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BEST
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PLANS
RAVEN SOULS MC
CANDICE WRIGHT

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Best Laid Plans

Raven Souls MC

Book 7

Candice Wright

OceanofPDF.com

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Also by Candice Wright
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Book Description

I thought I'd found my happily ever after until I realized it was all a lie.
But to escape the man I'd loved, I had to kill the woman I once was.
Knowing he'd hunt me to the ends of the earth, I assumed someone else's identity, reshaping all my good, bad, and ugly parts to fit her mold.
My history, my experiences, even my name, all belong to her.
I thought it was enough, but after years in hiding, I'm still not safe.
See, hunters don't forget about their prey; they lie in wait, setting traps, patiently waiting for you to fall. Only this time it's not me that falls. It's the MC.
My secrets kept me safe, but they made the club a target, and though I didn't pull the trigger, a brother's blood still coats my hands.
If the club casts me out for what I've done, I'll be at the mercy of the man who won't think twice about killing everyone I care about, including the man I'm falling for.
All because he wants to love me…to death.
And if he can't have me, no one can.

This book is M/F.

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Content Warning:

Best Laid Plans contains some very dark elements that some readers may find uncomfortable, including, but not limited to:

- Stalking
- Mentions of medical malpractice
- Police profiling and abuses of power
- Mention of previous sexual assault
- Violence
- Mentions of emotional and psychological abuse
- Mentions of domestic violence (side character)
- Mentions of a side character(s) with cancer

Please read with caution. Thank you.

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“If I'm free, it's because I'm always running.”

~Jimi Hendrix

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Prologue

Then

LIL

THE MOON IS FULL, casting an eerie glow across the former ghost town. Though it leaves me unsettled, I know there are worse things to fear than ghosts.

I hesitate before I knock. Every time I come here, I risk exposing more of myself than I can afford to. Yet here I am anyway.

I'm just making things harder for myself in the long run. The man I'm falling for will never be able to love me back because the woman he sees is a carefully crafted lie. I can't tell him the truth, so it sits between us like a bomb ready to explode. In my head, I swear I can even hear the *tick tick*—the countdown that would mark the end of us, before we ever really had the chance to begin.

Shuffling from foot to foot, I keep my emotions locked down before they bubble up and spill over. All these doubts and worries have me twisted up inside so much that I swear I'm going to give myself an ulcer. I'm just about to turn around and head back to the saloon when the door opens. And there he is, standing in the doorway, the light behind him acting like a spotlight, highlighting all the reasons I can't bring myself to walk away.

"Lil? Everything okay?"

I swallow, suddenly feeling tongue-tied, which isn't like me. I've had to talk myself both into and out of so many situations over the last few years

that words rarely fail me, but something about this man always leaves me feeling off kilter.

“Everything’s good. I’m just at a loose end and wondered if you wanted to watch a movie or something.”

As a club girl, my job is pretty much to be at the brothers’ beck and call, except when it comes to prospects. Prospects are not allowed to sleep with the club girls until after they’ve been patched in. Not sure if it’s supposed to be an incentive for them or a layer of protection for us when seventy percent of prospects fail to earn their patch.

It had never been an issue with me. I was not one of those girls with stars in their eyes who thought one of these rough-and-tumble men would fall hopelessly in love with them, claim them as their old lady, ensuring they had the club’s complete protection. I watched it play out with Legs, one of the other club girls. She loved Midas so much it hurt to watch sometimes. The light in her eyes dims a little more each day as he chips away at her happiness. Things had turned around a lot for them lately, so I was holding out hope that if nothing else came of this shitstorm that was brewing, she’d at least get the happily-ever-after she deserves.

I could want that for others even if I’d never have it for myself. I’d fucked up too many times, made too many stupid decisions, caused too much pain. Girls like me didn’t get happily-ever-afters, and I was okay with that. All I wanted was a place to call home and somewhere to lay my head at night without fearing what might be waiting for me in the shadows.

“A movie sounds good. How about you come in and make yourself comfy, and I go raid the kitchen for snacks.”

I smile, relieved he didn’t turn me away, and head inside. I make it a few steps in before Lucy, Power’s German shepherd, greets me. I hold out my palm and wait for her to approach. Lucy doesn’t come around the saloon much. She’s not much of a people person, preferring to stay next to Powers. I can respect that. As a K9 explosives detection dog, she’s learned to always be on guard, which makes her wary of people in general. As much as I get it, it makes me sad too. I’m one of the lucky ones that she seems to like, though, and I don’t take that lightly.

When she sniffs my hand and leans into me, I drop to my knees and give her a good scratch. “Hey, pretty girl. I missed you.” She licks my face, making me chuckle. When her tail starts wagging, I press a kiss to her head.

I look up and see Powers watching us with a look on his face I don't even try to decipher. "Something wrong?"

"Not a thing. Are you in the mood for something sweet or savory?"

"Eh, both?"

He chuckles. "I don't know why I even ask anymore."

