing Callie again. Then feel instantly guilty when I look back down at the image.

“I’ll fill you in later,” I tell Axe when he clears his throat.

I don’t have time to be distracted by a woman right now. No matter how perfect her body is. No matter how sweet her voice is.

I, again, push thoughts of her to the back of my mind and focus on the picture. The symbol is a hand with the pointer finger and thumb pressed together and the remaining three standing straight.

“It appears to be a hand gesture that means everything is okay,” I say.

“That’s what it used to mean,” Marisol says. “I’ve actually read that it’s now a symbol of hate. Something involving white supremacy and all of that. The whole thing is ridiculous, if you ask me.”

“A symbol of hate,” Axe murmurs. “Hmm.”

“Do you mind If I sleep in your guest room?” I ask them. “That way I can just take Mari-girl to work from here.”

“Of course, brother,” Axe says, pulling out his phone. “I’m going to call Cap and tell him what Marisol said. It might help Missy.”

With a nod, I gesture for Mari-girl to take my arm as I walk her into the house. My mind is reeling with the events of the evening. The woman who was killed just hired us yesterday. We hadn’t even gotten around to getting her place hooked up with our security before she was killed.

On top of that, I meet the woman of my dreams and she’s already targeted by those damn Rubberheads. I don’t know

why they're wanting to rent from her, but I'll look into it tomorrow. Then I'll make sure they know she belongs to me.

To us.

To the Phantoms.

Damn it.

Chapter Four

Callie

“Sorry about the bodyguard,” Marisol tells me as she removes most of her outer layers of clothing. “Unfortunately, I don’t think there will be a single day when Thomas lets me leave the house without someone escorting me.”

“Is there a reason for that?” I ask, ignoring the hulking beast man currently sitting at the back of my dining room.

“I was sort of kidnapped a little while back,” she admits. “I was lucky enough to have been taken with one of the Phantoms so I was protected as best as he could. Unfortunately, while I’ve healed and moved on, Thomas hasn’t. I guess the guys don’t like the man who came to visit you last night. They say he and his friends are bad news.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” I tell her honestly, shivering at the memory of that man. “I don’t mind. Plus, if the rest of these Phantoms look anything like your Thomas and Beast, then it will be more than a pleasure to have them here.”

“They are all definitely eye-candy, that’s for sure,” she laughs.

“Well, how about you and I serve while Sandy takes orders? Hopefully, today will be as good as it was yesterday.”

The next several hours are non-stop movement. My feet hurt and I really have to pee, but man, does this feel good.

I’ve given both of my workers their lunch breaks, but I haven’t stopped moving since we started.

“Another one?”

Hearing the laughter in Sandy’s voice, I glance over to see who she’s talking to.

“They are quite delicious,” Beast smiles in my direction.

“What’s delicious?” I ask, ignoring the heated look in the man’s eyes.

“He’s had three orders of your coffee cinnamon rolls,” Sandy answers. “And he wants one to go.”

I glance up at the clock and see that it’s time to close down the store.

“If you give me about twenty minutes, I can make you a batch to take home,” I tell him. “Maybe you can share it with your buddies?”

“I’ll wait as long as it takes,” he says. “But no one will be touching a single one of your rolls but me.”

“Awe,” Sandy whispers as Beast retakes his seat. “Someone doesn’t want anyone else touching your rolls.”

“As a big girl,” I whisper back. “I can take that sentence in two different contexts.”

Sandy’s laughter follows me into the back.

Luckily, I still have a batch of coffee cinnamon roll dough left. I prepared enough dough for the rest of the week, but I can’t help the smile that spreads across my face as I place the last batch in the oven.

These things were a hit. I’ll have to prepare some more dough before going home.

“I had so much fun,” Marisol tells me. She’s elbow deep in the sink, washing pans. “I really mean it. I really appreciate you giving me this opportunity. A lot of people wouldn’t consider my restrictions.”

“Your restrictions aren’t what makes you who you are, girl,” I tell her. “Your kind heart does that for you. You’ve done an amazing job today. I should be the one thanking you.”

“Baby, where are you?”

“Back here,” Marisol yells.

I watch with a not so small amount of jealousy as Marisol’s man wraps her in his arms and kisses her so sweetly.

“I’ve missed you, baby. Did you have a good day?”

Feeling like I'm intruding in an intimate moment, I silently excuse myself.

"I'm heading out, boss lady," Sandy tells me. "I'll see you bright and early."

"Thank you, Sandy. I'll see you tomorrow."

I spend the next several moments restocking the front.

"Do you need anything else from me?" Marisol asks.

"I'm good," I smile, noticing that she's once again covered from head to toe. "I'll see you in the morning?"

"I'll be here before the rooster crows."

I laugh. "I'll be waiting."

I follow behind them and flip the open sign to closed.

"Wow," I say to myself. "What a day that was. So freaking awesome."

"You have an amazing gift."

I nearly faint when Beast speaks.

"Sorry," I laugh. "I forgot you were still here."

"Ouch," he says teasingly, grasping his chest. "I told you that I would wait for those rolls."

"Crap," I say, rushing towards the back of the room.

I got so lost in my excitement of the day that I completely forgot to set the timer.

Please, don't be burned.

"Oh, thank goodness," I sigh. "They're perfect."

I pull them out and grab one of the to-go boxes I have for large takeout orders. After drizzling my special frosting on top, I pack them neatly in the box.

"Here you are," I tell the giant man currently waiting by the register.

He pulls out his wallet and looks up at me expectantly.

“It’s on the house,” I tell him. “I’m sure it wasn’t very comfortable sitting in that chair for all those hours.”

Without saying a word, he pulls out a fifty-dollar bill and drops it in the tip jar.

“Thank you, sweetheart,” he smiles. “These are the most delicious things I’ve ever had.”

I’m about to thank him when the door swings open and my favorite little person waltzes in.

“Hhhi, mmmoomy. I jjjust watched eeeveryone get on a pppp. On a pppp. Dang it. On a ppplane.”

“Hello, baby boy,” I smile, leaning down to hug his tiny body. “Did your uncles get to the airport on time?”

“Only bbbecause Uncle Ccccooper told them hhhe would leave without them.”

I pick up my baby and hold him against my chest while holding in my laughter.

“Uncle Cooper is always trying to boss everyone around, isn’t he?” I laugh.

“Especially yyyou, mommy.”

“Isn’t that the truth?” I mumble.

I glance at the door and smile at my sitter, Rachel.

“Thank you, Rachel,” I tell her. “I hope my brothers didn’t give you any trouble.”

“Your brothers are something else, Miss Childers,” she sighs. “I’m not sure I could have survived much longer with all of that testosterone under one roof. However, it looks like this man has more testosterone than all five of them combined.”

I look up at Beast and watch as the corner of his lip tips up. The very fact that Rachel is the one who caused that small smile makes me angry.

And I don’t know why.

“Thank you, Rachel,” I say calmly. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Sure thing, Miss C. See ya little C.”

“Bbbye, Rrrr,” Duncan sighs in frustration. “Bye.

When Duncan was two years old, he was diagnosed with autism. He’s a very smart boy but he can’t handle change very well. And, when something disrupts his schedule, he becomes really anxious.

For the past two weeks, he’s had to adjust to me leaving at all hours to prepare the store. Then he had to adjust to my brother’s visit and a new babysitter. Now, he has to adjust to his uncle’s being gone and me not being there to wake him up in the mornings.

He always has a stutter when he talks, but it’s been more pronounced lately and it makes me feel like a horrible mom.

“Wow.”

I follow Duncan’s gaze as he looks up at Beast.

“You’re giant,” he says with wonder.

“I am,” Beast chuckles.

“Wow,” he repeats, causing us both to laugh. “You’re as big as a bear. Have you ever fought one?”

“I’m bigger than a bear,” Beast teases. “And, I have not. But, rest assured, little man, if there ever comes a time when I come face to face with a bear, I will win.”

“Wow.”

“It’s not polite to stare,” I say when I remember that I’m supposed to be a parent and not admiring Beasts beastly size.

“It’s alright, sweetheart,” Beast says gently. “I know I look big and possibly scary, but I would never hurt you.”

The worry in Beast’s eyes has me wondering if he has to be this cautious with everyone he meets.

“I’m not ssscared,” my little man says. “I ttthink it’s sso cool. Mommy, wwwill I ever get that bbbig?”

“I’m not sure, love,” I say, placing him back on his feet. My little man is getting heavy. “I’m not a very tall person and neither is...”

I stop myself short, not wanting to bring up his father.

“The men in your life are not as big as this man,” I continue. “All of your uncles are very tall, though, so it’s a possibility.”

“My father isn’t bbbig,” Duncan says, causing my heart to skip a beat. He hasn’t mentioned the man since we left. “Mmmmy ffffather www... He wwwas mmean.”

Beast lowers himself until he’s eye level with my son. His face is soft as he listens to Duncan talk about his father, but in his eyes, I can see the storm brewing.

“Hhee aalways hit mmmommy,” Duncan continues. I want to stop this conversation, but I can’t seem to even breathe around the knot in my throat. “Mmmommy always ppprotected me. Bbbut one time, he hit me and mmmommy was so angry that we left.”

My Duncan is a shy boy. Why in the world is he telling our family drama to this stranger?

“Is that so?” Beast says, looking up at me. Where his face was soft while looking at Duncan, it’s nothing but rage as he glances up at me.

“It’s cause I llefft mmy legos on the floor and he sssstepped on one,” Duncan continues, as if Beast isn’t about to wage war in my little bakery.

“Alright, baby,” I finally manage to say. “Why don’t you go over and sit at a table while I finish closing down?”

“Aaare yyyou lllike my ffaather?”

“Duncan Tyler,” I say, shocked. “Please do as I ask.”

“I would never hit a woman or a child,” Beast says, still staring at me. “My job is to protect women and children from men like your father.”

“Cccool.”

Duncan skips his little butt to a table and pulls out his tablet from his bookbag.

“I am so sorry,” I say, completely embarrassed. “Duncan is Autistic. He doesn’t really have a filter.”

Beast stands and takes two steps towards me. He’s so close now that if I take a single deep breath, my chest will be pressed against his abdomen.

I have to lean back a little to look up at his face. He still seems very angry. Logically, I know that it isn’t directed towards me, but I guess I haven’t fought my way out of the conditioning my ex-husband put me through.

Fear causes me to take a step back when Beast reaches for my face. He freezes for a second, but then continues to move. I have to force myself to hold still while this beast of a man gently cups my face.

He doesn’t say a single word. He just holds my face and stares. After a long moment, he gently pulls me against his body, presses my head against his chest, and wraps his arms completely around me.

I’m being held in a way that has tears flowing down my face. With his arms somehow wrapped around my whole body, I feel safe. I feel protected.

He holds me like that for a long while. When he does eventually let me go, I feel exposed. I feel vulnerable. I want so badly to hide myself back in his embrace.

“You go and finish up, baby,” he says softly. “I’m going to go and hang out with little man until you’re done.”

I’m frozen to the floor as I watch him go and sit on the opposite side of Duncan. I can’t hear what he says, but Duncan smiles wide and glances in my direction with a very prominent nod.

Oh boy.

Finally finding my feet, I turn and move to clean up the mess from the rolls I just baked.

Chapter Five

Beast

I listen as Duncan tells me all about his uncles. Apparently, he has five of them and they all have cool jobs.

“Bbbut, none are aaas cool as a bbbbodyggguard.”

“Your uncles seem like good men,” I tell him honestly. “And while their jobs are important, I have to agree. None sound as cool as being a bodyguard.”

“Dddo you think I cccould bbbe a bodyguard like you?”

“Absolutely.”

“Even wwwith my ssstutter?”

“Does your stutter change who you are on the inside?” I ask him. “Does it make you a bad person?”

“Sssometimes, I get really angry when I cccan’t get a word out,” he tells me. “I’ll yell and ssscssscream.”

“That’s frustration,” I inform him. “We all get frustrated. Even me.”

“You do?”

“Yeah, little man. But it’s how we act on that frustration that’s important. When I get angry about something, I don’t lash out at other people. I control my anger, my frustration, and do my best to fix the situation that caused those emotions to begin with.”

“How?”

“It takes a lot of hard work and practice,” I admit. “But, even then, sometimes the anger will slip through. When you feel frustrated, I want you to close your eyes, take a deep breath, and really focus on what you’re trying to say. It won’t stop your stutter, little man, but with practice controlling that frustration, I guarantee that it will improve it.”

“Mmmommy says that my big emotions make my ssttutter worse.”

“Your mommy is right, little man.”

“Are you rreally ggoin tto make mommy your wwoman?”

I smile.

When I first sat down, I asked Duncan if I had his blessing to make his mama my woman.

His smile and nod will be forever implanted in my memories.

“You bet, little man,” I say. “But that also means that I want you, too, Duncan. You know that, right?”

Having children has never really crossed my mind. I’ve always been too busy to start a family. My hands were always bloody one way or another. However, since my brothers and I started this new business and stopped working secret ops for the government, I feel more stable.

Duncan pulled at my heartstrings the very second I set eyes on him. He’s a small boy, but I was the same way at his age. I’m sure I looked huge and intimidating to him. But he looked at me with trust and amazement instead.

Plus, Callie will be mine. And since Duncan belongs to her, he will be mine as well.

“Will you be my new daddy?”

Not a single stutter. I smile.

“If your mama agrees to be mine,” I tell him. “But no matter what, I’ll always be here for you.”

My phone buzzes.

“Is it another bbodyguard?” Duncan asks.

Despite the message I just read, I smile.

“Sure is, buddy,” I tell him. “He’s actually my Captain.”

“Hey mmmommy,” Duncan yells. “Bbbbeast says I ccan bbbe a bodyguard wwwhen I’m older.”

Callie comes over and stands beside her son.

“And he is absolutely correct,” she smiles down at him. “You can be anything you want to be. You just have to put your whole heart into it.”

“Wwanna cccome over and ppplay legos?” Duncan asks me.

I watch as Callie’s face looks mortified and can’t help but chuckle.

“As much as I would love to come and spend time with you and your mom, that message was about a case I’m working. There are some important things that I need to go and do.”

“Oh, alright. Mmmaybe soon?”

I nod, already knowing that I will do what it takes to make Callie and Duncan mine.

“I need to talk to your mom before I leave,” I tell him. “You stay here and I will see you next time, little man.”

“Bye Beast.”

Placing my hand on Callie’s back, I guide her to the back of the store.

“He didn’t stutter,” she says. “Both of those words started with ‘b’. There wasn’t a single stutter.”

“Baby, look at me.”

Callie shakes her head and looks up at me.

“You make me feel like a toothpick,” she says. “Do you know how hard it is to feel beautiful and feminine when you’re my size? We’re always bulkier than the other women, so we don’t feel like them. You make me feel feminine.”

“You’re beautiful, baby,” I tell her honestly.

“You don’t have to say stuff like that,” she says, blushing. “I mean, I do appreciate it, but I know you don’t mean it. I could probab...”

I don’t give her a chance to finish whatever it was she was going to say. I grip her hair, pull her head back gently, and slam my mouth down on hers.

Her flavor erupts as I shove my tongue between her lips. She tastes sweet. Like the baked goods she creates. It's the sweetest and most delicious taste that has ever crossed my lips.

With great reluctance, I place one last sweet kiss on her lips and stand to my full six-foot eight height.

Wide eyes, swollen lips and a blissful look.

So. Fucking. Beautiful.

"I know I can be a bit forward," I grin. "And I know I can be a bit much. But know that this thing happening between us will happen. However, as much as I fucking hate doing this, I have to go. Let me walk you both to your car."

Once I get a happy Duncan and dazed Callie safely inside her vehicle, I wait and watch as they drive away.

It feels as if the rope connecting them to me is being stretched the farther they go, and I fucking hate it. When I get this case solved, I plan to tie that woman to me as tight as I can.

But, for now, I'll give her space to catch her breath while I go figure out who the hell killed my client.

"Beast, you have an assignment."

"Damn, Cap. Give the man time to sit down."

I chuckle. Shadow never knows when to keep his thoughts to himself.

"I will shoot you," Cap tells him.

"Who's my assignment?" I ask, trying to save Shadow's life.

"Her name is Baily Driftmen. She's being stalked by her father. I sent you her file and picture."

I'm already opening the file before Cap finishes.

"Um, Cap?"

"Yeah, I know," he sighs. "But I already assigned everyone else to different cases. We need to get these four cases solved

so that we can focus on this shit.”

He tosses a file onto the table. Brittany Myles. The woman who was murdered.

“So, don’t just sit on your asses. Protect these women, but be quick about finding the fuckers who are threatening them. Once we’re finished, we won’t be taking on anymore clients until we figure out who killed Ms. Myles. You have five days to get your cases solved and get back here. Not a second longer.”

We take our jobs very seriously. Cap’s Security not only protects our clients, but we strive to put a stop to the person or persons responsible for their fear. We’re good at what we do. The fucking best. We have connections all over the world, so it never takes us very long to get these cases closed and the women feeling safe.

However, there is a general rule. I don’t protect the vulnerable alone without someone else there. At least not until they get to know me and feel safe around me.

“You know how this is going to go,” I remind Cap. “The second she see’s me she is going to freak the fuck out. Instead of feeling safe, she’s going to be scared constantly.”

“I know, Beast,” Cap sighs. “There isn’t any other option. Anna and the baby will be staying with Axe and Marisol while we get these cases closed.”

“Missy could always tag along,” I say. “You know clients don’t take well to my size. Especially females who are already scared.”

“Missy can’t,” Reaper adds. “She’s away for the next two weeks with her girlfriend’s family. She’s working from her computer to help us as best as she can.”

I glance at my brothers. Reaper, Shadow, Cap, and Axe. We’ve all been through some pretty rough shit together. These men are my family. My brothers. We would do anything for one another. So, I know without a shadow of a doubt that Cap has already looked into this for me. We don’t hire outside help because we don’t trust people.

Looks like I'll be going in alone.

“How the hell am I going to make this woman understand that I won't hurt her?”

“I believe in you, Beast,” Axe says. “You're the friendliest guy among us. I know your client will come to understand that.”

“Alright, brothers,” Cap stands. “Time to head out. Since we're not pairing up this time, I want to go over the rules when protecting solo. Normally, we choose to be discreet with our client's protection. We work in teams. One doing the guarding while the other does the hunting. Since we will be alone, I want you to be as intrusive as fuck. They're not allowed to take a piss without us in the room. We eat with them. We sleep with them.”

Great.

“We can reach out to Axe or Missy if we need any information that will help us in our cases. I don't want anything else on your mind except your client. Figure out who's threatening them, deal with it, and get back here. Trust me, I know how much of a pain in the ass this is going to be. I have a family that I'm leaving, but we need to get this done. I have a feeling that the person who killed Ms. Myles wasn't the person who was after her.”

“You think it's someone trying to come after us?” Shadow asks.

“Ms. Myles only wanted protection while she slept because she kept sleepwalking and leaving her house in the middle of the night,” I remind them. “She wasn't being threatened.”

“Exactly my point,” Cap says. “This kill was personal.”

“Whoever it was must have known she was our client,” Reaper adds. “How the hell did they get that sort of information?”

“Which is why we need to get these four clients sorted out and solved. Luckily, Missy was packing for her trip and never got a chance to file these cases into the computer. I think they

should be safe from whoever is fucking with us. Be quick, brothers. Be safe.”

With that, we all stand and head out. We keep a go bag in our vehicles for such a time as these. I jump in my truck, pull up my client’s address and head that way. It’s going to take me several hours to get there.

Callie’s beautiful face appears before me. Her shy smile, her amazingly soft-looking long hair. Her wide hips only a man can handle and that sexy as sin ass. I burn every single detail into my mind. I won’t see her for a week and I fucking hate this.

I have never before wanted to turn down a job and stay home.

Until now.

Knowing that she will only be a distraction, I try my best to put Callie out of my mind. I need to figure out where my client’s father is, why he’s after her, and how to stop him.

But first, I need to think of a way to introduce myself to a woman who is scared for her life. One look at me and she will run. I just know it.

Chapter Six

Beast

I was right. She ran.

It took three fucking hours to get her calm enough to even stop screaming. I couldn't do anything but listen. If I chased after her, grabbed her, or tried to talk over her scream, she would have freaked out more than she already was.

Eventually, she stopped screaming and locked herself in a hall closet. I sat on the floor outside of the door and calmly explained who I was and why I was there.

It took a long time, but she did eventually open the door. I hated the fear in her eyes as she looked up at me, but I at least had her attention.

That was five days ago and I'm now standing in front of her house waiting for the police to arrive.

Turns out, it's a pain in the ass doing this job solo. I'm so exhausted and I'm just pissed the fuck off.

"Cap and Shadow are back," Axe tells me. "Reaper hasn't contacted me since yesterday, but he said his client was now safe. I guess he's waiting for her parents to come and get her."

"Good," I mumble.

My client's father whines as I lean my elbow against my knee. He's currently on the ground and I'm using his face as a foot prop.

"As soon as this idiot is taken into custody, I'm heading home."

"Sounds good. See you when you get here, brother."

Mumbling goodbye, I pocket my phone.

"Try it and you'll regret it," I tell the squirming man. "I'm in a really bad fucking mood and need someone to take it out on. Go ahead, try to escape."

I remove my foot and step away.

Run. Please, run.

But he doesn't. The coward simply looks up at me and doesn't move another muscle.

"How could you, daddy?"

Sighing, I turn to my client.

"Ms. Driftman," I say. "You need to stay inside until the police arrive. They're going to want to ask you some questions, but until then, you need to stay where it's safe."

Tears stream down her face as she just stares at her father. Her mother passed away a year ago after a battle with cancer. Apparently, Mr. Driftman was cheating on his sick wife and when she found out she had her will changed.

Without anyone's knowledge.

Mr. Driftman didn't like that everything was left to his daughter. He hired a hitman to kill her so that her inheritance would go to him.

"Even if your plan would have worked, and that man killed me," she tells her father. "You wouldn't have gotten a dime, daddy. Mom's will stated that if I passed away and didn't have a family of my own, the money and all of the properties were to be donated to organizations of her choice. You lose."

She walks back in the house and the idiot on the ground starts screaming. Not feeling in the mood, I put my foot back on the side of his face.

"Shut the fuck up, man," I growl.

It takes the police way too long to arrive, but when they do, they cuff the bastard and shove him into the back of one of the cars. I ache to go home. I ache to see my Callie. But I can't just leave my client right now.

She's about to be questioned for who knows how many hours. I'll stay with her until she's done.

"Thank you, Mr. Easton," she tells me hours later. "I'm so sorry about how I acted when you first arrived. You're a good man and didn't deserve that."

“It’s quite alright,” I smile. “I understood your reaction and was fully expecting it.”

“Maybe one day people will stop looking at you like you’re the enemy.”

“Hopefully not,” I tell her. “I want people to see me as the enemy. I just don’t want my clients to.”

“Do you miss her?”

I glance at the woman in my passenger seat. We’re not far from her house, and then I can finally head home.

“Miss who?” I ask.

“Your lady friend. The woman you’ve been thinking about.”

Smiling, I shake my head.

“You’ve been watching me,” I tell her. “Very smart. And very good. Yes, I do miss her. More than I’ve ever missed anyone.”

“She’s very lucky,” she tells me.

“I’m the lucky one.”

I don’t say anything else. I miss my woman more than my next breath. I just hope she hasn’t forgotten about me.

I get my client home, make sure her house is safe, and then head back to my truck.

On my way.

As soon as I send Axe the text, I start my truck and head home.

I need a shower, a nap, food, and my woman.

Definitely not in that order.

Chapter Seven

Callie

“Do you need anything else, boss?”

“I’m good. You can head on out.”

I’m trying my best to smile when all I feel like doing is crying. And over what? A man I’ve only met twice? A man who kissed me once and never again showed his face?

He was probably throwing up in his mouth on his way to his truck that night. After pulling me into his arms and kissing me, he must have realized how gross it would be to be with someone my size.

How pathetic I must be to be depressed over someone who showed me a little bit of affection.

“Do you want me to help clean up?” Marisol asks.

“I told you I’m good,” I snap.

Instantly I feel regret.

“I’m so sorry, girl,” I apologize honestly. “I don’t know what’s wrong with me. I must be about to start my period or something.”

Marisol simply smiles.

“I think I have an idea,” she says. “He should be home really soon.”

“Who?” I ask stupidly.

“You know who,” she laughs. “Beast had to leave for work. And when these men are at work, they can’t make any personal calls. They have to be completely focused. I’m so sorry that I didn’t tell you before. It didn’t really hit me until today as to why you’ve been in such a sad mood.”

“I’m not in a sad mood, Marisol. I’m just stressed over work.”

With a sly grin, Marisol manages to raise a single brow.

“Alright, fine,” I smile back. “You’re right. But, I don’t understand why I even feel this way. First off, my brothers would kill him. They’ve grounded me from men for life. And second off, I’m not his type.”

“Why would you think you’re not his type?”

Axe’s deep voice has my face flaming red. I glare at my new friend for not warning me that her man was eavesdropping.

“Uhm.”

How the heck am I supposed to answer that? Especially to a man who looks like him?

“Well?”

“She doesn’t think she’s pretty enough,” my traitor of a friend answers. “She assumes because she’s big that men won’t find her attractive.”

“Eyes.”

Sighing, I turn around.

It’s not worth fighting it. I’ve learned over the course of the past week that the Phantoms are full of alpha men who won’t be denied what they want.

Not to mention that I’m as submissive as they come.

“You’re a very beautiful woman,” he tells me when my eyes meet his. “There isn’t a single thing unattractive about you. Just because you’re a big woman doesn’t mean that you aren’t worthy of a male’s attention. Do you understand me?”

I nod. I want to believe him, but years of socially acceptable body images are ingrained into my very soul.

“Good. Let’s go, Mar. I need to head to the office before we go home.”

“See ya tomorrow, boss lady.”

I smile as Marisol and Axe leave.

I turn to head to the back when the bell over the door chimes.

“Sorry,” I say before turning. “We’re closed.”

“I just have a package for you, ma’am.”

“Oh.”

I sign my name and accept the small box.

“Thank you,” I say.

With a nod, he leaves.

After locking the door this time, I head to the back.

I’m both emotionally and physically exhausted and seeing the mess that I have to clean up doesn’t help my mood.

Decided to open my package first, I sit at a table filled with dirty dishes.

Grabbing a knife, I open the box. I don’t remember ordering anything.

A folded paper sits atop of some bubble wrap. Opening it, the first thing I notice is how terrible the handwriting is. Almost unreadable.

Callie,

This is my second and final offer. I won’t ask again if your response is the same. My boys and I would very much like to rent the space above your shop. I understand that your business has just started, but I promise that you won’t even know that we’re there.

This will be a great favor towards my club and you will be paid well for it. Apart from the gift enclosed, we also offer our protection. The Rubber Bound MC are well known and people don’t mess with us. Just hang your gift in your store and people will think twice before messing with you, sugar.

Xoxo

Rubber Bound President

Roach

Oh boy. This man again.

Pulling aside the bubble wrap, I'm met with a black leather vest. There's nothing on the back, but the front has three patches. On the right side, it's a patch of a motorcycle's wheel on pavement that has *Rubber Bound MC*, etched along the bottom. The right side has a patch that says, *Sugar*, and another patch beneath it that says, *owned*.

Yeah, not happening. I toss the vest on top of the box and get to work cleaning my mess up.

There is no way in hell I'm renting out that space to those men. Heck, I don't even understand why they even want it. There's no kitchen or bathroom. Both of those are down here in the bakery.

The only thing that space is good for is storage. It's basically one large room with a smaller room the size of a closet.

It's why my son and I aren't living here. The place we rent is expensive and it would have been awesome to live above my bakery if it was actually a suitable place to live.

After cleaning everything up and preparing dough for the morning, I head home. I think I might take Duncan out to the park before it gets dark.

Chapter Eight

Beast

I'm pissed. My mind was so focused on getting this job done as quickly as possible that I didn't even think to ask someone to tell Callie I would be gone for a while.

"She knows," Marisol tells me as I pace back and forth at the clubhouse. "I just told her about half an hour ago. I'm so sorry that I didn't before. It never really occurred to me that her being depressed was because you vanished."

"She's depressed?" I ask. "Fuck. Cap, I need to go over there."

"I'm sorry, brother," he tells me, regret clear in his eyes. "I need you and Reaper to check out this lead. You're the only two available right now. This might be our only chance before it vanishes."

Cap told me the second I arrived that I needed to head back out. There's been another murder dressed as a suicide with that damn symbol drawn on the wall.

"She'll still be waiting when you return," Axe tells me. "If you're not back by morning, I'll go over and explain things to her."

Fuck.

"Fine, let's go Reaper," I grump. "Let's get this shit over with."

Reaper smirks and raises a single brow.

"This woman must be something special to have you all grumpy," Reaper teases. "I've never seen you this moody before, Beast. It's kind of alluring."

"Fuck off, Reaper, and let's go."

This better not be a waste of time.

It never really occurred to me that her being depressed was because you vanished.

Marisol's words will stay in my head until my last breath. I haven't even had the opportunity to make the woman mine and I've already fucked it up.

Callie

"Ddo you always have to ggo so early, mmmommy?"

I tuck my little man against my chest and hug him as tightly as I dare.

"I'm sorry, my love," I whisper against the top of his blonde hair. "I know that all of this change is hard. But, this is something mommy needs to do so that we can have a good life. Maybe later on today Rachel can swing you by the bakery and you can get a treat."

"Wwwill Beast be there?"

Great. It seems like the giant jerk wormed his way into my son's heart, too. How the heck did he do this when we've only just met him?

"I'm not sure, my love," I answer honestly. "I haven't seen Beast all week. But if he comes back, I'll tell him that you said hi."

"He'll bbbe bbbback," Duncan says confidently.

"What makes you think so?" I ask.

"Because he's going to marry you, mommy. He's going to be our family."

It isn't until I'm pulling out of the driveway, with Duncan's words on repeat in my mind, that I realized he didn't stutter once.

I'm starting to see a pattern here and I'm not sure I like it. I can't let Beast into our lives like this. I have to think about my son. He needs stability. He needs routine.

What he doesn't need is a man who vanishes for a week at a time.

Walking into my bakery brings a smile to my face. I am so proud of what I've accomplished. Over the past week, business has been insane. I've already had to order more

inventory. But I'm not complaining a single bit. Every time someone compliments one of my treats, warmth floods my veins.

So, getting here at four-thirty in the morning to get things going doesn't upset me. Eventually, I'm going to need help this early to get things baked before opening time. Actually, it wouldn't hurt to order one more oven. If items keep selling as fast as they have in the past week, I might be able to afford one in a few months.

"You really should lock this door when you're alone."

Marisol's voice makes me smile.

"You're not wrong, girl," I say back. "I normally do. I guess my mind wasn't fully awake yet."

"Beast will be back soon," Axe says from somewhere in the other room.

"I'm not worried about when that man will return," I lie. "I was just tired."

"Tired or not, lock the door."

"Is he always this grumpy or is it just because it's so early?" I whisper.

Marisol laughs.

"He's only ever grumpy when it comes to safety," she whispers back.

"Listen Cal," Axe pops his head into the back room. "I know it's early, but could I get a large order of those coffee cinnamon rolls? It's my turn to feed the crew breakfast."

"Sure," I say. This isn't the first time in the past week when he's asked this same question.

"Matter of fact, might want to make that two orders and some coffee," he continues. "Beast and Reaper are due back in an hour and everyone is meeting here."

"How many is everyone?" I ask, trying my best to ignore the Beast comment.

“Around eight,” Marisol answers. “Nine if you count the baby.”

“Sounds good. Would you care to prep the front? I think coffee beans need to be refilled and takeout boxes restocked.”

“On it,” she says, leaving to do her tasks.

I’ve met all of these men except for Cap. Marisol tells me that he married a woman named Anna and that they have a baby together. At least, I think her name was Anna. I haven’t yet met her, either.

From the ones that I have met, they’ve all seemed nice. Well, Reaper tried to smile, but I could tell it was forced. He seemed so serious. He even had on a nice suit beneath his very elegant-looking vest.

Marisol said they call it a cut. But that just sounds silly.

I spend the next hour preparing their order as well as the rest of the goods. I take pride in my items being made fresh daily. Any leftovers will never be reheated and sold. I’ve been donating all leftovers to a homeless shelter a few blocks away.

“The Phantoms are here,” Sandy yells from the front.

When did she even get here?

Grabbing the order of rolls, I head out to the dining room.

“Can you grab the coffee?” I ask Marisol.

I keep telling myself that I’m not scanning to see if Beast is among this large group of muscled men.

Ignoring the disappointment when I can’t see him, I plaster a smile on my face and walk up to the tables they’ve pushed together.

“Hey everyone,” I smile. “It’s nice to see you all again. You must be Cap.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he smiles. “This is my wife, Anna, and our daughter Bitsy. And you must be the infamous Callie.”

“Well, I wouldn’t say infamous,” I say. “But, yes, I’m Callie.”

“Those smell so delicious,” Anna says.

She’s such a beautiful woman. Not super skinny, but also not as big as I am. She’s perfect. Just like Marisol. These men are built like gods and, of course, they would want a partner who is just as perfect. Beast needs someone who’s perfect.

“These are my coffee cinnamon rolls,” I smile, placing the platter on the table. “Marisol here has your coffee. If you need anything else, just let her know and it will be taken care of. Enjoy.”

I rush away and head back into the kitchen.

I shake my head at how stupid I am. Right here and right now; I make a decision. No more thoughts of Beast. No more thoughts of men, period. I need to focus on what I’m doing right now so that I can build a better future for me and my son.

Nothing will get in the way of that.

“I’ve really missed you, baby.”

Crap.

I try not to turn around. I try really hard. But, in the end, my body did what it wanted.

“Beast,” I whisper, firmly planting my feet where they are. I will not walk over to him. No matter how sexy he looks leaning against the doorframe.

“I’m sorry that I was gone for so long,” he says, just staring at me. “I should have told you that I had to leave.”

“Why would you need to tell me anything?” I ask.

“I told you the night before I left that you were mine,” he growls. “And, I meant it.”

He starts moving forward, and I’m panicking internally. Before I know it, he’s cupping the back of my neck, and I know that I have to stop this.

I can’t believe I’m even thinking about this. This fine as sin man acts like he’s attracted to me and I’m about to say no? What the hell is wrong with me?

Images of Duncan flash through my mind. His good for nothing father, our new crappy house, and I know why I'm about to do what I'm about to do.

I place both of my hands on Beast's chest and take a step back as his hand falls to his side.

"Beast," I start. "I can't for the life of me figure out why you might be interested in a woman my size. Let me finish," I say quickly when he opens his mouth. "Over the past week, I have not been myself. I've been sad and angry. And it's all because I thought you kissed me because you felt sorry for me and then just left. That's my insecurities talking, and I don't think you're the type of man who would do something like that. But it's also made me realize something.

I could easily lose myself to you. And that can't happen because I'm just now finding out who I am. I can't become someone else's shadow. Not again. Duncan needs me at my best, and I can't be my best when I'm so worried about how I'm not good enough for someone like you. I feel this pull towards you that I know will win if I give it a single inch.

So, for now, I really need to focus on me and my son. I can't keep pining after a man I barely know. You have such a kind heart. I pray that you find the perfect woman who will be strong enough to hold it for you."

There, I said it. Do I want to take it back?

Yes. Every last word. But I know I can't.

I mentally brace myself for his reaction. But a huge smile is not what I expected.

"Oh, my sweet Callie," he says, his timbre voice sending shivers through my body. "I understand. But you have to know that I won't be walking away. Losing yourself to me wouldn't be a bad thing, baby. I'll never let you get lost any other way. We'll just have to build your confidence up, because I find you sexy as hell, Callie. One day, I'll have you convinced of it as well.

As for right now, I'm going to go out there and sit with my brothers. But don't think this thing between us is done."

He leans in and gently kisses my parted lips.

When he leans back, he glances over my shoulder and his face turns menacingly dark. I'm both surprised and a little scared at the sudden change of emotions that I take a few steps back.

“What the fuck is that?”

I look back and see the culprit of his anger.

“Oh, that's just a gift some man is trying to bribe me with,” I admit, shrugging my shoulder. I never gave that leather vest a second thought after tossing it on the chair last night. “Remember that guy who was asking to rent the space above this building? Well, he sent this, along with a letter, to ask again. I'll just tell him no and leave it at that.”

“Give them to me,” he demands.

Not wanting to anger him further, I walk to the chair and grab the note that I shoved back in the packaging.

“Uhm, here you go.”

“The cut, baby,” he says, after grabbing the note.

“Oh.”

I reach back and grab the heavy fabric.

“I don't really want it,” I admit. “That guy kind of creeps me out. He can keep this thing.”

“I'll take care of it.”

Looking into his eyes, his soften a bit before leaning down and kissing my forehead and walking away.

What the heck just happened?

Chapter Nine

Beast

Walking over to the team, I toss the cut on the table and glare down at my brothers. I know this isn't their fault. If anything, it's mine. I should have told them to keep an eye on her.

"What the fuck is this?" Cap asks, examining the cut.

"Someone from the Rubberheads sent this to Callie last night," I growl. "They've been harassing her about renting the place above this shop."

"So they sent her a cut?" Shadow asks. "It says fucking owned on it."

"It also came with this."

I hand the paper to Cap and he reads it out loud.

"Callie, this is my second and final offer. I won't ask again if your response is the same. My boys and I would very much like to rent the space above your shop. I understand that your business has just started, but I promise that you won't even know that we're there.

This will be a great favor towards my club and you will be paid well for it. Apart from the gift enclosed, we also offer our protection. The Rubber Bound MC are well known and people don't mess with us. Just hang your gift in your store and people will think twice before messing with you, Sugar. Xoxo. Rubber Bound President. Roach"

"We'll send a clear message that she isn't to be messed with," Reaper says calmly. "Is she yours, brother?"

"Absolutely," I say without hesitation. "She just doesn't accept it yet."

Anna smiles. "She's such a kind and beautiful woman," she tells me. "You two were made for one another. She'll come around."

“She has a son,” I admit. “He’s seven years old. He’s perfect.”

“I can’t wait to meet him,” Axe says. “Wonder if he likes horses.”

“I’m sure he does, honey,” Marisol says, switching out the empty coffeepot for a fresh one. “Now, you all better get to eating these before my insatiable brother eats them all.”

Shadow shrugs his shoulders as he shoves another roll into his already stuffed face.

“Leave this cut with me,” Reaper tells me. “I’ll be sure they receive the message loud and clear.”

Nodding, I take my seat.

Callie may not accept that she’s mine, but that won’t stop me from doing everything I can to protect her and her son.

I’m a patient man. I will give her the time she needs. I just hope it won’t be too long. I need to make a plan on how to win her heart. Because regardless of the situation, she will be mine in the end.

Callie

“Since I don’t need to go into work until later this evening, do you want to go and play at the park?”

Duncan jumps up and down.

“Ppplay wwwith mme?”

“Of course, I’ll play with you. Swinging is my favorite part.”

I’m momentarily shocked when there’s a knock on the door.

“Just a second,” I manage to say.

“Ddddo yyou ttthhink tthats dddad?”

My heart breaks at the fear in my baby’s voice.

“I don’t think so,” I say, not quite convinced myself. “Why don’t you go and play in your room while I go and talk to whoever it is.”

After hearing the bedroom door close, I walk to the door.

“Who is it?” I call out.

“I have a delivery for a Callie,” a female voice calls out.

I open the door and take in the friendly face holding a huge bundle of flowers.

“Someone must really like you,” she smiles. “You are one lucky woman.”

Handing me the bundle, she walks away.

After closing the door, I walk to the kitchen and place the flowers on the small table. It takes me a few moments to find the card.

“Good morning my beautiful, sweet, Callie. I’m going to miss your delicious rolls today, but I hope you have a relaxing day off. Always in my heart, Beast.”

Oh. My. Word.

Who is this man? Is he even real?

“Mmommy, Uncle Cc Cooper is on the phone. WWWOOW! That’s a lot of fflowers. Is it fffrom Bb beast?”

“Yes, they are, honey,” I answer, accepting my cellphone from his tiny hands.

“Who is Beast?”

“Hello to you too, big brother.”

“Hello, my girl. Now, who is Beast?”

“He’s just a friend, Coop.”

“Friends don’t send other friends flowers, Callie,” I can hear the skepticism in his voice. “What kind of name is Beast, anyway?”

“That’s not his real name,” I admit. “Come to think about it, I don’t even know his real name. But he’s a member of the Phantoms MC.”

“He’s part of a motorcycle club?” Cooper says, voice slightly raised.

“Yeah, but I’ve met the whole club, I think. They’re all really nice. Actually, one of their women works for me now.”

“Well, I’ll be looking into them,” he tells me. I didn’t really expect anything less. The problem will be when he tells the rest of our brothers and they all become nosy and all up in my business.

“How is the bakery doing?” Coop asks.

“Really good,” I admit, my smile hurting my face. “I’m so happy, Coop. My dream has finally come true, and it’s turning out to be a huge success.”