I shrug. I'm an equal opportunities snacker.

"TV's still not working in the living room, so head on up to the bedroom. Take Lucy with you."

"Alright. You sure you don't need any help?"

"Nope, I've got it. Help yourself to a T-shirt or a pair of sweats. You know where they are." He heads to the kitchen before I can say thanks. I watch him leave before making my way upstairs, with Lucy walking up behind me.

I take a deep breath when I push the door to his room open, letting his unique scent wrap itself around me. I don't know what it is, but whenever I breathe it in, I feel my whole body settle. Lucy jumps up on the bed as I move over to the dresser, pulling out a soft T-shirt that looks like it's been worn and washed dozens of times. I lay it on the bed as I strip out of my tank top and bra. I pull the shirt over my head before slipping off my short cargo shorts and kicking my flip-flops aside.

The T-shirt reaches me mid-thigh, which actually makes it longer than my shorts, so I don't bother with sweatpants. I crawl onto the bed, grab the remote from the nightstand, and turn on the TV. Lucy lifts her head and lays it in my lap. I stroke my fingers through her fur as I flip through what's on.

Powers walks in holding a tray of food and pauses for a second, his eyes moving up my bare legs to the hem of his T-shirt. "That's my favorite shirt."

"I'm guessing that means I can't keep it?"

"You keep stealing my shirts, you won't have anything to wear when you come over."

I swallow, picturing myself sprawled out naked on his bed, his powerful frame looming over me.

As if knowing where my thoughts have gone, he growls, placing the tray on the bed before he walks around and leans over me. "You're playing a dangerous game, Lil."

"I don't know what you're talking about," I tell him innocently.

She shakes his head, his lips twitching in response to my blatant lie. Both of us want each other—neither of us has done a very good job of hiding that—but we respect each other too much to jeopardize our respective positions here. When he's a patched brother, though…I rub my legs together. He shakes his head before reaching down and tugging his T-shirt over his head, revealing a six-pack worthy of an underwear model. I try to remember how to swallow without choking on my tongue.

His smirk tells me he knows exactly what he's doing. Well, two can play that game. I squirm a little, and the hem of the T-shirt I'm wearing rides up my legs.

His eyes drop to the newly exposed skin before he licks his lips. "Fuck. I'm going to take a shower. Cue up a movie." His voice comes out gruffer than usual. I nod, eyes on his hand as it moves to his fly. He pops the buttons open, showing the outline of his rock-hard cock encased in a pair of black boxers.

I manage to bite back a whimper, my eyes moving up his body to safer territory. They land on the dog tags around his neck. I reach for them without thought as he bends down to unlace his boots. He stops when I close my fist around them, tipping his head up to look at me, my mouth hovering an inch from his.

"Why do you still wear these?" I ask softly as Lucy lifts her head and groans before jumping down and climbing into her own bed, clearly sick of our shenanigans.

"Habit mostly. There is something comforting about knowing that if something happens to me, I'll never be lost. These will ensure that people will know my name and that I'll make it back home, come what may."

The lump in my throat makes it difficult to swallow, but I somehow manage. I need to get a grip on myself before I start crying. To distract us both, I reach up and kiss the tip of his nose, making him laugh. "Go get showered and hurry up before I eat all the snacks."

"I buy them for you anyway. What's mine is yours." He winks before disappearing into the bathroom.

I flop back down and gaze up at the ceiling, wondering what it must be like to have the comfort of always being able to find your way back. I wish I had that. But I'm afraid not even my death would unravel all the lies I told to get me here. I spent years trying to get lost. I just never realized how lonely that would be.

With a sigh, I pick up the remote and start scrolling again, forgetting all about those dog tags.

I had no idea at the time that they'd be my lifeline or that they would indeed lead me home, even if home were now a place I wasn't sure I was welcome anymore.

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Chapter One

Now

LIL

I CAN TASTE PENNIES.

Something sparks my memories from another time and place—flashing lights, pain, and the taste of pennies—only it wasn't pennies. It was blood.

I try to open my eyes, and I do eventually, but it takes far longer than it should. I groan, my body aching as if I have the flu. Wait, do I have the flu?

When I can focus, I realize I'm in a hospital bed. I shut my eyes again, wondering if I'm dreaming. But when I open them, nothing has changed. Shit, I can't be here. I move to lift my arm, but feel something heavy on it. I glance down and sob when I see a familiar head of hair.

He must hear me. Powers's head snaps up, his eyes clashing with mine.

"Powers," I whimper, unable to believe this is happening. "No, no, you can't be here. Oh god, he'll kill you."

His face hardens as he reaches for me, but panic claws at my insides with poison-tipped needles. "Hey, hey, calm down." He cups my face, moving so that his nose is touching mine. "Nobody is going to touch me."

"No, you don't understand—"

"I do, Lil. We know all about James fucking Taylor. We know exactly who he is. What we don't know is who you are."