“I’m glad to hear that, my girl. Listen, I called to tell you that we will be celebrating Caleb’s birthday next weekend before he gets shipped out.”

“He’s getting deployed again?” I ask, fear in my heart.

“Yes, he is, honey. Will you and Duncan come down for the weekend to help us celebrate before he leaves?”

“We’ll be there,” I decide.

“Good. Christian’s going to come and pick you guys up.”

“That’s just silly, Coop.” I tell him. “We can be there in a few short hours if we fly.”

“I figured you would say as much,” Coop laughs. “I already have your tickets booked.”

“Duncan might not do well on the plane,” I admit. “But I’ll figure something out.”

“I thought as much,” Coop says. “I’ve ordered him some noise canceling headphones, a heavy-duty eye mask and a weighted blanket. They should be at your house tomorrow.”

“Thanks, Coop. I love you.”

“I know,” he says. I can actually hear the smirk in his voice. “I know it’s only been two weeks since we left, but I miss you both already. Can’t wait to see you, my girl. Love you.”

“I love you, too, Coop. Bye.”

I look down at Duncan who has the widest smile on his face.

“I’m guessing that you heard that whole conversation?” I laugh.

“Uh-huh.”

“Alright. Well, let’s go to the park. While we’re out, we might as well go shopping and find the perfect birthday gift for Uncle Caleb. What do you say?”

“I say yyes. Can Beast come to the pppark?”

Oh, boy!

Chapter Ten

Beast

Reaper walked right up the Rubberheads clubhouse, made his way inside and tossed the cut right at their president, Roach.

Deciding that I wanted to make sure the warning got across, I tagged along. I leaned against the entrance door frame while Reaper did his thing. People may fear me because I'm a big man, but Reaper has death in his eyes. So, I let him take the lead.

"First and only warning," he told them calmly. "Stay away from what is ours."

Recognition dawned on Roach's face when he saw the cut on the floor by his feet.

Good, he got the warning, and he knows who we're talking about.

"Next time, there will not be any words spoken. I'll put a bullet between your eyes while you sleep. Then I'll do the same thing to every single person in this sorry excuse for a fucking club."

That was last night. I don't think they'll bother her anymore. They're all cowards, but I'm not going to take a chance on that.

"Since she's closed today," Cap says. "We can go ahead and get everything set up now. But first, you need to tell her."

Yeah, this isn't going to be a fun conversation.

Hey baby, we need to talk. Are you home?

I may or may not have gotten her number from some connections I have. I guess I could have just asked Marisol, but the thought hadn't crossed my mind. Must be the soldier in me to reach for the deepest intel.

Who is this? She texts back.

Is there another man out there calling you baby? Tell me who the fuck he is and I'll end him.

She sends back laughing emojis. I'm not fucking joking.

Hi, Beast. No, we're heading to the park. Actually, Duncan already asked me if you could come, too. Meet us there? Fifteen minutes? It's the one a block away from my bakery.

I tell her I'll be there and pocket my phone.

"I'm going to meet her and her son at the park," I tell Cap. "I'll talk to her about it then. Just make sure everything is ready to go."

"I hate to do this to you, but I'm going to need you and Shadow to go on a run tonight," he tells me. "This suicide killer keeps leaving trails for us to follow, and I'm starting to think he's playing a game."

"What's happened now?" I ask.

"We had all of our cases closed but one," he tells me. "She told us that she no longer needed our services because she worked things out with her friend. She was found dead this morning in her bathtub, wrists cut."

"Let me guess," Shadow says from the door. "The hand symbol was drawn somewhere close by?"

"You got it. This feels like an attack against us. We need to tighten security on the women, our houses, and this office. I don't think it's going to be long before they go after someone we love."

My first thought is of Callie and Duncan. But I gently shove it aside. Whoever is doing this has no idea about them. Maybe keeping her at a short distance wouldn't be a bad thing. At least, until we figure out who this person is that keeps killing people connected to us.

"Are we sure that it isn't the Rubberheads?" Missy asks. "We've never had anything like this happen before they showed up last year."

"I don't think so," Shadow says what I'm thinking. "They strut around like they're big and bad, but when it comes down

to it, the Rubberheads are nothing but idiots.”

“They’ve raped women before, Shadow,” Missy reminds him. “They’ve killed. What makes you think they wouldn’t do something like this? I mean, it is seeming like these murders are targeted towards us and it’s no secret that the Phantoms are not fans of the Rubberheads.”

“I understand, honey,” he tells his childhood best friend. “But I honestly don’t think they’re smart enough to concoct a plan like this. If they wanted to attack us, they wouldn’t be so secretive about it.”

“I agree,” Axe says. “There isn’t a full brain between the lot of them.”

“Whoever is behind it,” I add. “Will eventually make a mistake. They probably already have. We just need to find it. I’ll be back in time to do that run, Cap.”

With a nod, I leave. Time to see how my woman will react to my overprotectiveness.

I smile.

Callie

Beast hops off his bike and makes his way to where I’m sitting on the park bench. He’s wearing jeans, a white shirt, and his biker vest. With each step he takes his muscles ripple across his body. I can’t take my eyes off of him. Neither can the other moms at the park, but I don’t blame them. Nothing has ever looked more perfect.

“I have two questions for you,” I ask before he can say anything.

“Hi, baby,” he smiles, sitting beside me. “What are your questions?”

“One, what’s your real name? I know your parents didn’t name you Beast, and I feel weird calling you that.”

He laughs. “No, ma’am. My mama named me Anderson Easton.”

“Well, Mr. Easton,” I say. “My second, and most important question is, how did you get my address to deliver those flowers? Thank you, by the way. They’re the most beautiful gift I’ve ever received. But my question remains. Oh, and my number.”

“It was really quite simple,” he tells me, his smile deepening. “I used my deep government clearance to look you up, Miss Childers. Then I made your personal information inaccessible to anyone else trying to do the same. We do the same thing for all of our family.”

“I should be angry, shouldn’t I?” I ask.

“Well, I have something to say that might just do the trick.”

Oh no. Here it comes.

“I want you to allow my brothers access to your bakery so they can put security cameras inside.”

Well, that wasn’t what I was expecting him to say.

“I already have security cameras, Andy, but thank you. Duncan, do not walk up backwards on that slide.”

“Sssorry, mmommy.”

I look over and Beast is just staring at me.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” I say quickly. “I don’t know why I called you that. Do you prefer Anderson? Or I guess I can call you Beast. I mean, that is what everyone else calls you and how you introduced yourself to me.”

“Baby, please only call me Andy from now on,” he tells me softly. “No one ever has.”

“So, Andy is just mine?” I ask, suddenly shy.

“Andy is all yours, baby. In more ways than by name. Now, about the security system, it’s top of the line, Callie. And it can be accessed through our company if ever there is a need.”

“I really appreciate that,” I say honestly. “But my brothers are the ones who installed the security in both my bakery and home. I promise that they didn’t spare any cost. I have the most overprotective and overbearing brothers in the history of

the world. If they could, they would lock me and Duncan up somewhere safe and never let us leave.”

“I don’t hate the idea,” Andy grumbles. “I think I might like your brothers.”

“I’m sure they’ll like you too,” I smirk. “As soon as Cooper finishes digging up everything about you, that is.”

“He can dig all he wants, baby,” he tells me. “There are things he won’t be able to find.”

I shrug, not really wanting to get into this conversation. When it comes to my brothers, if they want a piece of information, they’ll find it.

“How many brothers do you have?” he asks when I don’t say anything more. “Duncan mentioned them to me, but I can’t remember how many there were.”

“Five,” I laugh. “And every single one of them is more protective than a mama bear. When they found out that my ex-husband was abusive, they went ballistic. First, they were upset with me that I didn’t say anything for years, then they turned their insane amount of anger towards Randall. I don’t really know what happened, and they refuse to tell me anything, but I’ve never heard from Randall since. He signed the divorce papers, signing all rights to Duncan over to me, and that was the last I heard of him.”

“Can’t say that I’m sorry about that,” he growls. “I might have to look into this Randall.”

“Like I said, my brothers handled the situation. Anyway, I told you all of that so you can see that I understand your need to protect. I don’t really know why you want to, but I do understand that need. So, if you want, you can add your security cameras to my bakery. But I can’t remove my brothers. Coop would know instantly and then I would receive a not so fun visit from five crazy brothers.”

“Thank you, baby,” he tells me, raising my hand to his mouth and placing a soft kiss on my inner wrist. “Now, I’m going to go and play with that boy for a few, and then we will meet the guys at the bakery.”

And that's exactly what happened. After thirty minutes of playing, we packed up and headed to meet his brothers. Duncan begged to ride the motorcycle with Andy, but I was not having any of that.

By the time we arrived, all the guys, apart from Cap, were waiting for me to unlock the door. It took them about an hour to get everything in place and by the time they were finished it didn't look like a single new camera was added.

These guys are scary good.

"Please, let me follow you home," Andy asks for the fifth time.

It's late, and I had Rachel come and get Duncan an hour ago so he can get ready for bed.

"I have to get things ready for tomorrow, Andy," I say, enjoying the sound of his name. "If I don't, then I'll have to be here at three in the morning. I promise I'll be okay."

He told me that he had a job to do tonight and that he should be back tomorrow. Now, he has to leave and doesn't like it one bit that I'll be here alone.

"My car is parked right out front," I remind him. "I'll be fine."

"I don't fucking like this," he grumbles. "But, fine. You will text Reaper when you leave, when you get in your car, and when you get home. Do you understand?"

Yes daddy, is a hair from coming out of my mouth.

"I'll be fine," I repeat. "But, yes, I will text Reaper."

"When you leave, when you get in your car, and when you get home."

The amount of force it takes to prevent my eyes from rolling has the potential to move mountains.

"Yes, when I leave, when I get in my car, and when I get home."

"Good. Now, follow me and lock the front door."

“You’re very bossy,” I say, doing as he demanded with a smile on my face.

“I might not be able to use my phone until I get back home,” he tells me. “It all depends on what Cap is having us do. But I’ll be back soon, I promise.”

He wraps a large arm around my waist and pulls me flesh against his body.

Holy cow. Never have I wanted to run my hands along someone’s arm before.

“Be safe,” he tells me.

“Shouldn’t I be the one telling you that?” I laugh.

“I’ll be fine. Now, kiss me and lock the door behind me.”

I try to say bossy again, but his mouth seals mine shut with a soul searing kiss. I gasp and he takes that opportunity to shove his tongue inside my mouth.

I couldn’t stop the moan if my life depended on it. My knees have gone weak, and it takes everything I have not to let go and have Andy hold all of me up. But I’m too big and I don’t want to hurt him.

Before I know it, he steps away and opens the door.

“What did you say?” I mumble when I watch his lips move with no sound.

“I said, lock the door, baby,” he chuckles.

“Oh. Uhm, bye Andy.”

“I’ll see you soon, baby.”

He stands there until I shut and lock the door. Seeing his hesitation to leave makes me feel like the most important woman in the world.

It takes a few more hours of prep work before I feel prepared enough for tomorrow and call it quits.

“I’m heading to my car,” I text Reaper, who called earlier so that I would have his number.

I shove my phone in my bra and turn to lock the door. It takes forever to get the right keys for all the locks, yes multiple keys for three different locks. Freaking overprotective brothers and overprotective boyfr...Uhm, friend. They couldn't make it so that all three worked with the same dang key?

Once all three are locked, I head to my car.

"I'm in my car and heading home." I send the text to Reaper with a roll of my eyes.

This is just crazy, but I know there is no fighting alpha males. Reaper will totally tell on me if I didn't text him.

My house is less than five minutes down the road. After I park, head inside and check on Duncan, I send the last text.

"Safe and sound. Home sweet home."

A few second later Reaper replies with two simple words.

"Good girl."

Well, okay then. Seems like he's channeling my brothers because that's exactly what every single of them would say.

Feeling a little more than overwhelmed at today's activities, I take a shower and head to bed.

What in the world have I gotten myself into?

And above it all, I forgot to go and get Caleb a birthday gift.

Chapter Eleven

Callie

When I arrived at the bakery the morning after Andy left for work, the front door was unlocked. All three locks. I thought for sure I locked those. Nothing looked missing. I even had a till full of money that I forgot to put in the safe when I was preparing it last night and not a penny was missing from it.

I must have thought I locked the door, but didn't actually do it.

That's been happening to me a lot lately. Last night before bed, I noticed that my bedroom window was cracked. I thought I closed it before getting in the shower, but it was still cracked open when I got out.

And then, this morning I couldn't find my phone anywhere. I remember sitting on the couch last night and talking to Coop. But, when I got in my car to head to work, there it was, right on the passenger seat.

I don't think I'm sleeping enough. I don't sleep well as it is, but with Andy gone and not being sure if he's putting himself in danger or not, I find myself worrying about him all the time.

"Hey Axe, will you try this for me? It's something new I'm working on."

Smiling, he accepts my new treat.

"What is it?" he asks suspiciously. "Is this another one of your tricks?"

Marisol laughs and I can't help but join her. Yesterday I asked if he would try a new drink I made. It was hot water with enough salt to melt an ice-skating rink.

He did the spit take of all spit takes.

"It's just a treat of chocolaty goodness," I say. "Scout's honor."

"Were you ever a scout?"

“Semantics. Baker’s honor,” I laugh. “It’s a thing...I just made up.”

“I’ll try it,” Cap says. “I trust in your baker’s honor.”

“No,” Axe grumbles. “I’ll eat the damn thing. If this is a trick woman, I will waltz in here buck ass naked tomorrow in front of all of your customers.”

“What time will that be?” someone yells out. “I want to make sure I’m here.”

“Me, too,” another customer calls out.

“I don’t think that’s a deterrent for these women,” I laugh.

“Or some of us men,” another customer says. “I’ll be here before the door is unlocked, cowboy.”

Marisol is practically on the floor from laughing so hard and Cap is shaking his head and chuckling.

“Do you think we could come early tomorrow too?” Anna asks her husband.

“Fuck no, woman,” Cap growls, his amused look completely gone.

Sounds of extacy have me looking back to Axe. His face is lit up with pure joy.

“What is that?” Anna asks. “I think I might want some too if it has Axe looking like he just orgasmed in his jeans.”

“That, my friend, is a small piece of a chocolate swirled breakfast pastry. I’m thinking of adding a sugar and cinnamon combo on top towards the end of baking it so that it has that slightly crunchy texture.”

“Miss, do you do cakes as well?” an older woman asks.

“I do, actually,” I admit. “Although right now I’m just aiming for small baked goods. Mostly breakfast treats.”

“What are you waiting for?” she asks.

I should be annoyed, but it’s an honest question.

“I just wanted to make sure my bakery would actually be a hit before I went all in.”

“I call this a hit.”

“Andy, you’re back,” without thought, I run right for him and slam against his body.

“Andy?” Axe mutters.

“I’m so sorry, baby,” he says. “I wasn’t expecting to be gone this long and unfortunately, I have to leave in an hour. But I’ll be back before the day is over.”

“That’s okay,” I mumble against his chest. “I really do understand.”

I want to tell him that what they do is important, but there are ears all around us and I know these guys try to keep everything regarding that part of their jobs as secret as they can.

“Anything I need to know right now?” Cap asks.

“Yeah,” Andy says, with his arms still wrapped tightly around me. “Missy was right. Shadow and I found something. He’s still there, but I needed to come back for some special cameras. I’ll tell you more when we’re at the clubhouse.”

“I’m really sorry, Callie,” Cap sighs. “I know your man just got back, but I need the intel he has.”

“It’s alright,” I smile, still hugging this big brute of a man. “But I am leaving tonight.”

Andy pulls me away enough that he can look down at my face.

“What do you mean you’re leaving?” he asks.

“My brother Caleb is being deployed,” I say, fear flooding my heart. “He loves what he’s doing and I understand that, but I’m always so scared that I’ll never see him again. This will be the third time he’s left to do whatever it he does with the rest of the soldiers. His birthday is tomorrow and then he leaves the day after. I don’t want to miss my chance to say goodbye. You know, just in case.”

Understanding shines in his eyes. I forgot that all of these men were soldiers at one point.

“How are you getting there?” he asks me.

“We’re flying,” I smile. “Duncan is beyond excited, but I think he’ll get nervous when the plane starts ascending.”

“I’m really sorry, Beast,” Cap says. “I really need the information you have, and you need to get back out there with Shadow. You know I don’t like solo runs.”

Andy nods his head.

“I can take her to the airport, though,” Cap continues. “I’ll see her and the boy there safely.”

“Oh, that’s alright,” I say, turning to look at Cap. “It’s only thirty minutes away.”

“I will drive you, and that is the end of the discussion.”

I have a feeling that arguing would do me no good, so I simply nod.

“Do you mind if we use your office, baby, so I can talk to Cap?”

“It’s not much of an office at the moment,” I admit. “I had the delivery person stack the boxes of kitchen supplies in there yesterday. I haven’t had a chance to put them all away, so there won’t be enough room. But the upstairs area is pretty roomy. There isn’t really a place to sit and my dry inventory is all over the place, but you’re more than welcome to use it.”

“Thank you, Callie,” Cap says. I’ve somehow managed to turn my body to where my back is against Andy, but he has yet to let me go. “What time do you need to be at the airport?”

“I need to go home in about an hour to get things ready,” I tell him. “I need to be there by seven thirty. The plane takes off at eight.”

“Sounds good. Let’s go, brothers.”

“The door to get up there is out back in the alley,” I tell them, ignoring all the glares. I grab the keys from my pocket and toss them to Cap. “It’s the green one.”

“The fucking alley?” Andy says.

“I’m fine, Andy. No one could kidnap a big girl like me. They wouldn’t be able to lift me.”

I chuckle at my joke while the men still glare.

“I thought it was funny,” Anna smiles. “You aren’t the only woman with some meat on her bones.”

Anna pats her chubby belly and we both laugh.

“Go on, you big grumps,” I say. “I’m going to go ahead and close the bakery down.”

“Do you have any of those brownie bites left?” Anna asks as I escort the last customer out and lock the doors behind him.

“Of course,” I say.

I’ve been trying different desert recipes for when I start baking regular sweets along with the breakfast ones. I’ve been testing them on everyone today. The brownie bites were Anna’s favorite.

“Let’s go, baby.”

Confused, I watch as Andy and the guys enter the bakery through the back door.

“Go where?” I ask. “I thought you had to leave.”

“I do,” he says. “But first, I want you to go grab our boy and spend an hour with me.”

Oh, my heart.

“Alright,” I sigh, hanging the clipboard back on the wall. “I guess I can take inventory when I get back.”

“I got it, boss,” Marisol says. “I know the drill. Plus, since you aren’t opening back up until Monday, then we don’t need anything stocked. I’ll finish taking inventory of the supply room and we can come in late Sunday and restock the front.”

I go up and hug my new friend tightly.

“Thank you,” I tell her. “Be sure the men locked the upstairs door, please.”

“When you get back from visiting your brothers,” Andy tells me. “I want you on the back of my bike.”

“Your motorcycle?” I ask, my voice squeaking.

Andy laughs.

“For now, let’s see if I can fit in your car.”

Somehow, he did. But, boy, was it funny watching him try to squeeze his big body into the passenger seat.

It takes us all of three minutes to reach the house and pick up Duncan.

“Beast,” he smiles, running into his arms. “I’ve missed you.”

“And I have missed you, my boy,” Andy smiles. “Do you want to come and hang out with me and your mommy for a little while?”

“Hhheck yeah,” he shouts.

I wait patiently as Andy straps Duncan into the booster seat.

“See ya, Miss C,” Rachel says. “Call me when you get home and we’ll go over when you need me to babysit.”

“Thanks, Rachel,” I wave as she walks away. “Have a good weekend.”

“One dday, I’m going to be as bbbig as you and I won’t have to sit in ttthis bbbaby seat.”

“Well, until then,” Andy says, tightening the belt. “I want you safe and secure right here in this seat. Understand?”

“Yyyes, sssir. Bbbut, one dday.”

“One day, little man.”

“Where to?” I ask when he shoves himself back into the front seat.

“My house,” he tells me. “It’s not far.”

Andy gives me the directions and I pull out of the driveway.

“Do you have a dddog?”

“Nope,” Andy says. “No time to take care of one. Hopefully, one day, when I have a family, I’ll have some little man who can maybe help me out with that.”

“Yyeah,” Duncan says, but the smile vanishes from his face and he sounds a little sad.

The sadness in his voice makes my heart hurt. What if this thing between me and Andy doesn’t work? I can’t do this to my son. I can’t get his hopes up. I should have never agreed to anything with Andy until I knew for a fact that my son wouldn’t get his heart broken.

I’m about to tell Andy that I’ve changed my mind. That we can hang out some other time. But the look in his eyes stops me. He’s watching my face closely and before I can say anything, he very discreetly shakes his head.