My shoulders heave under the weight of all my lies. I feel like everything I've built has come tumbling down on top of me. The room

starts to spin, and my vision turns hazy. Somewhere in the back of my head, I know I'm not getting enough oxygen, but I can't seem to remember how to breathe.

Flashes of a life gone by play in my head—snippets in rotation like an old-fashioned zoetrope spinning wildly out of control. Love, hate, anger, pain, guilt, despair, all weave themselves into a cord that wraps itself around my neck and pulls tight.

I hear shouting in the distance, but I can't make out the words, only the urgency. A sharp prick almost pulls me from the dizzying horrors dragging me back down memory lane. Before the monsters can open their mouths and clamp their jaws into me, everything stops, and I slowly float away.

When I next wake up, my head is clearer, and the panic has receded. Judging from the woozy feeling, it's not because I've processed shit on my own. I open my eyes and find more familiar faces. Havoc and Powers are sitting in the back of the room talking to each other. In the chair next to the bed, Neaveh sits with a book in her hand. She looks up as I stir and quickly closes her book, laying it on the table. She stands and takes my hand before sitting on the edge of the bed.

"There you are," she whispers, her eyes filled with tears. I feel my own tears running down my cheeks as I try to say something, anything, but it's as if the words get stuck in my throat. Of course, she sees that. Instead of expecting answers, she leans over and wraps her arms around me and lets me cry my god damned eyes out.

She holds me through it all, offering me support in the only way she can right now. By the time I'm done, my eyes are swollen, and my face feels puffy, but Nevaeh smiles and tucks my hair behind my ear. "I'm gonna talk now, and you're going to listen, okay?"

I swallow and nod, keeping my eyes off the guys who have moved closer.

She takes both my hands in hers. "When the doctor gives us the all-clear, you're coming back home with us, where you will rest up further. I know we have a lot to talk about, but right now, you need to focus on healing."

"It's not safe, Nevaeh," I whisper.

"There is safety in numbers, Lil. You're lying in a hospital bed because you nearly died. Do you think you're safer on your own than you are under the wing of the Raven Souls?"

“It’s not my safety I’m worried about. Don’t you see that? I don’t matter. I don’t want any of you getting hurt because of me.”

A look of pain crosses her face, but before I can ask her about it, Powers jumps in. “Don’t you say that shit. Do you hear me? You do matter. You matter to the club. You matter to me.”

That steals my words completely. The weight of everything has been so much to carry that I’d love nothing more than to hand it off to someone else, even if it were just for a little while. But I can’t.

When Havoc moves in close, I flinch, making him sigh. “I’m not gonna hurt you, Lil.”

“I know, I’m sorry,” I whisper, embarrassed by my reaction.

“We have a lot to talk about. There’s no getting around that. But for now, I know enough—”

“You know nothing,” I admit, waiting for him to lash out at me.

“I know my old lady adores you—all the old ladies do. I know the brothers have been worried sick, searching high and fucking low for you. I know Kruger wants to equal parts wring your neck and hug the shit out of you.”

I choke out a laugh even though guilt weighs on me. Kruger and I had grown close, even more so when he found himself on Lil duty. Though I’ve slept with him in the past, our relationship eventually drifted into more of a sibling sort of thing, meaning we didn’t look at each other that way anymore. And thank god for that, with Delphi being back.

“I’ll concede, there is a lot we don’t know. There is a lot you don’t know either, but this is neither the time nor the place. You’re coming home, and that’s the end of it.”

“I never thought I’d miss being bossed around.” I sigh, rubbing my tired eyes. “I don’t think you understand the trouble I’ll be bringing to your door. I left so it would follow me and leave you all in peace.”

“But it didn’t follow you, Lil. It stayed,” Nevaeh says so softly that it takes me a minute for her words to penetrate. When they do, horror freezes me in place.

I shake my head in denial, which almost has me passing out in pain. “No.”

“As I said, this isn’t the time or place, but I think it’s safe to say your plan isn’t working. Running is no longer an option. It’s time to put our

heads together and fight back," Havoc tells me. I know from the tight set of his jaw that he won't take no for an answer.

I give in and sigh. They're either going to see the wisdom of my actions and send me packing, or I can sneak away again.

"Glad you see things my way."

"I'll call home, get one of the girls to get your room—" Neveah starts, but Powers cuts her off.

"She'll be staying with me."

"Wait, what?" I shake my head, and Havoc looks over at him.

"She'll run at the first sign of trouble," Powers warns him.

I bristle at that, regardless of how true it might be. "I said I'd come back."

"And if a threat comes knocking and someone gets hurt? You won't lead the motherfucker away?"

I snap my mouth shut.

"Yeah, that's what I thought."

I grit my teeth so I don't snap at him. I don't have any moral high ground here. "You don't have a spare room."

"You've never had a problem sleeping in my bed before."

Havoc glares at him. Powers folds his arms over his chest, not giving a fuck. "We have never crossed that line—never touched each other like that. I've already told you. I'm done with you questioning that. You either believe me, or you don't. Not much I can do about that. But you really think, even if I were unable to help myself, that she'd let me risk my patch for her?"