What’s going on in that mind of his?

“Pull into the third driveway,” he tells me ten minutes later. The trip was made with Duncan telling Andy all about his favorite movies. Andy listened patiently and responded when appropriate. It was a very normal, and kind of surreal, moment for me.

Doing as he said, I pull into the third driveway. I can’t help but admire his house as well as his neighborhood. It’s not what I expected from a man like Andy. I mean, come on, they call him Beast. I didn’t think a cute two-story home surrounded by a white picket fence would be his thing.

Andy smirks before getting out of the car.

“Let’s go, little man,” he tells my son. “I have something special to show you.”

“What is it?”

“You’re about to find out.”

I get out of the car and wait for Andy to get Duncan out.

“Come on, baby,” he says, kissing the top of my head. “You’re going to want to see this.”

Instead of going on his front porch like I assumed we were going to do, Andy takes us through a gate and into his backyard.

It's pristine. Not a blade out of place. He has multiple flower beds decorating the yard, along with a seat swing, a grill, a picnic table and a playhouse.

Wait.

"Why do you have a..."

"WOAH, MOMMY, LOOK. A PPPLAYGROUND."

"Be careful, little man," Andy hollers after him. "Make smart decisions."

Confused, I allow Andy to lead me to the swing.

"I have dinner ordered," he says. "It will be here soon. I decided to go easy and went for some pizzas."

"What's going on?" I ask, smiling as Duncan slides down the slide.

"I told you that I would give you time," he tells me. "But I don't think I can, baby. I don't want to spend any more time without you. Without either of you. So, I had this ordered and delivered the other day before I left. The guys helped me build it so that our boy had a safe place to play."

I'm lost for words.

"Please," Andy whispers, gently turning my head to look at me. "Please, baby. Please, just trust me. Trust me with your heart. With our boy's heart."

"But, in the car," I start.

"I know what I said," he smiles. "It may seem low, but I wanted to see if he would be sad if he wasn't the boy I was talking about. Don't worry, our son will never feel like he's not worth our love, or the love of a dog."

"Oh, Andy," I say. "I don't know if I can handle a dog right now."

Andy just smiles.

“I’ll drop the dog talk for now. However, when you two move in with me, we will bring this topic back up.”

Before I have time to react to the statement of us moving in with him, his phone dings.

“Pizza’s here.”

“Pppiiizza.”

Andy pays for the order and places the boxes on the table.

“Come eat, little man,” he calls out. “We won’t get to spend a whole lot of time together today, but when you get back from seeing your insane amount of uncles, we will be able to spend as much time together as you want.”

“Wwwwooww, rreally mommy?”

I don’t say anything. I almost feel as if I’m being played.

“Mommy?” Andy says, smiling.

I can’t help it. Right here, in this very moment, I fall in love with this beast of a man.

I smile, wiping the tears falling from my eyes.

“Yeah,” I whisper. “Really.”

Andy and Duncan run around the yard cheering at the top of their lungs, and I can’t help but laugh. Duncan flaps his wings and runs towards Andy, who jumps to the side like he’s being attacked.

“Awe,” Duncan taunts. “Is Beasty afraid of a lllittle bbbutterfly like me?”

Andy’s eyes widen before he takes off, lifts Duncan and tosses him into the air.

“Butterfly, huh?” Andy says. “Then let’s fly, butterfly.”

All too soon, time was up and we had to leave.

“I kind of don’t want to go,” I tell Andy when I drop him off at his motorcycle outside of my bakery. “I don’t want this day to end.”

“Oh baby,” he says, gently kissing my lips. “We will never end. I’m going to miss you both like crazy, but you need to go and spend time with your brother. Next time, I’ll be coming with you.”

“I would like that,” I admit. “I’m going to miss you. Please, be safe.”

“Always, baby.”

Andy straddles his bike and I get back in the car.

“I’ll see you soon, little man. I love you.”

“Aare you my new ddad?” Duncan asks from the backseat.

Andy looks at me, but I don’t say anything. I already know where I stand with the man. And I trust him not with only my heart, but Duncan’s as well. This needs to be his decision.

“I want nothing more than to be your dad, little man,” Andy says.

“I love you, too, daddy,” Duncan shouts.

“Yeah,” I say. “And so do I. I love you, too, Andy.”

“You are my heart, Callie,” he says softly. “I love you so fucking much.”

I smile and put my car into drive. As I’m pulling out of the driveway, I could swear I saw my big beastly of a man wipe his eyes dry.

But that could have just been my imagination.

Chapter Twelve

Callie

Two hours later, Andy is heading back to where his friend is and Cap and Anna are sitting at the airport with me and Duncan.

“You don’t have to sit here,” I tell them. “Our plane should be boarding really soon.”

“And, for the third time, we’re not going anywhere.”

Cap doesn’t look at me while he speaks, but Anna’s lips raise. Cap seems to be looking everywhere at once.

“I don’t think anyone is going to attack them here at the airport,” Anna says. “You can stand down with the surveillance.”

“Beast is mine. Callie and Duncan are his,” he says. “So, what does that make Callie and Duncan?”

“Yours,” Anna sighs with a grin.

“And those who are mine also belong to my brothers. What does that make them?”

“Phantoms,” she sighs again.

“And what do the Phantoms do with the people who belong to them?”

“Protect them,” she says, trying to hold back a laugh. “Sorry, Callie.”

“Technically speaking, Andy and I are just friends,” I tell the pair. “Nothing has really been set in stone yet.”

Cap actually laughs. Like, head back, full belly laughs.

“Sure,” he eventually says once he calmed himself down.

“Cccan I wwwear yyyour cccut?”

Cap looks over at Duncan and his face softens like he does when he looks at his daughter.

“It might be a bit big on you buddy,” he says kindly. “But you’re more than welcome to give it a shot.”

Once he helped Duncan into the vest, I couldn't help but laugh. The bottom is a hair from reaching the floor.

"Look mommy," he says, jumping up and down. "I'm a bbbbiker."

"You're more than that, little man," Cap chuckles. "You're a Phantom."

"Flight from Columbus, Ohio to Orlando, Florida boards in five minutes."

"That's us," I say.

"How long will you be gone?" Anna asks.

"Just until Sunday. We'll be back home on Sunday evening."

"I'll make sure Beast is back by then," Cap tells me. "I have a feeling he'll be back by morning, anyway."

"Thank you, guys, for bringing us to the airport."

"Of course," Anna hugs me tightly. "Have a safe flight. Text me when you get there."

"I will."

"Bbbye."

"Bye, buddy," Cap says, accepting his vest back from Duncan. "I'll see you when you get back. Be good for your mom."

"I will."

With a final wave, I guide my son to the line. Cap and Anna stay and watch until we're out of sight.

"Go ahead and have a seat," I tell my son. "I've already talked to someone about you being allowed to use your new weighted blanket during takeoff. You're lucky, my love. They don't normally allow it."

"It's cause I'm cccute," he smiles.

"You might be right about that," I smile back, shifting through my carryon bag for his blanket.

“Excuse me, ma’am, is your name Callie?”

I gasp at the sudden voice next to my ear.

“I’m so sorry,” the flight attendant says, her eyes wide with worry. “I didn’t mean to startle you.”

“That’s okay,” I chuckle, handing Duncan the bag. “I guess I’m not as comfortable on an airplane as I thought I would be. Yes, I’m Callie. Is there something I can help you with?”

“There is a man in a black leather vest waiting for you by the baggage claim,” she tells me. “He says that you forgot something. I’m not normally allowed to let people back off the plane for something like that because it can be added to the rest of the luggage, but he says it’s something you need on the plane with you.”

What did I forget that I need to bring with me? I think about everything I brought on the plane. Just one carryon bag and my backpack. Both of which I have. The rest of our things are being loaded in the cargo hold of the plane.

“I cccan’t find the stuff uncle Ccccoop sent,” Duncan tells me.

“Ah, that must be it,” I chuckle. “Why don’t you sit here while I go grab them from Cap.”

“Nnno way,” he says frantically. “Wwwhat if the ppplane ttakes off wwithout you?”

“I’ll make sure it doesn’t,” the flight attendant says.

“Nno, I’m cccoming, tttoo.”

Not wanting to argue, I just nod.

“Let’s go then,” I say.

We rush through the empty passenger loading area and make it to where everyone’s luggage is being piled onto a cart.

“Where is he?” I wonder out loud.

“Oover there.”

Duncan points towards the other side of the room.

“He’s there,” he says excitedly. “I jjjust saw hhis cccut.”

“Well, let’s go check really fast,” I say. “But if we can’t find him, then we need to leave. We can’t miss our flight.”

I grab his hand and rush to where Duncan said he last saw the flash of black vest turning around the corner. But no one is here. It’s just an empty hallway that leads to some other part of the building.

“I’m sorry, my love,” I say. “We really have to go.”

“Alright,” he sighs. “Uncle Cccoop is gggoing to bbe mmad at mme.”

“I promise you that he won’t be angry,” I soothe. “These things happen. I’ll send Cap a message when we get back on the plane that we had to leave and to keep them safe for us for when we get back. Does that sound okay?”

Duncan nods, but sadness is clear in his eyes. He doesn’t handle change well, and this was definitely not part of the schedule.

“Let’s go, my love.”

Just as we turn to leave the hallway and make our way back to the plane, a searing pain pierces the back of my head. I don’t even have time to blink, let alone warn Duncan, before the world around me fades away.

Chapter Thirteen

Beast

“Are you sure it’s them?”

“We have proof,” Shadow says. “Beast grabbed one hell of a camera before he came back and we captured these.”

Shadow turns the laptop around so everyone can see. The first image is of a building clearly belonging to the damn Rubberheads. I recognized a few of them the moment I saw them.

“That isn’t much proof,” Reaper says. “We all know the Rubberheads have multiple buildings around. It doesn’t tie them to the suicide murders.”

“No,” I agree. “But this might.”

I click on the video and smile.

“How the hell did...” Axe starts. “You know what, nevermind. We all know this is a Shadow thing.”

The video shows the inside of the Rubberheads clubhouse. There are men all over and women in different stages of undress.

“How did you manage to do that without getting caught?” Cap asks.

“It was easy,” Shadow says. “I just walked in. They didn’t even bother to check my cut. There was no one guarding the door. They’re careless.”

“The tip we received the other day said to check out this location,” Cap reminds us. “We already knew about this place.”

“Just keep watching,” Shadow says.

Seconds later, the camera pans to the right, and I hear the men gasp. On one of the walls painted in bright red, is the same symbol we’ve been seeing at the murder scenes.

“Come to think of it,” Shadow says. “I’ve never seen a Rubberhead who wasn’t white.”

“Racist fucks.”

“It’s more than that, Axe,” Cap says. “The women who were killed were all clients of ours at one point. The Rubberheads know what we do.”

“We don’t exactly keep it a secret,” Reaper adds. “But we are discrete and ask our clients to be as well. Maybe they know someone who hired us.”

“I think it has something to do with this,” Shadow says, fast forwarding the video.

I’ve already watched the whole video, so I know what’s coming.

“A fucking cop?” Axe shouts. “Hey, isn’t that...”

“Deputy Chief Charles Moore from the local precinct?” I finish. “Yes, it is. He’s helped us in many of our recent cases. Hell, he’s even responsible for a handful of arrests because of us. He knows who we are, and what we do. There’s no doubt in my mind that he’s passed along information to Roach and his gang.”

“It looks like he’s buddies with the President of the Rubberheads,” Cap says. “Which explains why none of the information collected by the police even remotely points to that damn wannabe biker gang.”

“Trusting what we read from those reports was a bad move on our end,” Reaper says. “It was an amateur move. We should have had someone we trust at the scene to collect our own evidence.”

As the President of the Rubber Bound MC comes into view on the laptop, I can’t help but remember his visits to my woman.

“We need to figure out why they want inside Callie’s building,” I say. “It might not be connected to the suicide murders, but knowing they are responsible changes everything.”

“This is all directed at us,” Shadow says. “If I’m remembering correctly, they started hounding her about renting that extra space before Callie was even associated with us. I don’t think the two are connected.”

“Maybe not,” Cap says. “But they know she’s ours now. Which brings a whole new level of threats against her and her son.”

Fuck.

“Maybe she should stay with her brothers for a while,” I suggest, even though being away from her would piss me the fuck off. “At least until we get these damn Rubberheads dealt with.”

“You know that’s not going to happen,” Anna says, walking into the room. “Callie would never leave her bakery for that long. Plus, Duncan starts second grade next month.”

“Hey baby,” Cap smiles. “Is my princess okay?”

“Yes, she’s sound asleep,” Anna says softly. “I actually came in here to ask about Callie. Does anyone know what time her plane is supposed to land?”

“Hours ago,” I answer, feeling a bit worried at Anna’s look. “Why?”

When I arrived back at the Rubberheads building with Shadow, we were in and out in half an hour. It didn’t take long for us to piece things together and head back to the clubhouse.

“Well, Callie said she would message me when she got there,” Anna says, her brows furrowed. “I haven’t heard anything.”

“She’s probably just busy,” I say, not quite believing my own words. “Her brothers are most likely keeping her distracted. Or she fell asleep. It is after midnight.”

“Maybe,” Anna says softly. “Listen, if you hear from her, will you let me know, please?”

“Of course,” I nod.

“Go and get some sleep, baby,” Cap says. “If we hear anything, I’ll wake you up.”

“I’m sure she’s fine, Beast,” Shadow says. “Like you said, she’s probably sleeping.”

“Yeah,” I mutter. “Sleeping.”

Cap continues talking about how we’re going to deal with our dirty cop issue, but I’m having a hard time staying focused.

“Maybe we should contact Lieutenant Colonel Adaway,” I manage to suggest. “He has more resources and can dig into the Deputy Chief more discreetly than we can.”

“And quicker,” Cap says, pulling out his phone. “He can have us information within the hour.”

“Beast, your phone is ringing.”

Reaper points to where my phone is laying on the table directly in front of me. I’m so lost in my thoughts about Callie that I didn’t hear it ring.

“Hello,” I answer distractedly.

“Am I speaking with Anderson Easton?”

“Yeah,” I say.

“My name is Cooper Childers. I’m Callie’s oldest brother.”

“Is she alright?” I ask, instantly focused on the man’s voice.

“I was about to ask you that same question.”

“What do you mean you were about to ask me the same question?” I ask. Something in my tone must grab my brother’s attention, because they’re all watching me. “Isn’t she there with you?”

“Her plane arrived,” he answers. “Even her luggage. Even her carryon bags were stored above her seat. But neither her nor my nephew were on that plane when it got here.”

“That was hours ago,” I all but yell. “Why are you just now calling me?”

Knowing my brothers will want all the details, I place my phone on speaker and put it on the table.

“First off, because she’s none of your fucking concern, Phantom,” he snarls back. “And second off, because you and your men are hard as hell to track down. Regardless of my feelings towards your interest in my baby sister, I can see that you and your men are good people. You’re doing good things.”

“How do you know anything about what we do?” Cap asks.

“I know everything about everything you’ve ever done, Captain Carter Williams, leader of the disbanded US secret military protection unit labeled US1. There isn’t a single breath you or your men have taken that I am not now aware of.

Carter Williams, leader of Cap’s Security. Thomas Adler, known as Axe, takes second in command. Anderson Easton, or Beast, is the fucker who’s pining after my baby sister, Graham Hendrix, Shadow, now spends his days blaming himself for the way his sister was treated, and the only thing I know about your Reaper is his name, Nash Sullivan. His past seems to not exist.”

“And that’s the way it stays,” Reaper growls.

“How the fuck did you get such top-secret intel?” Cap demands. “Those files were burned the second we decided to step away.”

“Burned things leave ashes, Captain,” Cooper says. “And where there are ashes, a Phoenix finds its feather.”

“What the fuck?” Shadow whispers. “What does that even mean?”

“Two of my brothers are on their way to you as we speak,” Cooper continues. “Christian and Colton will arrive in roughly half an hour. Don’t fucking shoot them.”

“Can you track her phone?”

“Marisol, you shouldn’t be in here right now,” Axe says, holding his arms out.

“She’s my friend,” Marisol says, sitting on Axe’s lap. “And my question stands. Can you track her phone?”

“I’m afraid her phone was in her carryon bag, sweetheart,” Cooper says softly.

“We watched her get on the plane,” Anna says from the doorway. “We stood there until every last person had boarded and they closed the door. How did they not arrive?”

“She’s not wrong,” Cap agrees. “I made sure not to leave until I knew they were safe and sound on that plane.”

“Could it be her ex-husband?” I growl.

Cooper laughs.

“Not a chance,” he says. “You don’t have to worry about that man. We took care of him a while back. However, I am going to dig up everything on every single person aboard their plane. I’ll be in contact soon.”

“If it’s not her ex-husband, then that really only leaves one more option.”

I nod my agreement at Cap’s conclusion. Grabbing my phone, I program in Cooper’s number before pocketing it.

“They’ve been after her since she first opened her bakery,” I say. “Now they also know that she belongs to me.”

“To us,” Reaper corrects me. “They know she’s a Phantom now. So, added to whatever reason they want her building for, they have to be the ones who took her.”

“And Duncan,” I remind them. “They also took my boy.”

“I’ve called in Missy,” Cap tells us. “Let’s wait for her and Callie’s brothers to arrive. Then we can dig a little more. We know most of their locations. We’ll find them, brother.”

Of that, I have no doubt. My concern is what condition they’ll be in when we do.

Chapter Fourteen

Duncan

I don't know where I am. It's dark, and it's cold. I hear drips from water somewhere but that's all. I'm trying really hard not to be scared. Beast wouldn't be scared and I want to be like him. My new daddy would be brave and so will I.

When my old daddy used to hit mommy, she would tell me to go and hide. There was this tiny door that went under the house and he never found me there. That's almost what it feels like wherever it is that I am. The ground doesn't feel like the floor of a house. It's hard, cold, and muddy. Like it was under the house on rainy days.

Maybe I can find a door if I just crawl around and feel. I'm afraid to stand up because if I hit something and fall, I can get more hurt than if I'm closer to the ground. I watched a video of a cave explorer who did the same thing. So, I slowly move forward.

My eyes seem to be adjusting to the dark and I can sort of make out dark shadows of things. There must be some sort of light around or my brain wouldn't be able to do that. I learned that from a video, too.

I see a long and wide shadow that's darker than the rest of the room. That could be a door, maybe. I think my daddy would take the chance to find out. So, I stand and scoot my feet across the floor.

Suddenly, light blinds me and I have to squeeze my eyes shut.

"You're awake," someone says. "Good. I need you to give someone a message for me."

I want to ask so many questions, but I just know that my stutter will be too bad right now. So, I just try to look at the person talking. I can't really see much of his face. The light is too bright, and he just looks like a shadow.

"Here's the bitch," a new voice says. "I want her to watch."

“Duncan.”

I would know my mommy’s voice from anyone.

“Mmmooo.”

“It’s okay, honey,” she says.

Why isn’t she coming to me?

“Just do what these nice men say, okay, my love,” she says.
“Everything will be okay.”

“Did she do it?”

“Yeah,” someone laughs. “She signed it over in a second flat.”

“Let him go,” mommy says. Her voice sounds different. I’ve heard her say those exact words before when my old daddy hit me. She sounded angry then. But now, I can still hear the anger, but I sort of think she’s scared.

I don’t really understand emotions all that well, but my therapist and I have been working on what the different tones of a voice mean. I’m getting pretty good at it, so I know that my mommy is more scared than angry.

“I did what you asked,” she says. “Please, just let him go.”

“Iiii’m ookkay, mmommy,” I say, trying to get her to smile.

“See mommy, he’s ookkkkaay.”

The men laugh. People have made fun of my stutter for my whole life, so it doesn’t bother me that these bad men do the same thing. What does make me angry is that they made my mommy cry.

My eyes still hurt from the light and all I can see of the mean man is his legs. So, I run over to the guy who made mommy cry and I kick his leg as hard as I can.

Hearing his howl of pain gives me pride. I bet daddy would be proud of me, too.

“You little shit.”

I'm not sure what happened, but one minute I'm standing next to the man and then I'm on the other side of the room with a bad pain in my head.

“NO, PLEASE. YOU SAID YOU WOULDN'T HURT HIM.”

“I said that *I* wouldn't hurt him. However, Roach here has a message for your man.”

My eyes are heavy and my head feels like it's about to explode, but I try my best to stand up.

My daddy would do the same thing.

“What are you doing?” Mommy asks. “Roach, Please, stop. Duncan, run.”

But there's nowhere to run. Mommy knows this, too. She can tell that we're in some sort of basement. The man standing beside my mommy comes forward and raises his hand.

Why is he pointing at me?