Havoc tenses, and he takes a second before responding. "Fine, she stays with you. You aren't a prospect anymore, and I'll leave her in your capable hands."

I bite my lip and count to ten while the menfolk barter me away like a prized cow.

"Guys, enough. One of you go find the doctor and see when she can get discharged," Tink orders.

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“It would be a good start, considering I don’t even know what happened to me.”

“What’d you mean you don’t know?” Powers frowns.

I stare at him, wondering how else he wants me to word it. “I don’t know what to tell you. I have no idea why I’m here. All I know is my body aches, and my head hurts.”

“That’s because you took quite a bump to it,” a doctor says as he walks in without knocking. Glad I wasn’t getting changed or anything.

I blow out a steadying breath, not sure why I’m feeling so touchy. The last few months have been brutal—so much so that I think anything meek and mild I had left in me has gone.

I reach up and inspect my head and find the bump he’s talking about at the base of my skull. I frown, wondering how I got it. As if reading my thoughts, the doctor looks through his notes. “Did I fall?”

“Perhaps, though it looks more like blunt-force trauma.”

“I don’t know what that means.”

“It means you were hit with something, likely a bat,” Powers says, making me blink.

I feel the bump again, this time realizing how incredibly lucky I am, all things considered.

“You have some substantial bruising over most of your body, particularly your shoulders, back, and thighs.”

I tense for a whole other reason now, my hands gripping the side of the bed for support. “Was I attacked? Was I ra…raped?” I whisper, holding my breath until he answers.

“Attacked? Possibly, but we ruled out sexual assault when you were admitted. Tests confirm you’ve not had any recent intercourse, and there was no tearing or damage or any fluids left behind. Your clothing appeared to be undisturbed, too.”

He’s so matter-of-fact about it all. I know that’s his job, but hearing him talk about what could have happened to me with zero inflection in his voice makes me want to stick a pen in his eye.

As if sensing my building anger, or maybe because of his own, Powers's hand wraps around one of mine and squeezes it. "When can we take her home?"

"I'll sign these forms for you, and you'll be free to go. You'll be sore for a few days, but over-the-counter meds will help. Same for any headaches. I'm confident you don't have a concussion, but if anything seems off—your vision, for instance, or your balance—and you start throwing up, come straight back in."

"I'll keep an eye on her, doc. I know what to look out for," Powers tells him.

The doctor nods before signing the chart with a flourish. "Please fill in the forms I'll leave with you for our records and for insurance purposes."

I tense but nod, agreeing with a smile. He hands me the forms before leaving the room. Nevaeh looks between Powers and me before she slips her arms through Havoc's. "Let's nip back to the hotel quickly. Lil will need something to wear home and could probably do with something to eat."

Havoc looks like he wants to say no, but ultimately gives in to his old lady. "Don't leave until we get back," he orders.

"We won't go anywhere unless there is an issue, but I'll keep you updated if that happens," Powers tells him.

Havoc nods. "We won't be long." He takes Nevaeh's hand, and they both walk to the door. He stops through before he can close it, his eyes turning back to catch mine.

"I know there is a lot to get through, and this will be anything but easy, but it's good to have you back, Lil. The club hasn't been the same."

I swallow a wave of emotion, swiping at the few stray tears that run down over my cheeks. "Thank you."

He gives me a two-finger salute before pulling the door closed.

The silence that descends in their absence is deafening. I fold my hands in my lap, unable to look at Powers. Once upon a time, this man somehow became my touchstone. Now, I might as well be in the company of a stranger, but then I suppose that's true of him, too, isn't it?

"Was any of it true?"

I look up. My eyes are still damp, but my tears are under control for now, at least. Exhaustion weighs heavily on me, and I don't mean the kind that you get after a couple of late nights. It's the kind of exhaustion you

only get when you've been living on a diet of fear and survival for years. I'm surprised I haven't given myself a heart attack.

"What?"

"What you told me. The things we shared? Was any of it true? Do you even know what the truth is anymore?"

I flinch away from him, turning to stare at the wall. "You can wait outside. I can assure you I won't be shimmying out of a window anytime soon." My voice sounds devoid of emotion, robotic even.

Now it's his turn to flinch. "Lil…" He sighs, moving closer.

I keep my eyes on an imaginary spot on the wall, not wanting to give him the satisfaction of seeing the wounds his words have caused.

His fingers slip under my jaw before he turns my head so I have no choice but to look at him. "Baby."

I suck in a ragged breath.

"That was shitty of me. I'm sorry. My head is fucked-up—has been since the moment I realized you were gone. You didn't come to me. I could have helped you. I could have done something."

I reach up and press my fingers to his lips. "I'm sorry. I did what I thought was best. I could never risk you or endanger the club. It's the only family I've ever really known."