“YOU CAN'T DO THIS,” mommy screams.

She's starting to kick the person holding her, but it doesn't look like she's going to win. Finally, my eyes adjust to the light and I can see my mommy's face. She's been crying a lot harder than I thought.

I look at the man who was pointing at me and realize that he isn't pointing his finger like I thought he was. He has a gun.

“Tell those Phantoms that the Rubber Bounds say hello,” the man says.

BOOM!

The loud thunder makes my ears ring. Mommy starts to scream and struggles more against the man holding her. She's crying now worse than I've ever seen her cry before.

What's going on?

Suddenly, I feel so tired. I can't even stay standing. I think I might just take a nap.

I fall to the floor and settle my head on the cold, hard ground. Warm liquid covers my chest and flows around my head.

Finally, some warmth.

I'll take just a small nap, then I'll get up and fight, just like my daddy would.

Just a small na....

Chapter Fifteen

Callie

Time stands still. Over and over, my mind replays Duncan falling to the ground, his blood pooling around him. Nothing else is penetrating my mind.

It's been hours. Or has it been days?

Voices are banging against the wall that's been built around my mind. They keep trying to talk to me, but I can't hear them.

Bang.

Bang.

Bang.

Over and over and over. I watched my little love's eyes as he fell. He didn't look scared or confused. He just looked tired. Did he die instantly, or did he lie there and suffer?

Bang.

Bang.

Bang.

A sharp pain slashes across my face, finally pulling my mind back to the present.

"There she is," someone says. "We have some things we want from you."

"Haven't you already taken everything I have?" I ask, my voice tired. Resigned.

"Not at all."

I look up at the face of the same man who has been asking to rent out the top floor of my bakery. The same man who shot and killed my son.

"You have my bakery," I say. "And you took my son's life. What else do I have that you could possibly want?"

What was his name? Travis? Greg?

“Roach, they found him.”

Roach.

“The Phantoms,” Roach says, ignoring whatever it was his lackey was telling him. “I want the Phantoms. I want them to suffer. I want them out of my town. Maybe not in the order.”

“Then you’re bargaining with the wrong person,” I admit. “I don’t mean anything to those men. You already have what you wanted from me. Just please, kill me now.”

“You see, the thing is,” he says, smiling as if this is the best day of his life. “At first, I just wanted your building. But, then, I noticed the Phantoms hanging around way more often than they should. Which means you mean something to one of them. I want them to suffer almost as much as I want them gone. Plans are in place to get them out of this town, but I need them to suffer a bit more first.”

“What’s so important about my bakery that you had to kill my son over it?” I ask, avoiding the main reason why the men hang out at my bakery most days. I refuse to tell him that one of their women works for me. I’ll take that small little bit of information to my grave if it means keeping Marisol safe.

“I don’t see any harm in telling her,” someone says. “It’s not like we’re going to let her live, anyway.”

As if I want to live.

“I guess you’re right, Booker,” Roach says.

I’m only just realizing that we’re no longer in the basement of some house like we were before. When I was first knocked out at the airport, I woke up in some random normal looking kitchen, tied to a chair.

With threats that they would torture and then kill my son if I didn’t sign over all ownership of my building, I signed their paper.

I’m not even sure if it was a legal paper and I honestly don’t care.

Then they dragged me by my hair to the basement of that house where I found my son standing tall and looking as brave

as he could.

I grasp desperately for that image as it's replaced with the one of him falling. I must have blacked out because now, here I am, sitting in my bakery, surrounded by men all wearing the same black leather vest that seems to be in every aspect of my life these days.

However, I can tell the difference between these and the ones Andy and his friends wear. These seem old and worn down with a different patch and name on the front.

Rubber Bound?

That's the same name on the vest that they had delivered to me.

"Why are we here?" I ask.

"My original plan was to leave your body here for those Phantoms to find," he tells me bluntly. "But now that I own this building, I don't want any attention drawn to it. Now, I have another, even better, plan."

"Lovely," I mutter.

"Come on, fat ass," he snarls. "I want to show you what it is that you've been sitting on these past several months."

The cruel name doesn't affect me. I don't think anything will ever again. My heart aches at the loss of my son.

"What did you do with my son's body?" I ask numbly as we walk through the kitchen.

"Don't worry," someone says. "The Phantoms will find him soon enough."

Somehow, that brings peace to my extremely unpeaceful mind.

Duncan won't be laying somewhere alone. Andy will find him. He'll do what needs to be done.

A spark of hope ignites in my heart. Will Andy come looking for me? Do my brothers know that I'm missing, or do they think I just changed my mind about coming to visit? Then

the hope is smashed under the guilt I feel for wanting to make it out alive when my son didn't.

"Years ago," Roach says, guiding me towards the back door. "It was either the late sixties or early seventies. When this place was built, it was owned by a man named George Smith. The blueprints for the building show everything you see. The area where you set up shop and the upstairs where George and his wife lived."

"What's with the history lesson?" I ask, not caring of any consequence.

"Shut up and listen," he snarls. "Anyway, George used the building as a shoe repair shop. But what's not in the blueprint, and what he didn't tell anyone, was that he had something special added to the building."

Roach opens the back door and heads to the door leading upstairs. I have kept it bolted shut, but Roach has my keys. He opens the door and shoves me inside. To the right side are narrow stairs that lead up to the room above my bakery. To the right is an empty space beneath the stairs. The walls are made of concrete and the steps themselves look like they might cave in at any moment.

It's a very old building, but it's surprisingly sturdy for its age.

I make it up a few steps before I'm yanked by my hair and fall down to the floor.

"Look at that," Roach laughs. "Fat asses fall even harder than skinny bitches."

Everyone laughs as I lay there wishing God would just free me from this misery.

"Under the stairs," he says, kicking my leg.

Finally managing to stand, I walk to where he said.

"What is it I'm supposed to do under here?" I ask.

"Look down."

I do, but I see nothing but an old dirty rug. It's so old and worn down it's almost as if it's part of the floor itself. The sun has set and the small stairway is lit by a single bulb hanging from above the doorway. While I put almost all of my savings into updating the bakery, I put next to nothing in doing the same to this part of the building.

"Get out of the way, woman," a burly man with striking black hair braided down his back says. "This will take all damn day, Pres, if you keep playing your games. We got work to do."

The man shoves me back towards the door and kicks the rug out of the way. At first, I see nothing. Just the concrete floor in need of a good sweep. Then the man bends over, grabs something, and pulls.

To my surprise, a door opens. It looks as if it weighs more than I do, but this guy just lifts it up like it's a regular door. I stand there in shock. How long has that been there? Where does it go?

What the heck is going on?

"Old George was constantly raving about air raids which never even occurred in these parts," Roach says. "According to the townspeople, George was something of a nut bag. If it wasn't bombings, then it was aliens. And if it wasn't either of those, it was our own government. Which, I guess, I can understand him on that part."

Voices float out from the hole where before it was only silent.

"So, George built this bunker all by himself," Roach continues. "Well, if you believe rumors, that is. I'm sure he had help in some form or another. Anyway, go on, let's take a look inside."

Going down into that hole is the last thing I want to do.

"Go on," Roach says, pushing me forward. "If you don't go on your own, then I'll push you down. And, trust me, that's a long fall. So, go down the ladder yourself or we do it my way."

Maybe I can scream. Surely someone is awake and will hear me.

But the small walk from my bakery to the apartment made me realize how late it must be. Even if someone did hear a lone female scream, they would most likely assume someone else called it in.

Death sounds good to me right now, but suffering doesn't. And a fall will most likely result in a broken bone or two.

So, I walk up to the hole and peer inside. The ladder leading down is so far that I can't even see the bottom. Doing the only thing I can, I turn and drop my foot, feeling for the first step. Once I find it, I make my way down, followed by the men above me.

I don't know how long it takes to make it to the bottom, but I counted ninety-seven steps before my feet hit solid ground.

What is the smell?

"Roach is back," someone yells. "And he brought a friend."

"This is your new worker," he tells them, shoving me forward. I'm standing in a narrow tunnel. It's only lit but the wide-open door at the end. "She's the bitch who owned this building. But now it's mine. So, no more having to sneak around."

After being forced to move forward, we make our way to the open door. Once past the first door, there's a small area where weird looking outfits hang on the wall before a second, much stronger looking door is closed tightly. Someone grunts as they turn the wheel. Once the door is open, I've shoved inside.

Now, I'm standing in a single room that looks to be about double the length of my bakery. The walls, ceiling, and floor seem to be made of some sort of steel. The room is worlds different from the tunnel leading up to it.

It looks sterile. Almost as if I'm standing in some sort of scientific laboratory. There are many tables around the room all lined with beakers, microscopes and other scientific looking devices. People are standing around the tables wearing

white protective suits over their clothes and, what I would guess, are filtration masks over their faces.

It looks like something out of an apocalyptic movie.

“Welcome to the Ice Lab,” Roach says. “Your new home.”

“What do you expect me to do down here?” I ask, looking around at the half-dozen people working at their tables. “I don’t know anything about science.”

“You don’t need to,” he laughs. “You won’t be making the Ice. You’ll be testing it.”

Ice? What’s Ice?

“Handcuff her to the sink,” Roach says, shoving me towards someone. “Make sure they’re tight. I think it’s time to give her a dose of the first batch. We need to make sure it’s pure and not tainted.”

I’m shoved to the floor next to a small white sink. One like you would find in a basic bathroom. The man, some pot belly, foul smelling, middle-aged man, secures one cuff to the pipes of the sink and the other to my wrist.

“Actually, Roach,” one of the men in the white suits says, his voice muffled by his mask. “This batch is a test to see if it mocks the real shit.”

“Is it ready for testing?” Roach asks.

“Not on humans,” the man laughs. “This is ready to be tested on the rats.”

“Well, meet your new rat,” he laughs. “I want this stuff street ready in a week. If that means doping her up until she sees sound, so be it. Just don’t use the pure crystals, you got that? We already sold the next four batches.”

“Got it.”

Roach walks up to me and I use all my strength to kick out, landing on some part of his leg. I don’t stop. I kick for all it’s worth. Which might not be worth a lot considering my situation. But, I don’t care. And, I don’t stop.

“You bitch,” he yells. “Someone hold her fucking legs.”

Within seconds, I'm being held down by multiple hands.

"Who knew fat bitches were so strong?" someone says.

Roach shoves the needle into the crook of my elbow. Seconds later, my body gives up its fight, but my heart starts beating much faster. I feel as if I'm flying and falling simultaneously. My body is telling me that everything is okay. That nothing can ever go wrong again. But, at the same time, my mind knows that something isn't right.

I'm not sure now how long this feeling of euphoria and confusion lasts, but eventually, everything seems to settle. My heart finally slows, and my mind seems to be less foggy. I can see the men looking down at me. Some are laughing, but I just can't seem to care. The grief of never seeing my son again also seems to vanish.

Everything is perfect.

Deciding to use this blissful time to take a nap, I close my eyes. Andy's face is the first thing I see. His eyes look concerned, but then I see him and Duncan playing, and I know that everything is going to be okay.

Even if it is only just pretend.

"Looks like we can pass this cheap shit off as pure. Now, let's go fuck with these damn Phantoms. This is going to be fucking hilarious."

The men's laughter follows me into a deep dark abyss. I don't dream. I don't think. I don't exist.

I don't want to leave.

Chapter Sixteen

Beast

“Where the fuck were you when my sister got on that plane? Huh? For someone who says they care so much about her, you weren’t around when she and Duncan needed you the most.”

I’m a big man. Much larger than anyone in this fucking building. It takes Reaper, Shadow, and Axe to hold me back from ripping Christian’s head from his fucking shoulders. Cap steps forward into the man’s space.

“He was working a job,” Cap tells him calmly. “It was my fault he wasn’t there. I was the one who promised to look after his family while he did what I needed him to do. If anyone here is to blame, it’s me.”

“Let’s all just calm down,” Colton says. “Christian, if they release that man, then you’re as good as gone. This isn’t his fault. Can’t you tell he’s already beating himself up over this? And Captain Williams, this isn’t your fault, either. You promised your man that you would see them safely on the plane, and you did. Cooper is looking into finding out why their carryon bags were in their seats, but they weren’t. Until then, let’s all just sit down and regroup.”

“Beast,” Reaper says from behind me. “Brother, if you harm him, then your woman will never forgive you. You know how much she loves her brothers.”

“The same goes for you, Christian,” Colton says. “We need to work together. While you two are standing here, measuring your dicks, who knows what they’re doing to Callie and Duncan.”

“This isn’t over,” Christian says, shoving his brother off of him.

I don’t say anything. Mostly, because he’s right. I should have been there to protect them. I should have never even let her get on that plane without me. Hell, I should have just driven them both to her brother’s place.

Whatever happens to either one of them is on me.

“Don’t listen to my brother,” Colton says. “He’s angrier with himself than he is with you.”

“Why?” I ask, following the group to our meeting room.

“Because I was going to come and pick them up,” Christian says, taking one of the twelve chairs around the large meeting table. “Coop told me the two-to-three-hour flight would be easier on Duncan than a whole day in a vehicle.”

“He was right, Christian,” Colton says. “Duncan would not have done well on that long of a road trip.”

“I don’t know what good it will do,” Missy says, entering the room. “But I pulled up the security footage we have from Callie’s bakery. I also talked with her brother Cooper and he sent me the footage from the cameras they placed as well.”

“And?” I ask impatiently.

“Nothing,” she says. “Not a damn thing. I sent the footage to a friend, and he’s going to get back with me in a little while, but from what I’ve seen, everything is fine at the bakery.”

“What about the security footage at her home?” I ask.

“We checked before we left,” Christian says. “Callie wouldn’t let us place cameras in her bedroom or bathroom, but everything else looks fine. We’re still waiting on the footage from the driveway. Cooper was going over it when we left.”

“I have those as well,” Missy says. “I sent them, along with the other videos, to my friend. I just have a weird feeling that we’re missing something.”

“Let us know the second your friend gets back to you,” Cap says. “We need a plan of action. I already contacted our old boss about getting more information about Deputy Chief Charles Moore.”

I wait as Cap fills Christian and Colton in on what’s been going on with the club.

“And the same group who’s going after you are the ones who wanted to buy my sister’s building?”

“Well, they just asked to rent the upstairs part,” Missy says. “But Marisol said that anyone who lives up there would need access to her bakery to use the bathroom and make food because there’s only the one room and a closet up there.”

“They had to know that,” Marisol says, carrying little Bitsy to her mom. “She woke up wanting cuddles. Now, she’s hungry.”

“Thank you, Mar,” Anna says. “Let’s go get you fed, sweet girl.”

“What do you mean they had to know that?” Cap asks, smiling at a retrieving Anna and Bitsy.

“Callie said they told her they were interested in the building before she bought it,” Marisol explains. “They already knew about the space above the bakery. So, they had to know that it was never meant to be lived in.”

“Can you access the bakery from the space upstairs?” Shadow asks.

“No,” Colton answers. “There’s only one door leading up there. We had the lock to the bakery changed first thing, so I also know the locks don’t match.”

“Hello.”

Missy walks out of the room with her cell to her ear.

“Let’s hope that’s her friend with some information,” Christian says. “Because we have shit.”

We sit silently. My thoughts revolve around Callie and Duncan. Where are they? Are they hurt? Are they scared?

“Beast, your phone is ringing again.”

Damn it. I need to keep my mind focused before I end up missing something.

“Yeah,” I answer.

“Hey Beast, this is Murphy, your neighbor.”

I sigh, not having time to deal with Murphy and his nosey neighbor shit right now.

“What is it, Murphy?” I ask as patiently as I can.

“So, I was just outside tending my garden...”

“In the middle of the night?” I ask, suspiciously.

“I wanted to make sure no night critters were eating them,” he says. “Anyway, as I was tending my garden, I heard a noise from your side of the fence. Now, you know how people can get around here. I didn’t want someone to call the law on you for taking out trash or something.”

Missy walks back in and retakes her seat, waiting for me to finish this stupid ass call.

“Out with it Murphy,” I grump. “I’m in the middle of something.”

“Oh,” he says. “Right. Anyway, so I went over and knocked on your door. And guess what? You weren’t home. Now, I know you weren’t just sleeping because I didn’t see your motorbike where it’s normally parked. So, I went around back to see if maybe there was a loose animal. There was nothing.”

I take a deep breath and still my patience.

“I was on my way back home when I heard it again. It was coming from inside of your house. Like creaks or something. The next thing I know, a car is screeching down the road. I was still out back, so I didn’t see anything. I just heard it. That’s when I came back home and called you. Are you sure you aren’t home?”

“You heard something from inside of my house?” I ask. “When was this?”

“About half an hour ago,” he says, infuriating me further.

“And you’re just now telling me?” I yell. “Damn it, Murph. What is it with people waiting to contact me about shit like this?”

“I couldn’t find my phone. Anyway, if you’re not home, then you might want to come and see who is. Bye Beast.”

“I need to go check my house,” I tell the room.

“Right now?” Christian says. “My sister, the women you’re supposed to care about, is missing. Not to mention her son. And you want to go and check out a noise inside your house?”

“This isn’t a coincidence,” Reaper says. “The security in his house is the same as we all have. I take it that you haven’t been notified of anyone trespassing?”

“No,” I say, looking at the app on my phone. “This is connected. I just know it.”

“Before you go anywhere, you might want to hear what my friend found out.”

I remain seated and try not to rush Missy. All I can think about is Callie and Duncan being the ones in my house. Logically, it doesn’t make sense, but something isn’t adding up.

“So, all of our security systems have been hacked,” Missy tells us. “Including Callie’s brothers.”

“No way,” Colton says. “We have the best damn system available.”

“As do we,” Cap says. “It’s just not possible that someone has been able to hack into our systems without some sort of warning.”

“Well, it happened,” she tells us. “I should be getting an email...oh, there it is. Okay, so all the files have been corrupted. They’re all, every single one of them, on a time loop. It plays for an hour and then repeats.”

What the fuck?

“The loop is from the space of time when Callie and Duncan weren’t home and the bakery was closed. So, there’s really nothing to show that it’s being repeated unless you know what to look for. As for the actual security systems, not just the cameras, they’ve all been reprogrammed to listen to a different owner.”

“What do you mean by a different owner?” Axe asks. “Could this be why Beast wasn’t informed that his house was broken into?”

“I’m not really sure,” she answers. “And my friend says that it’s not really important. The important thing is that we have the location of where the security systems are being rerouted to. We also have footage from the airport. I’m not too sure you three should watch it, though.”

“Missy,” I growl.

“Don’t say I didn’t warn you, big guy.”

Missy screen shares her laptop to the tv and presses play on the video. I see the airport terminals with just a few employees standing around. Nothing happens for a few minutes and then I see them. Callie and Duncan come running off the walkway and out of frame.

“Where did they go?” Connor asks.

“Just a second. Alright, they’re picked up on several other cameras.”

Now Missy has four different viewpoints on the screen. We again watch as they run back into the airport from the plane. They don’t look scared. Just rushed. Then they head towards the luggage area before turning and heading to the bathrooms. Duncan leads Callie off to the hallway beside the restrooms.

“There’s a blind spot on this corner,” Missy says. “But if I forward it to... here.”

Less than a minute passes on the Timecode when two men wearing face masks carry Callie and Duncan out of the building.

“They’re not conscious,” Axe says. “Do we have a viewpoint on the outside?”

“Yeah, but you can’t see anything,” she tells us. “Here we see the men carry them to the parking lot across from the airport. They’re put into this black van. As you can see, it doesn’t have tags or any identifying marks.”

“They’re headed west,” Shadow says. “Maybe we can get someone to tap into the street cams to follow them.”

“Already on it,” Christian says. “Cooper will have everything we need soon.”

“I’m going to go check my house,” I announce. “It’s just a few blocks over. I’ll be back soon.”

“Actually, why don’t I come with you?” Christian says. “You say you have a strong feeling about this?”

I nod.

“Then I trust you. Let’s go.”

“Keep up,” I tell him.

Running will get me there faster.

“Everything looks fine, man,” Christian says as we walk through my kitchen.

He’s right. Everything does look fine. But something feels off. Not only did my house alarm not go off when I opened the door, but according to the keypad, the alarm was already deactivated. I haven’t been home since I had Callie and Duncan here, and even then, we didn’t come inside. I know for a fact that I set the alarm before I left the day before. It’s ingrained in my brain to do so. I would never forget something like that.

“Silent alarm?” Christian asks.

“Yeah,” I say. “But the system is saying it wasn’t armed.”

“Can’t you call the security company?”

“We are the security company,” I admit. “We buy top of the line security equipment and install everything ourselves. Everything is recorded and filed away on Missy’s systems at the office.”

“Well, fuck.”

“Yeah.”

“What’s up?”

I turn around to watch as Cap, Connor, Shadow and Reaper walk through my front door.

“Nothing,” I tell them. “Why is everyone over here?”

“What do you mean, nothing?” Cap says. “We got your text. 911. We rushed over.”

“I didn’t send any text, Cap,” I say, pulling out my phone. I go to my messages and show him the last message I sent. It was to Callie hours ago.

“What the fuck?” Shadow says. “What’s going on?”

“Why would someone....wait,” I pause, horrible thoughts running through my mind. “Who’s at the clubhouse?”

Cap’s eye widens before he takes off running, the five of us following behind. Axe, Marisol, Anna, Missy, and Bitsy are still there. This has to be a distraction.

We’re less than half a block from our building when an explosion lights up the night sky.

“NO,” Cap screams.

By the time our eyes adjust to the new light, we’ve made it to our clubhouse. Anna, Bitsy and Marisol are all standing huddled together while Axe stands firmly in front of them, holding a gun.

“Thank fuck,” Cap cries as he rushes to his family. “What the fuck happened, Axe?”

“I don’t know, Cap,” he says, lowering his weapon but not standing down. “We were all sitting down when we heard the explosion. I didn’t want to risk keeping them inside in case it wasn’t the only one.”

“It was the shed,” Missy says, running from where the fire is roaring high from behind our building. “By the time I got back there, whoever it was already left. Probably a remote detonator. We won’t know until the fire’s extinguished and we have a look inside.”

“This was more than a distraction,” Reaper says. “This was a warning.”

“Rubberheads,” Axe mumbles. “I think it’s time to step up our game, brothers.”

“Cap, your old boss is on the phone,” Missy says. “Says he has something on that cop.”

“I need to talk to him,” Cap tells us. “Beast, why don’t you, Christian, and Reaper, go and check Callie’s house. I know it’s a long shot, but it’s better than doing nothing. When you get back, prepare to ride. Because we will attack every single stronghold these Rubberheads think they have until we find our family.”

“Wait,” Missy says, running back inside. Within moments, she returns, handing each of us a two-way radio. “Apparently, we can’t trust technology right now. These bastards have one smart Rubberhead in their midst. Until we get that under control, use these to talk to each other. As long as we aren’t too far apart, we shouldn’t have any trouble.”

“Smart thinking, little lady,” Connor smiles.

“Don’t call me a lady, sly boy,” Missy smiles back. “I could kill you three different ways just standing right here. I’m all woman. And way too much woman for you.”

“Not to mention, you don’t have the parts she wants,” Shadow laughs.

Even though my mind is racing and my heart is broken in half knowing my family is unsafe somewhere out there, I can’t help but add, “She once bit a man’s dick completely off.”

I race to my bike, Conner’s laughter following.

Chapter Seventeen

Beast

Callie's house looks normal. I haven't been inside, but nothing looks out of place or tampered with. It's a small house and takes us no time to look through each room. Twice.

"I'm going to swing by the bakery before we head back," I say. "It's probably a long shot, but I'd rather take the time to make sure."

"Agreed," Reaper says.

After locking Callie's door, which I'm grateful her brother had the keys to, we head around the corner to the bakery.

"Come to think of it," Christian says as we approach the door. "I don't think I have the keys for this building. I think Coop is the one with it."

"It doesn't matter," Reaper says. "The lights are on and the door is cracked open."

My throat drops through my stomach. I want nothing more than to get my woman and my son back home safely, but I am terrified of what I'm going to find when we get inside.

"Maybe I should go in first," Christian says, eyeing me as if he's worried.

I challenge him with a simple three second stare down before I step around him and into the bakery, gun raised.

Everything seems quiet. Raising my head above my head, I point in the direction of the chairs and then to the restrooms. Knowing Reaper will understand, I just assume Christian will as well.

While they check those rooms, I head behind the counter as quiet as possible. Turning the corner, I point my gun towards the floor, but no one is there. To get to the kitchen, you have to open a door. If someone is back there, I'm about to give it away that I'm here.

Placing my hand on the door, I turn the knob and gently swing it open. Luckily, the door is quiet. The lights are on in the waiting area, but they're off back here. Feeling around, I finally find a switch and flip it on.

Nothing.

“BEAST.”

Never have I heard that sound come from Reaper's mouth. Not even when we found him and Marisol after he was tortured did he ever sound so scared.

Turning, I run.

“CALL A FUCKING AMBULANCE.”

I just reach the women's restroom door when Christian comes out, his face pale, and phone to his ear.

“I need an ambulance at 3225 Jude...”

I slam the door open and rush into the restroom. At first, all I see is Reaper leaning over on the floor. I can't walk around him because he's inside the small stall. Then he stands, turns, and my heart stops.

“Duncan,” I whisper.

My little man is laying lifeless in Reaper's arms, his face pale, and dried blood on his shirt, the side of his face, and in his hair.

I can't seem to move as Reaper takes Duncan into the waiting room.

“DAMNIT, BEAST. GET OUT HERE.”

Shaking off the shock, I rush out and to his side. He's put Duncan on one of the tables and stepped back.

“They're not going to make it time, Beast,” he tells me. “I'm surprised he's still alive as it is.”

Stealing my heart against the pain, I step up to my boy and rip his shirt open. Right on his shoulder, way too fucking close to his heart, is a single bullet wound. I gently turn him to the side.

“The bullet went straight through,” I say, accepting the cloth Reaper holds out.

I press the cloth against the wound very tightly. The fact that Duncan doesn't even whimper has me worried.

“He wasn't shot here,” Christian says, slamming the restroom door open. “Some fucker shot him somewhere else and then brought him here.”

I check his pulse. It's there, but weak.

“I'm here, little man,” I say. “Daddy is right here and I'm not going anywhere.”

Ignoring the look Christian gave me when I called myself daddy, I press against Duncan's wound a little tighter, hoping to stop more blood loss. There's no telling how much he's lost already, but based on how pale he is, I fear it might be too much.

“ETA two minutes,” Christian says. “They're almost here, buddy. Just hold on.”

“Reaper, call Cap and have him get any medical records about Duncan sent over to the hospital,” I say. “I want them ready.”

“Got it, brother.”

Reaper's hand on my shoulder almost does me in. I know I'm not alone, even if, at this moment, I feel like I'm lost.

“I'll do, Reaper,” Christian says. “I already know who to get in contact with. I just need the information to the local hospital.”

By the time Reaper gives Christian all the information he needs, the ambulance stops in front of the bakery, its lights illuminating the night.

As soon as the EMTs arrive, it takes everything I have to step aside and let them work.

“I'm riding with him,” I tell the EMT as he gives me a look when I step up to the ambulance.

“Get the fuck out of my way,” I warn. I’m a hair away from punching the young man in the face.

“I’m sorry, sir, but I can only allow family to ride along.”

“Who the fuck do you think he is, asshole?” Christian says. “If you don’t let my nephew’s father onto that truck, you and I are going to have a problem.”

“I’m sorry, sir,” the young male says. “I just needed to be sure.”

Logically, I know he’s in the right. But, right now, logic is the furthest thing from my mind.

I climb into the truck and squeeze myself between the cot and the seat before sitting down.

“Daddy’s here, little man,” I whisper, holding his cold hand. “Just stay strong for me, okay? You need to get better so we can play butterfly again. I would very much like to play butterfly, baby boy. Please, don’t stop fighting.”

I don’t take my eyes off my boy’s face the whole ride. I’m terrified he’s not going to make it, and I’m equally terrified that I won’t find his mom in time, either.

I’ve failed them both.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper.

Chapter Eighteen

Callie

Why does everything hurt?

“I think she’s having another bad trip.”

Who said that?

“This is the third one in as many days. I thought you said it was ready?”

What’s going on? Where’s Duncan? Is he alright? Did Andy get him? Why is nobody answering me? Hello?

“She’s coming back around. What do you want me to do, Roach?”

Roach? I hate roaches. Please, keep them away.

“You’ve only done injections? Would there be a different effect if she took it a different way?”

“Possibly.”

Why are there so many unfamiliar voices?

“Then get her to smoke the shit and find out.”

“Prez, I can’t even get her to take a sip of water. If we keep this up, she’s going to die.”

Die? I don’t want to die. Give me the water. I’ll drink all of it.

“As if I care. This bitch had her chance to be under my protection and she and those damn Phantoms threw it right back in my face. If I have anything to do with it, then all of their precious women will soon be dead.”

My head isn’t pounding as much as it was when I first woke up, so I try opening my eyes. At first, everything is too bright. But I try again. As soon as my vision clears, everything comes rushing back.

The airport. Signing papers. Duncan. Oh no. They shot Duncan.

Pain tears my heart to pieces and I can't hold back my cries.

“She's awake.”

“The only way she's making it back to those fuckers is in a body bag. I don't care what you do to her. I just want her dead by the end of the day. The Phantoms will receive a package tonight and I want her to be the bow on top.”

“Fuck yeah. Party time, brothers.”

Cheers erupt in the room, surrounding me on all sides. But, I don't care. I don't care what they do to me. Duncan is dead. My brothers will never forgive me. Andy won't want anything to do with me.

I fall to my side as the first blow hits my side. The pain, while intense, is nothing compared to what I'm feeling inside. Someone steps on my back with their whole weight and I feel something snap.

Weak pain. I feel nothing.

After a long while, I crave the next kick, slice of a blade, or punch. Every inch of my body is in pain, and yet, it doesn't take away the pain I feel for failing to protect my son. I swore the day his father hit him that I would never allow another soul to harm a hair on his head. And now, he's dead because of me.

Eventually, the blows stop.

“Take off her clothes,” someone says. “I want to see what a fat woman looks like naked.”

“Why the fuck would you want that?”

“Hey, pussy is pussy. I don't mind some cushion. I say let's do it. Strip her. And then we can fuck her.”

Being fat has always had some advantages. I never get catcalled. I never get propositioned. And I always thought it would protect me against attackers such as these men.

I guess I was wrong.

I feel my shirt rip from my body and the men laugh.

“Look at those tits,” someone says. “I wouldn’t mind getting my lips around those babies.”

“Me first.”

I feel warmth envelope my nipples and all I can do is lay there and cry. I couldn’t fight them off even if I wanted to. I have no more strength left in my body. And my mental strength left hours ago.

I squeeze my eyes shut and think of Andy. I bet he would have been a great dad to Duncan. I truly hope that he finds happiness in his life. My heart hurts at the thought of him being alone.

“Really?”

I recognize the voice instantly as Roach.

“I said dead by the end of the day. Why the fuck is she still breathing? What have you been doing?”

“We were just getting to the fun part, Prez. Want to join?”

“Not anymore. You’ve ruined her skin with blood and bruises. At least she was pretty before you did all of this. Oh well. I guess we’ll just leave her for dead like we did the little brat. It won’t be hours before they find her, anyway. By then, she’ll be dead. It’s better this way, anyway. That way, they know she suffered as much as she could.”

“We’ll have those Phantoms running from this town by the end of the week,” someone laughs. “They’ll be sorry they ever met us.”

“Our inside made is getting everything prepared to frame those bastards for the murders of the women they were supposed to protect,” Reaper laughs. “They will be in prison for the rest of their lives.”

“That’s what they get for trying to run us out of town,” someone else says. “Killing those women was fun, but watching those Phantoms get blamed is going to be fucking amazing.”

I want to laugh. They obviously don’t know those men like I do. I don’t even know them all that well and I know for a fact

that they won't let any of this slide. I don't know what bad beef is between the Phantoms and these guys, but I do know that I would bet on the Phantoms against the idiots in this club any day.

"Let's make this quick," Roach says. "They've had their eyes on this place since finding the kid. My tech guy is smart as fuck, but they have someone on their end trying to crack my man's code. He says they almost have it. We need to close this place down for a bit. Let's go."

"Did that explosion do what you wanted it to?" someone asks.

"Fuck no," Reaper snarls. "The idiot placed it in the wrong fucking place. That building was supposed to go up in flames, killing those fucking women. My man had all the Phantoms out of the building using a little trick to think someone was in one of their houses. The plan was to blow up the whole building with the women inside. Another way to make those men suffer."

"The idiot has been dealt with," another male says. "He failed us, so we killed him."

They have me half standing on my feet and half leaning between two men as I'm dragged through the room. I smile at the thought of how they're going to get me up that long ass ladder.

Score one for the fat chick.

I hope I break someone's back.

My vision is fading. Everything is slowly vanishing. I manage to stay conscious long enough to see the ladder.

"Fuck," someone says.

I chuckle. I don't know if the puff of air escaped my mouth loud enough for them to hear, but I sure hope to hell that it did.

"This way, you idiot," Roach says. But I'm too gone to see what he was talking about. I try to listen and remember every word everyone says, but I just can't do it anymore.

Then I'm gone. I'm falling into a black void. One that I don't think I'm going to make it out of.

Chapter Nineteen

Beast

It's been five days since we found Duncan. The first four days were touch and go. I wasn't sure he was going to make it. He lost half of the blood in his body. Doc said that he was surprised he was still alive when he got to the hospital.

He had to have several blood transfusions over the course of three days. Finally, the color started returning to his body, and he didn't feel as cold. I spent my days at his side and my nights looking for my woman.

I'm tired. So fucking exhausted. But I won't stop.

"Daddy?"

"Hey buddy. It's uncle Coop."

Hearing my little man's voice clears my head of the exhaustion.

"Uncle Ccoop? Wwwheres Daddy?"

"I'm right here, little man," I say, stepping up to the other side of his bed.

The second his little eyes meet mine, he bursts into tears. Lifting him gently, with Cooper arranging his wires and cords, I lay down on his bed and place him against my chest.

"It's okay, baby boy," I whisper. "I've got you. Daddy is right here."

"I'm ssoorry," he cries against my chest.

"You have nothing to be sorry for, little man," I say.

"I ddo. I ttried ttto ssave mmmommy. I wanted to bbbe brave lllike you. Bbbut, I wwasn't ssstrong eenough."

His stutter is more intense than I have ever heard it. My heart skips a beat when he talks about his mom. I look at Cooper and he's already on his phone. When his brother, Caleb, left for his rotation, he and his other brother rushed down.

“Listen, little man,” I say. “You were very brave. And you’re very strong. Do you know how I know that?”

“How?” he whispers.

“Because you were shot, Duncan,” I tell him through the tightness of my throat. “You were shot and left to bleed out, and you survived. You are one of the strongest people I know.”

“Really, daddy?”

“Yes, baby. Really. Now, can you tell me about the men who took you and mommy?”

“They made her cccry,” he says. “They were mmmean and one ggguy had scars on his fface.”

Roach.

I will kill that bastard when I get my hands on him.

Slowly.

“Good job, little man. Now, listen, I need you to do something super brave for me. Do you think you can?”

He nods.

“I need to go and help all of your old uncles and your new uncles to find mommy. So, I need to leave you for a little while. But Rachel is here, and your uncle Shadow is going to be your bodyguard. Is that okay?”

“My new uncles?” he asks.

“That’s right, big man,” Cap says, walking into the hospital room. “You have your five uncles that you’ve always had, and now you have four more. Me, Uncle Cap.”

“Uncle Shadow,” Shadow smiles.

“Uncle Axe. I’m going to be your favorite one.”

“And I am your uncle Reaper,” Reaper says gently. “And contrary to what Uncle Axe says, I will be your favorite. The most favorite uncle out of all nine of us.”

“Not to mention three new aunts.”

“Wow,” he says softly. “Ddoes that mmean I’m a Phantom Ilike you, daddy?”

“The most important one,” I say. “So, how about it? Will you be okay here with Uncle Shadow while I go out and help find your mommy?”

“Yeah,” he says. “But, mmy shoulder hurts. Ccan I have ice cream?”

We all laugh.

“Makes sense to me, kiddo,” Shadow says. “Ice cream heals all.”

“Alright, little man. You know that I love you, right?”

“Mmmhmm.”

“Good. I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

“With mommy?”

“I sure hope so, buddy.”

Standing, I gently place him back on his bed. I make eye contact with Shadow and he just nods. He’ll protect my son. Of that, I have no doubt.

I follow Cap and the rest of the men out of the room, stopping to tell Duncan’s nurse that he needs pain meds.

“We finally have something,” Cap says. “Remember when I reached out to our old boss about finding information on that dirty Deputy?”

I nod. It’s taken the old man way too long to get back to us.

“Well, as it turns out, the dirty fucker is addicted to crystal meth. He was purchasing a very large quantity from Roach and his gang the day that you and Shadow saw them.”

“How does this help us find Callie?” I ask impatiently.

“We know where they’ve been hiding out and cooking their supply,” Cap says. “You are not going to believe this shit, Beast. They’ve been under our noses this whole fucking time.”

I think back to the last several nights when we’ve been out checking all the known Rubberhead locations. Every single

one of them have been empty. It's almost as if they've left town. But we're not stupid. They're up to something.

I jump into the passenger seat of Cooper's car as he starts it up.

"Where to?" he asks.

Cap reaches up from the back seat and hands me his phone. On it is an email with a set of blueprints.

"This is of the bakery," I say, having memorized the layout. "Including the upstairs space."

"Check the next email," Cap tells me.

I slide to the next email and again see a blueprint. This one, while it looks similar to the bakery, is different.

"That's the original blueprint to that building," Cap tells us. "Whoever owned the building at the time didn't have this part of the design added to the public blueprint copy. This is a copy of the original design."

"What is it?" Coopers asks.

Enlarging the blueprint, I take a closer look.

"You've got to be fucking kidding me," I growl. "There's a bomb shelter under her building."

"And the worst part of it is, we were all standing right on top of the entrance."

I look to where Cap pointed on his phone and see that there's a hatch beneath the steps leading up to the second floor of the building.

"I bet more than anything that Callie was down there the day you all found Duncan in the bakery," Cooper says.

I think he's right.

"Fuck."

"She won't be there now," Cooper says, speeding down the road. "There's no way they would have her under her own building for very long knowing that we would eventually figure it out."

“Has your man been able to break through whatever wall is blocking us from our security access?” Cap asks.

“No,” Cooper growls. “And he’s been working around the clock. Whoever these rubber men have working for them really knows their shit. We even have the location that Missy’s guy sent. The master signal for all of our security equipment was routed to an apartment in another fucking state. The only thing in the building was a Wi-Fi router. This guy is good.”

Cooper slams on the brakes in front of the bakery, and I jump out.

“Shadow, I want you to do a thorough search of the bakery,” Cap orders. “Reaper, you check upstairs. If it’s all clear, meet us by the entrance to the fallout shelter. But hurry up, Beast won’t wait.”

Fuck no, I won’t.

The door is unlocked and I just shake my head.

“Why the hell didn’t we have someone watching this fucking building?” I ask. “What the fuck, Cap? Don’t you fucking care?”

“I’ll forgive you this time, brother, because I know personally the hell you’re going through.” Cap steps in front of me to stop me going forward.

I could easily plow through the man, but I hold more respect for him than any other male I’ve ever known. Instantly, I feel like shit.

“Between four of Callie’s brothers, Reaper, Shadow, Axe, and myself, eyes have not left this building since you went to the hospital with Duncan. At this very moment, Colton, Cameron, and Christian are somewhere around. I know you’re scared, Beast. You’re freaking the fuck out and want nothing more than to get your woman back safely and kill these damn Rubberheads, but I need your head on straight. If we go down there and shit hits the fan, I need to know that you’ll have our backs. I need to know that you won’t lose it when so many lives are on the line.”

I rub my hand down my face. He's right, of course. I need to think straight before I go anywhere. My mind is so driven by getting my woman that I'm bound to ignore everything else around me.

"I'm sorry, Cap," I say. "You're right. I'm good. Promise."

Cap looks into my eyes for an uncomfortable amount of time before giving me a single nod.

"Let's go."

By the time Cap and I reach the door for the upstairs, Cooper is already standing under the steps, glaring at the floor.

"When Callie told us of her interest in buying this building, my brothers and I had it deeply inspected. We had a few things fixed or changed, but overall, the building was perfect for her bakery."

"We didn't do more than a walkthrough of this part, though," Cameron says, walking down the steps.

"Your guy Reaper says that nothing is different up there," Cameron tells us. "Of course, I could have told you that. I've been sitting up there for the past several hours. There hasn't been a single peep."

"The person you hired to inspect the bakery didn't do the same over here?" I ask.

"We didn't see the need for it," Cooper says, still glaring at the floor. "Callie had no interest in this part of the building. She didn't want it, but it came with her bakery. We just inspected it on the surface level to make sure nothing would cave down on her."

I grunt. I don't like the idea of them not taking every step necessary to keep my woman safe, but at the same time, I can't really blame them. I probably would have done the same thing.