He presses his forehead against mine, and for a moment, nothing else matters. I'm just a girl, and he's just a boy with nothing but the future to look forward to, one that isn't defined by our pasts and our mistakes.

All too soon, the moment is gone. He lifts his head and pulls back. He picks up the packet of discarded forms and hands them to me. "Better fill these in."

I wait a beat before taking them from him. There's a pen clipped to the top, so I lean back and pull my knees up, giving me something to lean against as I fill in the bits that need to be filled in, ignoring the parts that are none of their goddammed business.

When I'm done, I hand it to him. "You can hand this to whoever needs it. I think I'm going to take a nap."

He flips through the pages. Clearly, any privacy I'm owed is out the window now. "You missed a shit-ton of info."

"Can't imagine why."

"I'm not your enemy here, Lil."

"And yet, I'm not sure it feels like we're friends anymore either."

“Friends? You think what we have is friendship?” He laughs without humor before he leans over me. “Friends don’t fuck each other.”

“We never fucked.”

“Oh, but we will, my little trickster. Let’s see how many lies slip from your lips while my cock is buried inside you.”

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Chapter Two

POWERS

I PUSHED TOO HARD. I knew it the second the words were out of my mouth, but I couldn't control myself around her. Never in my life had a woman embedded herself so deeply under my skin. I equally love and loathe it. The relief at having her back, knowing she's safe, is tempered by the anger and fear that's been eating at me all the months that she's been gone. The not fucking knowing if she was dead or alive. I swear I woke up in a cold sweat more than once, convinced I heard her screaming for me. To say I'm not in a good place would be an understatement. Finding out that she's not even who she said she was was another kick to the gut. I felt like I'd lost her all over again. All that time spent getting to know each other, and for what? The woman is more of a stranger now than she'd ever been.

None of it did anything to dampen how much I want her, though. She's still the most stunning fucking woman I've ever seen.

There is something about the contradictions that gets to me. How she is so inherently sexy and yet somehow seems so innocent. I want to peel back her layers to find what's underneath, unravel her piece by piece until I reach her center. I want to know just who this woman is and what kind of spell she has woven over me.

I handed in her forms, filling in some of the missing information with made-up bullshit. She'd written a fake name—ironic, given that she was already using one. I wanted to know how and why, but I also wasn't sure I

was ready to hear it. Something told me it was going to flip everything on its head and not necessarily in a good way.

I assumed she didn't have insurance, so I listed myself as her payment guarantor with the hospital billing department while Neveah helped her get changed and Havoc arranged transport to the airport and flights back home. He'd also have to call and let the local MC know we were leaving. We weren't affiliated with the Sons of Purgatory as such, but we had mutual acquaintances.

They'd been fine with us passing through as long as we removed our colors, which we did out of respect. That, and the fact that TSA loves to assume the worst of us. It takes forever to get through all the checks—something we thankfully managed to avoid on the way back.

I look over at Lil's sleeping form beside me. Part of me worries that every time I take my eyes off her, she'll disappear again, even now when we're in the air with nowhere for her to go. As a flight attendant walks closer, I signal for her to stop. She does so with a wink, leaning over Lil as if she isn't there, her chest looking like it's about to break free from her shirt as she gives me what I'm assuming is supposed to be a provocative smile. It does fuck-all for me. "Can I get a blanket for my girl?"

Her smile falters for a second before she turns it up. "Of course, sir. I'll be right back." She heads down the aisle.

Tink leans over her armrest across the aisle, her eyes sparkling with mirth. "Psst."

"You don't need to psst me. I'm looking right at you."

"I wasn't sure if you'd noticed me over her giant bazookas."

I snort at her vernacular, wondering—and not for the first time—where she comes up with this shit. Maybe she was dropped on her head as a baby. Havoc shakes his head, a grin on his face, his hand on Tink's thigh just under her skirt.

"What do you need?"

"Huh? I don't need anything. Well, maybe a Ferrari. That would be cool, right? Cruising around town in my whip with my ride or dies."

I look at her blankly.

"I took it too far, huh?"

"Little bit."

"I'm trying to be cooler. I have all these cool friends, and I'm…not as cool."

I blink before I throw my head back and laugh. Havoc looks over in amusement.

“Is she serious?”

“What do you think?”

“Tink, you’re a world-famous author who could buy her own Ferrari, might I add, and you’re the queen of a motorcycle club. That’s pretty fucking cool.”

She beams a megawatt smile at me. “Well, when you put it like that, I guess I am pretty cool. Thanks, Powers.” She turns back to Havoc, but doesn’t bother lowering her voice. “Powers says I’m pretty freaking cool. So I need a cooler name than Tink. Something edgy like Rogue or Mistress of Mayhem.”

“First one makes you sound like one of the X-Men—”

“Should that not be Person, or X-People, now? Though that makes it sound like they were formerly people and now they’re not. Then again, some could argue that a few are more animal than—”

He covers her mouth with his hand and shakes his head. “And you can’t use the second one because there is an all-female MC called the Mistresses of Mayhem, not that far from Raven’s Fall.” He lets go of her mouth just as the flight attendant returns with the blanket.

“There’s an all-female MC?” Tink whisper-shouts in awe as the flight attendant makes a show of practically bending in half to tuck the blanket around a still sleeping Lil. “Quick, Havoc, hold on to me before I get sucked into the swirling vortex of her vagina.”

The woman bolts upright, straightening her uniform as her face flames red.

“Oh, thank you, sweet baby Jesus. I swear I just saw my life flash before my eyes. There was even something white at the end of the tunnel, though that might have just been last night’s swimmers looking for a little fertilization—”

Havoc’s hand is over her mouth again, only this time he yanks her into his lap, mostly so he can hide his face in her hair while he laughs his ass off. The people around us don’t seem to care. They laugh loudly, enough to make Lil stir and the flight attendant walk off in an embarrassed huff.

Lil wipes her eyes and looks around sleepily. “What did I miss?” She slurs her words a little. The Ambien I slipped her is still in effect.

“Just Tink being Tink.”

“Okay,” she whispers, her head rolling before it stops on my shoulder.

I move the blanket up to cover her better and rest my jaw on the top of her head. The light relief Tink provides is always appreciated, but the closer we get to home, the heavier everything feels. Somehow, we have to find a way to tell her about Capone. She’ll blame herself. If I’m honest, I’m not entirely sure that there aren’t at least a few people—brothers—who might blame her a little too. I can’t control what people think, but if they treat her in any way that I don’t like, then brother or not, I will lay them out.

I breathe her in. Having her this close is all I’ve been dreaming about since she’s been gone. But now that she’s here, pressed up against me, I realize it’s still not enough. If I thought I could get away with it, I’d pull her onto my lap and impale her with my cock and not let her off until it was time to deplane.

A sense of foreboding washes over me when the captain announces we’ll be landing soon. Something tells me to brace myself because trouble is coming our way, and it won’t matter how prepared we are. Someone is going to get hurt. Hell, someone already has.

I rub my hand over my face, feeling suddenly tired. I wish I’d napped alongside Lil, but I’d been reluctant to take my eyes off her for even that long.

As the plane descends, Lil stirs again. She lifts her head, and her eyes meet mine for a moment before everything comes rushing back.

“We’re landing?”

I nod. Sensing her nerves, I wrap my arm around her and pull her to my chest. “It won’t be long now. You’ll feel better once we get you home,” I tell her, though I’m not sure it’s true. Not when she finds out everything that happened while she’s been gone.

She holds my hand the whole time we land, only letting go when I need to get up and get our luggage from the overhead compartment. She stays close, though, with me in front and Tink and Havoc bringing up the rear.

There’s a familiar truck waiting for us when we finally make it out of the airport. Con jumps out when he sees us and grabs our bags, throwing them in the back as he greets everyone. His eyes land lastly on Lil. “Hi, I don’t know if you remember me. I’m Con. I started around the time you left.”

“I remember,” she says softly.

“It’s good to have you back. You need anything, just let me know.”

I shake my head and sigh. I swear to god, Con collects old ladies like others might collect baseball cards.

That makes me pause. Lil's not my old lady. Fuck, we've never even kissed. And after everything that's gone down, I'm not sure that's even a possibility. Hell, when everything is done and dusted, she might find she wants nothing more to do with the club or Raven Falls. I can't blame her for that, but I won't put my patch on a woman who won't stay. I'm just not sure if, and when, the time comes, I'll be able to let her go.

Once we're all in—Havoc and Tink up front on the bench seat, me and Lil in the back—Con pulls out into traffic and starts the trek back home. It's not long before Lil dozes off again on my shoulder.

"Jesus, are you sure that was just Ambien you gave her?" Havoc asks, his eyes on Lil as he turns to check on her.

"She doesn't react well to meds as a general rule," Tink pipes in.

"That would have been good to know before I drugged her." I barely stop myself from snapping. I'd rather not have to deal with a rabid Havoc while trapped in a small space.

"She's not allergic or anything like that. She's just more susceptible to them. Makes her act kinda drunk and, more often than not, spill the beans about shit, which is probably why she doesn't take anything stronger than Tylenol most of the time."

I shake my head and sigh. But the truth is, it's probably easier this way. She won't have time to work herself up if she's asleep.

"Does she know about Capone yet?" Con asks, snagging all of our attention.

"Back in my day, prospects were far less chatty," Havoc grunts out.

Tink chuckles. "Back in your day, you could ride a T-Rex instead of a Harley."

He turns his glare from Con to Tink. "Did you just call me old?"

"I would never."

"I guess that's just as well. I'd hate to have to spank you in front of my men."