"Move aside," I say, stepping forward. There's an old dusty rug laying across the floor and I yank it up and toss it aside.

There is it. A fucking hatch.

“I’ll be damned.”

“It’s made of wood,” Cameron says. “Not very affective for a bomb shelter.”

“There’s probably a steel door down below,” I say, grabbing the rusted looped handle and pulling it up.

The light from the sun gives us a small glimpse inside. A ladder descends down so far that I can’t see where it ends.

“Will you even fit?”

I shoot a glare at Cap but couldn’t stop the smirk if I wanted to. Cameron chuckles and I roll my eyes before stepping down on the first step.

“I’ll go first,” I say. “I don’t trust the feel of this ladder, so let’s just go one at a time.”

Cap wasn’t wrong. I really am almost too wide. The fabric of my shirt rubs against the walls as I make my way down.

When I reach the bottom, I send up my whistle call so Cap knows to send the next person down.

I take a moment to look around. As much as I want to run down this corridor, I know the smartest decision would be waiting for my backup.

“It’s so fucking dark,” Cooper whispers.

“Your eyes will adjust,” I tell him quietly. “I’ve found what I think might be the light switch, but it might be best if we leave it off. If there’s someone here, I would rather them not know until I shoot them in the fucking head.”

“That’s my kind of talk, brother,” Reaper says from behind me. “Proud of you.”

“Is that a light down there, or am I seeing things?” Cameron asks.

“I think it’s light shining from beneath a door,” I say, having already noticed it.

I take the lead and make my way down the long tunnel-like walkway. The width isn’t much larger than it was coming

down the ladder, so we go one man at a time. Reaching the door, I grab the regular handle and gently pull it open. The room is lit up brightly. Looking around, I see very outdated hazmat suits hanging on the walls, along with flashlights and what I assume are boxes of batteries.

On the other side of the very small room is a large steel door.

“Whoever this man was sure wasn’t playing games,” Cap says.

“Maybe,” Cameron says. “But shouldn’t these suits be on the other side of this door? It seems to defeat the purpose putting them out here where they could have gotten exposed to whatever it was they were afraid of.”

“There’s no telling what was going through their minds at the time,” Cap says.

“Is everything okay down there?”

I’m momentarily shocked by the sudden voice on all of our radios. I completely forgot I shoved one in my pocket earlier.

“We’re fine, Axe,” Cap answers back. “Go radio silent until I give the signal. However, based on the looks of this door, there’s a good chance we might lose signal once we enter.”

“I’ll wait for ten minutes. If I don’t hear back, I’m coming after you. Axe out.”

“I don’t think your plan for a silent entrance is going to happen,” Cooper says. “There’s no way in hell that door will open quietly.”

I grab part of the large round handle and turn. It gives a little resistance before releasing. Cooper was right, though. Between turning the handle and opening the door, any chance at sneaking in is gone.

Expecting to see an aged room filled with water, dry and canned food, blankets, and cots, I’m blown away by what I actually see when the door opens.

“What the fuck?” Cooper says, speaking all of our thoughts.

The walls are what I expected. Solid steel. However, instead of supplies, there are about eight tables, two in each row, scattered around the very large room. Each table has an assortment of scientific equipment. There are around a dozen white hazmat suits hanging on the far wall. These are in much better shape than the ones on the other side of the door.

“What’s going on?” Cameron asks.

I look from table to table, and that’s when I spot it.

“Crank,” I say.

“Crank?” Cooper repeats. “Crystal meth?”

I nod my head. They’ve made this old bunker into a meth lab.

“Those fucking idiots,” Cooper snarls. “One wrong move and they could have caused an explosion. Right below my baby sisters’ feet.”

I understand his anger. The steel walls might have contained any flames from the explosion, but the force of a meth explosion would have impacted the building above this place.

Pushing those thoughts aside, I look around some more.

“They didn’t leave very long ago,” Cap says. “This beaker is still warm. Look around quickly. We need to leave as soon as possible.”

Cameron tilts his head in confusion.

“Nothing is on,” he says. “Isn’t the dangerous part of cooking meth the actual cooking?”

“The waste is just as combustible and very unstable,” I explain. “Plus, they left in the middle of the process. None of us should be in this room, let alone without protective suits on.”

“I’m telling you, brothers,” Cameron says. “We’ve been watching this place like a hawk for hours. Hell, for days now, between all of us. Not a single soul came in or out of this building. In neither the front nor the back.”

“We’re missing something,” Cooper says.

“Well, it’s nothing in this room,” Cap sighs. “Let’s go. I want that door shut and sealed.”

My mind is a raging storm trying to think of what to do next. With each passing day of me not finding my woman, I feel myself fall deeper into agony. Duncan has helped keep me grounded, but I fear that losing Callie may be all I can take. I have known her for such a short time, but she’s become my whole world.

She’s my missing piece. The soul reason I keep going.

I will find her. I have to.

“I’m going to go and grab a few masks,” Cap says. “It’s a long shot, but we may be able to pull some prints or DNA of some other kind. There’s no way in hell these men don’t have a record. If we can get a name, just one name, then Reaper will make sure that one man gives us everyone else.”

“You better fucking believe it,” Reaper says.

I’m heading toward the thick steel door when Cap says, “Oh, fuck.”

I freeze, turning to make sure he’s alright.

He’s bending over and I wait for him to stand.

He does, but doesn’t turn around.

“What is it, Cap?” I ask.

Cap turns and holds out what he found.

My heart stops.

“This was the shirt Callie was wearing when I took her to the airport,” Cap says, his face grim.

“Open it up, Cap,” I say, not recognizing my own voice and not daring to move a single inch.

Looking grim, Cap starts to unfold the shirt and holds it out.

“They’re fucking dead,” Cooper says.

The shirt is ripped down the middle. But that isn’t the only thing that has my blood boiling.

Blood coats parts of the fabric. She's hurt.

Darkness threatens to take over. The peripheral parts of my sight fade, giving me tunnel vision. I'm on the verge of passing out.

Or blacking out.

My father used to do that when he was drunk. He never remembered anything he said or did the next day. Could something like that happen because of anger? Fear?

"Focus, brother," someone says close to my face. "Take a deep breath. Come on, man. Don't quit on me now. We need to go and find your woman."

"And make those fuckers pay for what they did to her and your son."

"Exactly. Take another deep breath, Beast. There's no way in hell we'll be able to get your big ass up that ladder."

It takes several minutes for my mind to calm down enough that my vision returns. A pain in my hand causes me to glance down. Blood runs from my clenched fist and drips to the floor.

"Don't worry, brother," Cap says when I glance from one face to another. "You didn't hurt anyone but yourself."

He nods to the steel door where the only evidence of my attack is the spots of my own blood smeared against the surface.

"I found something," Reaper says, his voice a bit muffled.

I grab Callie's shirt from Cap and roll it up before shoving it in my pocket. I have a special place for this when I find the person responsible for hurting my woman.

"Help me with this door, Beast," Cap says. "Let's make sure it's locked up tight. As soon as we get Callie back, we need to call this in. Everything needs to be carefully removed, and that's a job for experts."

Once we're sure the door is secure, we head back down the now lit tunnel.

“The second I turned on the lights, this bad boy was waiting for us.”

“Another door,” Cooper says.

“Yeah,” Reaper says. “Look.”

The door is just a basic door that you would see in any home. It’s completely out-of-place down here. This tunnel is mostly a large cylindrical tube that they used to line the walls. It’s nothing special. But the door is wooden, with a knocker on it.

I rush forward and shove the door open.

“It’s a path,” Cooper says. “Was there anything on that blueprint about this bunker being connected to others?”

“No,” Cap and I say at the same time.

“According to the copy I received,” Cap says, looking down the long tube. “You enter from beneath the stairs and the walkway turns left. Landing right beneath Callie’s bakery. There is nothing at all indicating that there are additional paths leading anywhere.”

“This explains why we haven’t seen any traffic,” Cameron says. “Cap said that it looked as if they just left and I know nobody entered or left this building while I was on watch.”

“I wonder how far ahead they are?” Cap says. “Okay, here’s what we’re going to do. Beast, I would prefer it if you stayed behind, but I already know what your response to that will be.”

I have never before wanted to punch my friend. It doesn’t matter if he chained me to a fucking tree. Nothing will stop me from walking down this path.

“So, I want you, Reaper, and Cooper to head forward,” he continues. “I’m going to take Axe and Cameron and we’re going to get backup. This is bigger than us, brother. We need help.”

“We don’t need help from the police,” I sneer. “I have plans for Roach that involve very illegal and brutal things.”

“Damn it, Beast,” Cooper sighs. “I’ve told you several times already that I’m a criminal lawyer. Stop saying shit like that in front of me.”

“I have news for you, Cooper,” I say, walking through the doorway. “By the time all of this is over, you’re going to see a lot of illegal shit you would rather not see. Including, but not limited to, me killing many, many Rubberheads.”

“Fuck,” he sighs. “Well, let’s go then.”

“I’m thinking a career change would be a wise choice,” Reaper tells him as we make our way through the dimly lit tunnel.

“You’re the one always dressed like you’re in court,” Cooper tells him. “Even with your fancy cut over your dress shirt, you look more like a lawyer than I do. Who are you out to impress?”

“I have no need to impress anyone,” Reaper answers. “I dress this way because it’s what I like. Not to mention that I look fucking good.”

Cooper chuckles and then no one else speaks. I’m not sure how long this tunnel is, but I can’t make it to the other end fast enough. I pick up my speed, feeling Cooper and Reaper doing the same.

Chapter Twenty

Callie

I've never understood the concept of God. Maybe that's because my parents never took me to church growing up, or maybe it's because I just never really sat down and thought about it. It's not that I don't believe, it's that I didn't even care.

Now that I'm dead, I care.

Is this my punishment for not going to church? To spend eternity in this black abyss of nothingness? My sweet baby boy is probably dancing with my parents in the clouds. Or whatever it is that is supposed to happen to you when you die.

If there's a heaven for people who believe in God and a hell for people who don't, then where do people go who choose neither?

Limbo?

It's not so bad, though. I could easily just float around with a blank mind. It might even be relaxing. Like being inside a hydraulic tank.

But for all of eternity? What would I eventually become? Just an empty soul?

"It's probably best if we lock the building down for a couple of weeks. At least until those Phantoms back off a bit."

"Lockdown means not even opening the door. This bitch is going to die, bloat, and stink up the place in a matter of days. No way, Prez. I'm going home."

My black abyss is suddenly gone and replaced by a blurry white wall.

Well, hell. I'm still alive.

BOOM!

Instantly, memories flood my mind of Duncan getting shot and falling to his death. I try my best to turn my head so that I can see him one last time.

It takes every ounce of strength, but I finally manage to do it.

Except, it isn't Duncan looking back at. It's the cold dead eyes of one of Roach's men.

"Don't worry about him, Sugar," I hear Roach say. "I wasn't going to let him survive, anyway. It's better that I got that task finished sooner rather than later."

"Where am I?" I ask.

Or, at least, I try to ask. Only a breath of air escapes my lips. I try to focus on my body, to move anything, and that's when it hits me. All the pain that I'm in comes roaring back with a vengeance. My mind must have somehow blocked it.

But it doesn't last long. Actually, in only a few seconds, it all stops. I sigh in relief as my eyes start to drift closed.

I want to fight it, to stay awake, because I know if I close my eyes, I'll never open them again.

"Finish her," I hear Roach order.

My body jolts as more thuds hit my side. Mocking laughter follows each one. They're beating me again. But it's okay. I don't feel anything. Just my body being rattled with each blow. No pain.

Warmth flows over my mind, and I want to smile. It almost feels like those all-encompassing hugs that Andy gives me. I've never been hugged so completely by someone before. I know that sounds strange, but being fat does that. It's hard to feel small. But, Andy makes me feel small, and cherished, and loved.

That's the warmth covering me at this moment. His love.

So, regardless of how tired my eyes are, or how much pain I might feel later, or the heartbreak of living a life without my beautiful son, I fight.

Physically, I can't move a muscle. But mentally, I give it my all. I do it for Andy. But I also fight for myself. For the promise of a life with the man I love.

But also... For revenge. Call me petty, but I don't want the man who killed my son behind bars. I want Roach dead. I want him to suffer unimaginable pain first, and then I want to sit inches from his face as the life drains from his eyes.

So, yes, I'm going to mentally fight for all it's worth.

Using every bit of strength I have left, I manage to lift my eyelids. Everything is blurry but I can make out shoe after shoe flying towards my body. They're still kicking me as I just watch. I can't feel anything and I know that's a bad sign, but I still watch.

And I fight.

BOOM!

BOOM!

BOOM!

Screaming echoes around the walls. The shoes stop swinging towards me and turn the opposite direction. My eyes burn, but I refuse to even blink. Something has distracted them and I want to make sure they aren't hurting anyone else.

Not that I can do anything about it, but I can remember. I will remember. Every face. Every word. Every laughter. Everything.

And they will pay.

Chapter Twenty-One

Beast

“Idiots,” Cooper whispers.

I couldn't agree more. It took us ten minutes of walking before we came to the end of the tunnel. We're met with a door similar to the one at the start, slightly ajar, with voices on the other side.

Reaper holds his hand out, indicating for us to stop. Pulling out his walkie, he uses a series of dots and dashes to send a message to Cap using the radios static. The walkie has a dots and dots button that can send out an SOS morse code style, but Reaper's idea will tell them exactly where to meet us. He repeats the code three times.

Due north, half a mile.

It will be much faster for them to reach whatever building is on the other side of this door from the street.

When we were in the army, Cap was a captain and the rest of us were lieutenants. When the government placed us together all those years ago, Cap kept his leading role, and we voted to have Axe as First Lieutenant and Reaper as Second since they had the most experience. Which means, if Cap isn't around, we look to Axe for orders. If neither of them are around, we look to Reaper.

Now, as Reaper holds his hands back up and gives off signals, I back down and let him take the lead without hesitation.

Visual communication is required to learn when you're a soldier. Reaper is saying he's going left, I'll take center and Cooper pans right. Then he says, shoot to wound, not kill. Turning, I prepare to whisper to Cooper the plans when he's already holding his gun out and turned slightly to the right.

He looks over at me and winks.

Alright, seems like he understood.

I step behind Cooper so he and Reaper can swing in their directions before I take center. Reaper counts down.

Three. Two. One.

He kicks his leg out; the door slamming against the wall. Within half a second, we are all in our positions. I take a quick moment to assess the situation. Rubberheads everywhere. Most with guns. I take aim and start shooting. Legs. Shoulders. Knees.

Oops, got that one in the head. My bad.

A door slams open on the other side of the room and Cap, Cameron, Christian, Axe, and Colton all rush inside. They make quick work of removing all weapons.

“Oh, no you don’t,” Cameron says to a male trying to run out of the door they just came in. He grabs him by the throat and shoves him back inside.

Rubberheads, a little over a dozen, lay wounded, cursing, or dead.

The man Cameron stopped from escaping looks around and that’s when I notice him. The same male who was outside of Callie’s bakery that first day.

Roach, the president of the Rubberheads.

“Where the fuck is she?” I demand, with barley restrained control.

Roach just laughs.

“Oh man,” he says. “You were so close. An hour earlier and you could have saved her.”

Cap kicks the back of the man’s knees and he falls to the floor, still laughing hysterically.

“Last warning,” I say, taking aim at his head.

I’m seconds away from pulling the trigger when I see his eyes glance right. He still has this shit-eating grin on his face, as if today is the best day of his life.

Lowering my gun, I walk in the direction that he was looking, but all I see are men in different stages of groaning all over the floor.

A few more steps and that's when I see her. Laying on the floor wearing only her jeans and shoes, is my Callie. Her skin is littered with black and blue bruises, cuts, and even bite marks.

I rush to her side and fall to my knees. I want so desperately to pull her into my arms, but I don't dare touch her.

Fearing the worst, I place my fingers on her neck, checking for a pulse.

"She's alive," I shout.

"Ambulance is already on its way," someone says.

"Baby," I say, tears clouding my vision. "Oh, I'm so sorry."

Gently, I move the hair covering her face and am surprised to see that her eyes wide open. Almost comically wide.

My first thought was that she was actually dead. But then her eyes move up.

"Oh, baby," I say, laying down on my side so she can see me. "I'm right here, sweetheart. I'm right here."

"Sry," she mumbles.

"I'm sorry, baby," I say, brushing her cheek with the tip of my finger. "I can't understand you."

"Killed Dun."

Killed Dun?

"No, baby," I say, trying to smile for her. "Our boy is alive. He's at the hospital and waiting for us to come back and take him home. He's fine, baby. He's not dead."

A sob breaks free from her swollen face and my heart shatters. My poor baby lay here suffering from what these fuckers did to her, and the whole time she thought Duncan was dead.

How did she manage to stay alive? I know stronger men who would have succumbed to death much sooner.

“Beast, they’re here,” Cap says. “Let them help her.”

Jumping to my feet, I move away, and Callie starts whimpering.

“I’m still here,” I say loudly. “Just look up, baby. I’m right here.”

For the first time, I’m thankful to be a beast of a man. I stand taller and wider than every man in this room. Moving her eyes upwards, her lips raise when she sees me.

“Love,” she whispers.

“I love you,” I whisper back.

“Neck secured,” an EMT says. “Backboard in place. On my count, three, two.”

The two EMT workers lift her and place her on the cot before wheeling her out.

I stop by Cap on my way out.

“I want...”

“It’s already taken care of, brother,” Cap says.

Looking around, I can’t find Roach anywhere.

“We also have the people who have been torturing her,” he tells me. “One of these fuckers squealed like a pig. The question is, do you want us to handle them, or do you want us to wait?”

That’s not in question at all.

“Wait,” I say. “When my family is in my home safe and sound, I plan to have a nice long conversation with them all. First, I need to see the extent of Callie’s injuries before I decide what type of *conversations* we’ll be having.”

“Sounds good, brother,” he says. “It turns out that the reason they wanted Callie’s building was to start an undercover meth business. The pig said they were going to start a small bar to disguise their operation. I guess they spent

the past year digging the tunnel out to connect to the bunker under the bakery. They were almost finished with their plan when Callie bid a higher price for the building. It's just six buildings down, brother. They've been here the whole time and we never even knew it."

The building we're in just looks like an old shop of some kind. There's a tv, and some broken down chairs but apart from that, it's just an old building. It's no wonder it never drew any attention. The Rubberheads have several locations, all of which we knew about.

Except for this one.

"Sir, we're heading out."

I nod at the EMT.

"Let's use our contacts to keep Callie's brothers' names out of this," I say. "They lead honest lives that could ruin if word got around about their involvement."

"I can do that," he says. "We still haven't found the person responsible for messing with all of our security equipment, but you don't need to be involved in that right now. Go be with your woman."

So, I do. I rush to the ambulance, and for the second time this week, climb in the back and squeeze myself between the cot and the seat.

"Cover her up," I demand, when I see that she's still shirtless.

"I'm sorry, sir," the woman says. "I need to assess her wounds. I promise to be respectful."

Callie's eyes are still wide open and she just stares at me. Almost as if she's afraid to blink and find herself back with those men.

"Everything is going to be okay, baby," I say. "You're safe now."

Still, she keeps her eyes wide open. I don't think she blinked more than three times on the whole trip to the hospital.

“Are you in any pain, ma’am?”

Has an EMT ever asked such a stupid ass question before? Of course, she’s in pain. I’m in pain just looking at her.

“No,” Callie whispers.

Fuck. That’s not good.

We make it to the hospital in half the time it would normally take. Callie is rushed from the ambulance straight into the building.

I stand back while the doctors do what they need to do.

Five minutes later, Callie is being prepped for emergency surgery.

“She has internal bleeding,” the doctor tells me as I watch them rush away with the love of my life. “She’s going to get a quick scan before surgery so we can see how many bones we need to fix.”

“What are her odds?”

I didn’t even notice Cooper standing beside me.

“We’re going to do everything we can,” the doctor says. “But if you want honesty, her odds are not that great. One of her lungs has collapsed and there’s a risk of a bone shard piercing her vital organs. I can’t tell you more until after the tests come back.”

“Thank you, doctor. We’ll be upstairs in ICU room three-seventy-four with their son. Please, let us know of any updates.”

He nods and walks away.

“Come on, man. Your boy needs you.”

Numbly, I walk beside Cooper as we make our way back to Duncan.

When I’m sitting beside my sleeping son’s bed, I do something I don’t think I’ve ever done in my entire life.

I pray. I pray to a god that I never really liked. A god who lets harm come to these women and children that I risk my life

protecting. But, a god, who if he wanted, could heal my family.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Beast

We've been in the hospital now for six weeks. Duncan was able to go home after the first week. He and his uncles were staying at my house, but they had to eventually leave and head back home.