"Liar. You'd love it, you freaking caveman." Havoc doesn't deny it, so Tink redirects the conversation. "Don't mind Havoc, Con. He thinks more than three grunts in a row is chatty. And to answer your question, no. She doesn't know yet. Partly because we wanted to get her home first, and we weren't sure she'd come if she knew. But mostly, she should be around

family when we tell her. We all had each other to lean on, and though the whole situation was awful, none of us had to go through it alone."

"I get it," Con says quietly. "Though it doesn't really matter how many people are around you feeling the loss too, you still grieve alone."

Nobody has anything to say to that. Something tells me he's not talking about Capone anymore.

I stare at the back of his head, feeling kinship with the man. I know next to nothing about Con and his past, but I do know what it's like to lose people. It's part of being a soldier. I might have left the sandbox a little more battered than when I entered it, but others weren't so lucky. Everyone I lost left a scar, as a tiny slice of their soul scorched into my skin that I carry with me always. I'm okay with that because they deserve to be remembered.

Now Capone will join them. I might not have known him as well as the others, but there is no doubt that man left his mark on all of us.

I look down at Lil. This will leave more than a scar. It will leave a wound, one that will take a long time to heal if she lets the guilt fester, and something tells me that's exactly what's going to happen.

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Chapter Three

LIL

I WAKE up when I realize I'm being carried. I panic for a moment before Powers's familiar scent wraps itself around me once more. Instead of fighting the pull, I give in and relax into his hold.

Tomorrow, I'll do better. I'll figure out where to go from here, but right now, I just need someone to watch over me so I don't have to sleep with one eye open anymore. I want to be strong—and I will be—but right now I don't have any strength left.

Powers carries me into his place, which is one of the first apartments as you come out of the warehouse. He'd been one of the only prospects to live off-site for most of his prospecting time, due to his infiltrating the club that Hannibal is now president of. When he officially moved here, it made sense for him to have an apartment rather than live above the saloon. Plus, I think it helps Lucy not to be surrounded by all the noise and commotion.

Speaking of…as soon as I'm placed on the sofa, Lucy is right there by my feet, her head moving to rest on my lap.

"Hey, baby," I stroke her head, feeling a rush of warmth wash over me. God, I missed her almost as much as I missed Powers.

"Alright, we'll leave you to settle in. I'll keep the others away for now, but at most I'll be able to buy you a day before they come seek you out," Havoc says in that no-nonsense tone of his.

I'm already feeling a headache coming on at the thought of the thousands of questions that will be coming my way.

“She’s recovering from being attacked,” Powers reminds him.

“Which is why I won’t let them harass her today.”

“I won’t let them harass her at all.” Powers crosses his arms, daring Havoc to argue.

“Your house, your rules.” Havoc holds his hands up in surrender before he reaches down and tosses Tink—who had been checking out the books on the bookcase—over his shoulder, flashing her Wonder Woman underwear in the process.

She screeches, making me wince, but Havoc is already heading to the door. “So about that spanking…” His voice disappears a moment later as the door shuts behind them.

Lucy doesn’t even bat an eye at the fiasco. She leans into my touch, demanding more petting, and I’m helpless to resist.

“So…”

I look up when Powers speaks and see him watching me. It’s never felt so damn awkward between us. Though I’m the reason it’s like this, I have no idea how to fix what I broke or if I should even try. It’s much easier to walk away from acquaintances than it is from friends and lovers. The whole time I was gone, all I wanted to do was come back, but I couldn’t let myself forget the reasons I left in the first place.

And now here I am, exactly where I want to be, yet the urge to run is all-consuming. I know what danger my being here puts everyone in.

“So, what? I’m not sure what you want me to say.”

“That’s fair. I’m not sure what I want to hear.” He runs his hands through his hair and takes a seat on the chair opposite me. “I need to ask you something. Put all the other bullshit aside and answer me with the truth, okay?”

I swallow hard but wait for him to ask his question.

“If there was no threat…If we found this motherfucker tomorrow and took him out, would you stay?”

“I never wanted to leave to begin with.”

“I need more than that, Lil.”

“If I knew everyone would be safe, then yes, I’d stay. Of course I would.”

He looks like he’s deliberating something, so I let him, watching everything he’s feeling pass over his face before it’s gone, and he’s locked down tight again.

“You know the club protects its own.”

“I know.”

“Club girls get blanket protection from the club they’re attached to.”

“I know that too.”

“But old ladies, they get protection from all the clubs.”

I swallow and nod again. “I’m not an old lady, Powers, and this was never a ploy to make me one. Hell, I’d paint a target on their back by association even if some idiot decided….” My voice fades out when I see the intense look he’s giving me. “No.”

“It will give you another layer of protection.”

I gently move Lucy’s head off my lap before I dart up. The room spins, making me sway, ruining my whole thought process as I pitch forward. Thankfully, Powers has killer reflexes. He jumps up and catches me before I can swan dive into the coffee table.

“Whoa there. You just got out of the damn hospital, and you’re supposed to be taking it easy.”

“Then stop fucking with my head.”

“I’m fucking with your head? Seriously?”