They waited until Callie was in the clear before they did, though. Now, Duncan is staying with Cap, Anna, and Bitsy.

"He thinks if he gives her enough milk, she'll be strong enough to walk across the floor."

Callie laughs as Anna tells her about Duncan's latest antics.

Unfortunately, children are not allowed on the ICU floor, and due to covid restrictions, they're also not allowed in patient rooms, so she hasn't been able to see him in person.

Hearing Callie laughs settles my heart.

The surgeon said he's never seen someone with insides as broken as hers had been. He said it's like she got hit by a train.

She died twice on the operating table and again the next morning. I still haven't recovered from that.

Now, the swelling in her face and body have gone down, the bruises have all but faded, and she's wearing a hard cast on one of her feet.

"Do you want us to keep him a little longer until you can get settled?" Anna asks.

I smile, already knowing her answer.

"Absolutely not," she says firmly. "I mean, I appreciate you more than you will ever know, but I miss him something terrible. I promise to take it easy."

As if I would have it any other way. As soon as Callie was moved from ICU to patient care, I told her I was moving her and Duncan into my house. She started to protest, but then smiled and accepted her fate.

Everything she and Duncan owned we're moved the next day.

"Your house is ready," Anna tells us. "Marisol and I were over there just this morning making sure that you have everything you need. The fridge is stocked and all of your things are put away. You just need to go home and rest."

Callie smiles.

"Alright," Anna says, slapping her knees. "I'm going to go and get Duncan ready to go home. It's going to be difficult trying to talk him out of taking Bitsy with him. He's a really good big cousin."

He really is. He loves that little girl. Hopefully, one day, he can also be a really awesome big brother.

When Anna leave, I sit on the edge of the bed, lean down and kiss my woman.

"I love you," I tell her. Something I do consistently throughout the day.

"I know," she giggles. "Thank you for taking care of me. For taking care of Duncan."

I don't say anything. She knows where I stand on this. They are mine to take care. Mine to love. One day, she'll truly believe that.

"Here you are," Nurse Marsha says. "Discharge papers, prescriptions, and future appointments. It's time to get you out of this hospital, Callie."

Callie reaches her hand to me and I gently help her sit up. Unfortunately, due to the amount of times she was kicked in the spine, she has permanent back trauma and she will have trouble walking for the rest of her life. Even standing too long can cause a flare up.

Callie's heart broke into pieces when she realized that she might not ever be able to reopen her bakery. The task of bending over, lifting heavy object, and rushing around while working could easily cause her back to give out on her.

For now, the bakery will remain closed until she decides on what to do. No matter what her decision, I will be there to support her the whole way.

She gives me most of her weight as we walk to the door so she can sit in the wheelchair. The first few times we tried this, she didn't lean on me much at all. Something about not wanting to cause me harm with her weight.

I didn't say anything, I just glared at her. It seemed to do the trick. One day, she's going to believe that I think she's the perfect fucking size and weight. I love that she has meat on her bones. And, in no way, shape or form, is she too big for me to carry.

"Let's go home," she smiles after sitting down. "I can't wait to get this cast off. Maybe walking won't be too bad, even with my bad back."

"Everything is going to work out just fine," I say, taking the chair from the nurse. "I'm going to be the best nurse you've ever had."

"Definitely the sexiest," she giggles.

I smile, my heart lifting.

I'm taking my family home.

Finally.

Thank fuck.

Epilogue

Callie

Seven months. That's how long it's been since they rescued me. Seven long months of healing, readjusting to my new life and sexual frustration.

Yep, you heard that right. I am so freaking sexually frustrated that I'm about to explode. Andy is trying so hard to be gentle with me that I'm almost to the point of begging him to tie me up and gag me.

Not that I'm into that type of stuff, but I'm desperate.

Duncan is spending the night with his favorite cousin tonight. So, I'm going to make my move. And, I swear, if that man tells me no one more time, I'm going to tie him down and have my wicked way with him the way that I want.

"He's on his way back. Have fun."

I laugh at the winky face at the end of Anna's text.

She and Marisol both know of my plans and fully approve.

Game time.

I rush to our room and quickly change into the sexy outfit Marisol, Anna, and I picked out the other day. It's a red babydoll chemise lingerie bodysuit. When I saw that the booty part had nothing covering it, I instantly knew that it was the one. I have never met a man who loves a big butt as much as Andy does.

And a big butt is something I have plenty of.

It takes some maneuvering, but I manage to figure it out. Looking in the mirror, I can't help but admire my reflection. I've never thought I looked good in anything before, let alone something as scandalous as this. I have come a long way these past six months with the help of Andy. There isn't a day that goes by when he isn't telling me how beautiful I look.

He even has Duncan doing it.

When I hear his truck pull into the driveway, I turn off the lights and just bask in the glow of the candles.

When he enters the house, I rush to the bed and position myself on my side as sexy as I can. I'm not sure if it looks sexy, but that's okay. He'll understand.

"Baby, are you sleeping? Is everything okay?"

Rolling my eyes, I let out a little sigh. He's always worried something is wrong. It's taken a lot of therapy to get through everything that happened. For me and Duncan both. But we're in a good place.

I've never felt more happy, or horny, than I do right now.

I choose not to say anything and just wait.

Seconds later, he's pounding up the stairs. My heart races when he opens the door. Will he like what he sees?

"Holy fuck," he moans, pausing in the doorway.

"I'm tired of waiting for you to see that I'm okay," I tell him openly. "I'm not going to break, Andy."

"Are you sure, baby?" he asks softly, still frozen by the door. "I want you more than my next breath. I crave being balls deep inside of that wet pussy. But I refuse to cause you any pain."

Sighing, I do the only thing I can. I gather up my courage, climb to my hands and knees facing him, before slowly turning around.

When I'm in position, I lower my upper half to the bed and just wait.

He can see where I stand.

The next move is his.

"That is the most beautiful sight I have ever seen," he groans. "Look at the fucking ass. Your pussy is weeping for me, baby."

"Then why are you still standing by the door?" I ask. "I'm submitting my whole self to you, Andy. I don't want easy. I

don't want slow. I need you to fuck me like you say you want to. I need you to claim me as yours in every way. Show me that you crave me as much as I crave you."

Moments go by and he doesn't say anything.

Sighing, I move to sit up but a hand presses against my shoulders, pushing me back down to the bed.

"I can't be gentle with you, Callie," he says roughly, his huge palm messaging my ass. "That's why I've kept my distance when it comes to fucking you. I won't be able to hold back and I am fucking terrified of hurting you."

"The only thing you're going to hurt is my pussy, Andy," I say bravely. "And that's a pain I am desperately craving from you right now."

Thick fingers enter my pussy.

"You're already wet and ready for me," he groans. "I could just push my cock right inside of you, baby. The stretch would burn, but I think my girl can take it."

"I can," I moan. "I can totally take it. Please, Andy. Please."

I will beg until I die if it means he fucks me. I've seen his cock numerous times since I moved in. I've taken showers with him multiple times a week. Even after I've healed and could stand on my own. He's so sexy. The sexiest man I've ever seen. His cock is thick and long and, man, do I want to feel that burn.

"First," he mutters before removing his fingers and replacing it with his tongue.

"Yes," I moan. "Please, Andy. I need more."

He moves his tongue to my clit, flicking it back and forth, before reinserting his fingers deep inside of me.

"So fucking good," he breathes against my pussy. Using his other hand, he squeezes my inner thigh. "Fucking perfect," he says, moving to kiss every inch of thigh that I have. And, trust me, I have a lot.

“Does that feel good, baby?” he asks, moving his fingers in and out slowly. “Does my baby want more?”

“So much more,” I moan. “Please.”

Everything stops and I almost die on the spot.

“Don’t move a fucking inch,” he snarls. “As much as I want to eat that pussy, and baby, I will eat that pussy until you have nothing left to give, I need to claim you. My baby craves my cock and so I’m going to give it to her. But I’m not going to be gentle, Callie. If it’s too much, I need you to say *red*. Do you understand?”

“Not gentle, too much, red, got it. Please, Andy.”

It takes him way to freaking long to remove his jeans and climb back on the bed.

“Ready baby?” he asks.

“Andy,” I demand.

With a chuckle, he places the tip of his cock on my pussy and surges forward. No warning, no inserting the head and waiting. No teasing. He just impales me.

“God, yes,” I scream.

His dick is so freaking huge, I feel as if he’s tearing me in two. But I need more.

I don’t even need to beg this time.

With one hand on each side of my ass, Andy lets loose. I can’t catch my breath. I can’t do anything but feel.

“So fucking good,” he grunts. “My new favorite place.”

He squeezes my ass hard enough to cause bruises and thrusts his hips faster.

“An..nnn..dddy,” I say. My body is being bombarded with his body so hard and so fast that I can’t get out a single word. “Mm...ore.”

Andy just laughs and goes harder.

“FUCK,” he yells. “Perfection. I fucking love you, baby.”

I can't respond. All sense of communication eludes me. Pressure is building and I'm on the verge of a nuclear freaking meltdown.

"That's it baby," he says. "Give it to me. Right. Fucking. Now."

I lose it. I've reached the tip of the precipice and now I'm falling in the most pleasurable way possible.

"FUCK YES," he yells. "FUCKING SQUEEZE MY COCK BABY."

Warm gushes of Andy's pleasure shoots deep inside of me. I'm being loved from the inside out. Andy owns all of me, and I wouldn't have it any other way.

"Holy hell," he sighs, falling to his side, his dick still hard and deep inside of me. "Don't move, baby, I'm not finished. I'm going to need to do that again. I just need to catch my breath. You're a fucking vixen."

I laugh and settle against his side.

"I love you, too," I say. "Thank you for not giving up on me, Andy."

"Always baby, always."

Three minutes later, when Andy is back to breathing normally, he removes himself, tosses me on my back and proceeds to, in his words, eat my pussy until I have nothing left to give.

My bakery has been officially closed down. My dream ruined in the course of a week. But Andy has somehow made me even happier than I was before.

My dream doesn't have to end just because I can't physically run a business. I can still bake from home. And I do. Daily.

But it doesn't matter. Andy, Duncan, my brothers and my new family will help me figure everything out.

I even got my revenge. Andy wouldn't let me stay when they killed those guys, but I got to witness some pretty brutal

things happen to them. Things I never thought I would enjoy and probably wouldn't if they were done to men who didn't do anything to harm me or my son. But watching Roach suffer the way he did was a balm, soothing the parts of my broken soul that he took.

Hours after Andy is finished using my body until he's fully satisfied, I fall into a dream-filled sleep. Children, many, run around our home. Duncan is a teenager and has since fought against his stutter. Andy and I are married and happy. Somehow I know that it's all just a dream, but when I wake up the next morning beside the man who owns every inch of heart, I know that it wasn't just a dream after all.

It was a vision. A vision of the future we will make.

All because this beast of a man fell in love with a fat baker.

How freaking awesome is that?

Reaper

I smile at my brother Beast, and his beautiful woman, Callie. They went through hell within the first month of being together. Anger courses through my body towards those damn rubberheads.

We've gotten rid of two of their presidents in under a year, but they still won't fucking leave.

"I was thinking we should have a cookout," Marisol says.

Marisol has grown into a brave and confident woman. After Callie told Axe about the windows in her shop that keep the sun's rays out, he's had his house as well as the clubhouse fitted with them. Now, she can walk around freely during the day without her already sensitive skin being burned.

We're all sitting in Missy's office when the phone rings.

"Would you care to get that, Cap?" Missy asks as she runs out of the room. "I'm about to piss myself."

Grunting, Cap walks to Missy's desk and hits the speaker button on the office phone.

"Cap's security," he answers.

Silence.

"Hello?"

The office number isn't listed and we don't hand it out to any companies. This number is strictly listed on the cards we place in lucrative places that women in need would be able to see.

So, whoever is on the other end of that line most likely needs our help. We stay silent, waiting for her to answer.

"If you need help," Cap says softly. "Please, just say something."

Silence.

"Alright, honey. I'll stay on the phone for as long as you need. I won't leave you. I can do the talking until you're ready.

My name is Cap. Since you found this number, that means you know what I do.

I'm currently sitting in a room with my team and I have you on speakerphone. Looking around at all of my brother's faces, they are all just as worried about you as I am."

Cap pauses, waiting to see if she replies.

"I have a daughter," he smiles.

Sometimes, we get phone calls like this. The person is too afraid to say anything and we've found that if we just keep talking about random things, they usually build up enough courage to talk.

"She loves cookies," Anna says, smiling. "Just like her daddy here. My name is Anna, by the way."

"But then again," Marisol adds, stepping closer to the phone. "Who doesn't love cookies? My name is Marisol, and even I am a cookie addict."

Even though I'm worried about the woman whose breath I can only just make out, I smile.

Each person says something softly while introducing themselves. Then it's my turn.

"Hello, sweetheart," I say, not introducing myself on purpose. I can image the look on her face when I say my name is Reaper. "Can you do me a favor? If you are currently in a safe place, will you press a button?"

Nothing.

The tension in the room quickly escalates.

"Alright," I continue. "You're not in a safe place, but are you currently alone?"

Beep.

"Good job, sweetheart," I praise. "Is there a reason you're not talking? Is there something wrapped around your face preventing you from speaking?"

Silence.

She's just scared.

"I understand."

I step up next to the desk and sit on the edge, just staring down at the office phone. "My name is Reaper, and I know that's a scary name, but I would never hurt you. No one here would. We really just want to make sure you get help. Will you please talk to us?"

I wait with abated breath. After a minute passes, I assume that she's not yet ready.

Cap presses the mute button.

"We need to get her talking before whoever she's hiding from comes back."

Nodding, I wait for Cap to unmute the phone.

"I know that you're..."

"Please help."

The looks around the room are just as shocked as I am. Not for the fact that the voice finally spoke, but because it's clearly a male's voice.

"Hello?" he whispers.

"I'm here, sweetheart," I say calmly. "Can you tell us where you are?"

"I found this card in the women's bathroom at the truck stop," he whispers quickly. "I don't know what else to do. I'm so scared."

"Can you tell us the name of the truck stop, honey?" Cap asks. I'm not shocked that he continued to use that term of endearment, even though we now know that we're talking to a man. Cap has a big heart when it comes to anyone needing help. Even men.

Missy walks back in the room, and Anna walks over to quickly fill her in.

"It's red," he whispers.

I know it's not a lot to go on and I can feel the frustration throughout the room, but Missy is already on her tablet.

"What's your name, sweetheart?" I ask.

"Sammy," he says, fear clear in his voice.

"Alright, Sammy. We're going to do everything we can to find you. I need you to be brave for me, alright? Can you think of any details about where you're being held that might help us?"

"Uhm, Master's house is close to a place with animals. I hear lots of barking."

Master? Shadow mouths?

My stomach drops at his possible situations.

"Hi Sammy, my name is Missy. Can you tell me how far away the truck stop was from where you're being held?"

"Not far," he mumbles. It sounds like he's moving around and something is brushing against the mouthpiece of the phone. "We had to go meet Master's men. Maybe ten minutes. The Mens bathroom door was locked so Master told me to use the other one. That's where I found your card. I repeated the number over and over so that I wouldn't forget it."

"That was very smart, sweetheart," I praise. "My friend Missy is already narrowing down your location."

"Oh, god," he says frantically. "He's coming. He's coming. I have to go. I'll get into trouble if he notices his phone even moved."

FUCK FUCK FUCK!

"Listen, when you hang up, I want you to go and delete your recent call. Do you understand?" I rush to say. "Then place the phone in the exact spot where he had it. Can you do that for me?"

"I'm so scared, Reaper."

Hearing him say my name with so much fear in his voice has more anger than I've ever felt consume my every thought.

“Hang up, Sammy,” I demand. “Do as I said and delete this number so he doesn’t know you’ve called someone.”

“WHY THE FUCK IS THIS DOOR LOCKED BOY?”

“Oh, no,” he whispers right before the call ends.

“FUCK.”

“Can you triangulate that call?” Cap asks Missy.

“Working on it, big buy. It keeps jumping from tower to tower. I think it might have been a burner phone.”

When the phone rings, it takes everything I have to remain calm.

“No one talk,” Missy orders as she marches to the desk and pushes Cap to the side.

Pressing the speaker button, she smiles before saying in a bubbly voice, “Thank you for calling our twenty-four seven advanced weather forecast. The sun is shining high in the sky today as the temperature reaches a whopping ninety-three degrees. Although the sun has graced us with her beauty, it won’t last. Later this evening, clouds will roll in, bringing with them the storm we’ve all been waiting for, lasting through the evening and continuing until early tomorrow morning. Look forward to a temperature drop as the low will be seventy degrees. Thank you for calling our advance weather forecast hotline. Be sure to call back tomorrow for more updates. Have a nice day.”

“Why did you call the fucking weather?” the man yells. “And why the fuck did you touch my phone?”

“I’m sorry, Master,” I hear Sammy cry. “I just wanted to see if it was going to rain.”

“Why the fuck would you ca..”

The call drops.

My hand itches to throw the damn phone across the room.

“Come on,” Cap says. “We need to sit down and go over everything Sammy told us. It won’t be easy, but we will find him.”

Cap glances in my direction with a raised brow.

Unclenching my fist, I straighten my already perfectly straight tie and shrug. I have no idea what the fuck is wrong with me.

“There’s no way we’re going to find this man with the little bit of details he gave us,” Shadow speaks up. “We will just have to wait and see if he calls back.”

“Found him.”

I watch a smiling Missy as she connects her phone with the wall-mounted tv.

“Well,” she continues as a map of the tri-state area pops onto the screen. “I found his about location. He said he found the card at a red truck-stop that was only about ten minutes away from where he’s being kept. Which, he also said, was near someplace that housed many dogs.”

“We’ve put cards all over the place,” I gently remind her.

“True, Reaper,” she tells me. “But this is the only truck stop in this area that’s even remotely near other places. The rest are way out on the highway about an hour away. So, I’ve lowered his location down to here.”

She circles a large area.

That’s still a lot of fucking places to search.

“Missy, can you call your woman to come and stay with you all while we go look?” Cap asks.

“She’s already on her way,” she smiles. “She should be here any second now.”

“I’ll meet you all at the truck stop,” I say, not willing to wait another second to start looking. “Missy, can you see if there are any security cameras there? Maybe it caught Sammy on video.”

“On it,” she tells me. “Be careful, guys. We have no idea what his *master* is capable of.”

Whoever has Sammy will soon be fucking dead.

I grab my leather vest from where I had it hanging and head to my bike. After straddling it, I pause. What if we need to escape quickly and Sammy won't be able to hang on?

With a small change of plan, I get off my bike and head for Cap's car instead.

"I'm driving," Cap says. "Looks like Reaper is with me. Shadow and Beast, you two follow behind on your bikes. Axe, ride with us in case we need help with Sammy."

Suppressing my growl, I climb into the passenger seat.

If Sammy needs help with anything, I will be the only one doing the helping.

"Are you alright, brother?" Axe asks. "I've never seen you so ruffled."

"I don't fucking know," I admit, slightly agitated. "Something about this man has my emotions all over the place."

"I would say it's because you have this need to save people," Axe says. "But we've been at this for a very long time and I've never seen you react this way. It must be Sammy. If I didn't know any better, I would say you've just heard the voice of your soul mate and you're fucking furious that he's in danger."

He's not wrong. But I won't justify his smirk with an answer.

"It's going to take us days to search this location," Cap says, starting the car. "Even with the five of us. We can only pray that this guy is as safe as he can be until we find him."

"He better fucking be," I say, loosening my tie.

The End

NOTE TO READERS

Reviews are an author's best friend. It would mean a great deal to me if you would consider leaving a review on Amazon or Goodreads. Even just a few words would be amazing. I would absolutely love hearing what you have to say about this story.

I like to do random giveaways. Sometimes it's a signed book, or sometimes it could just be a bookmark. You never know with me. If you would like to enter to win one of these random giveaways or want to stay up to date on all future releases, join us at [Carol's Infernal Riders](#).

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About the Author

Carol Dawn was born in Maysville, Kentucky, USA, under the name Carolyn Jacobs. Carol is a stay-at-home mom where she spends her days making pb&j sandwiches, picking up toys, and giving her kids more cuddles than they want.

At the young age of five, Carol received a reading medallion for reading over twenty-one books in an eight-week period. So, her literary journey began. She wrote poems, songs, short stories, and read many books.

Carol has a slight (MASSIVE) obsession with alpha male/insta-love romance books. If she isn't reading about them, she's writing about them.

When she isn't writing, reading, or playing mom, you will find her watching re-runs of Stargate SG1, Star Trek, cooking, coloring mandalas, or performing her favorite songs for her invisible audience.

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