“I’m not doing this. I’m in no state to fight with you. I’m sorry I hurt you by leaving. I hurt me too, but I stand by my decision. Because if you knew who I was dealing with, you’d have told me to go too.”

“Like fuck would I have let you go off alone. Anything could have happened to you. Something fucking did happen to you.”

“Yes, but it happened to me. It was the only thing that got me through the worst of it, knowing you all were safe. That was the sacrifice I was willing to make.”

“You should have stayed. You should have told us who and what we were dealing with instead of letting us fumble our way through everything. We could have been more prepared—” His words snap off.

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I push back from him, catching the odd inflection in his tone. “What are you talking about? Prepared for what?”

“It doesn’t matter right now. I shouldn’t have said anything.”

“Said anything about what? Powers, tell me what happened.” I feel my heart thundering in my chest as I wait for him to reply. I did everything right. I ran so he’d follow. He always follows me.

“Shit. Sit down for a minute, okay?”

I close my eyes and try to take a steadying breath. I can already feel it—that impending sense of doom rolling over me like a black cloud. “Just tell me, please,” I whisper.

He freezes, my tone and how tense I am giving away how close to the edge I am. “He kidnapped Star, Citi, and Capone.”

I swallow down the bile rushing up my throat. I don’t ask how or why. None of that matters. “Are they okay?” I know they’re not dead because Neveah would never have been so nice to me.

“Citi and Star are okay.”

I relax before his words soak in like poison. I grab the back of the sofa for support. “Capone?”

He hesitates before he shakes his head. “He shot at Star. Capone covered her body with his. She’s alive because of him.”

“And he’s dead because of me. Oh god.” I turn and run to the bathroom, barely making it in time before I’m puking up everything inside me.

I don’t know how long I stay there, bending over the toilet, tears, snot, and puke on my face, *blood on my hands*, before I’m gently lifted and lowered into a warm bath fully clothed.

I gasp, my eyes flying to Powers’s worried ones. “You were going into shock.”

My face crumples as a sob rips out of me so forcefully that when I look down, I’m surprised I don’t see an open wound in my chest. Tears pour down my face, and I struggle to catch my breath.

“Jesus Christ,” Powers curses before he kicks off his boots and climbs in behind me. He pulls me back so his chest is pressed to my back. “Breathe with me, baby.”

I try, I really do, but it’s just too much. Everything I did—everything I sacrificed—was for nothing. I didn’t bring them peace. I walked them into a war and then left them on the battlefield to fight alone. God, they must hate me.

Powers wraps his arms around my chest and holds me tight. His lips move against my ear. “Breathe with me, baby. In for five and out for five.”

I focus on the sound of his voice and the feel of his chest moving up and down and slowly mimic his actions until eventually my chest doesn’t feel like it’s going to cave in anymore.

“I’m sorry,” I hiccup.

“No, I’m sorry. That was fucked-up and not how you should have found out. That’s on me. I swore I’d look after you and fell at the first fucking hurdle. I let you down.”

“You didn’t let me down,” I say softly, feeling emotionally and physically drained.

“You’re sitting fully clothed in a bathtub, coming down from a panic attack after throwing your guts up from the news I delivered. Trust me, I let you down. But that shit isn’t happening again.”

We lay there quietly for a minute as my heart rate gradually returns to normal.

“He’s really gone?”

“Yeah, babe. He’s really gone.”

“I messed up so bad, Powers. I don’t know what to do anymore.”

“Let me help you.” He presses a kiss to the back of my head.

“I don’t know how.”

“You just have to let me in here.” He taps my temple lightly before he presses his large palm over my heart. “And here.”

I lean back into him, not knowing where to start with something like that. The last person I let in destroyed my life. I don’t think for a second Powers would do that to me. That’s not my issue. It’s that I don’t know how to be in a functional relationship. Being in a relationship with a narcissist means being in a relationship with two people at once, only you never know which one will turn up. One of them is the love bomber. They’ll promise you the stars from the sky and carry you over puddles just so the new, expensive shoes they bought you don’t get wet. They praise you, touch you constantly, affirming how much they just want to be near you. They kiss you until you’re dizzy and can’t do enough for you. It’s this man who is the most dangerous, because he’s the reason you stay. The glimpses of him are what you live for. In reality, it’s all an act to keep you compliant. The other version, or the real one, is the man who tears you down and wears you out. The one who gaslights you and makes passive-aggressive comments that

slowly see you folding in on yourself to make yourself smaller. You walk on eggshells, waiting to see if you're lovable or not today. And the thing is, I didn't know there was anything wrong with that. It's what I knew. Though it's worth saying, when you take a narcissist and throw in religion, it's arguably worse. My father ran his family like he was god and the rest of us were his disciples.

The irony isn't lost on me that I ran from the life I hated and ended up in an almost identical situation. History has a way of repeating itself with just enough twisted nuances that you don't notice it until you're in too deep to dig your way out.

"You're asking me to tie myself to another man who doesn't love me," I tell him, a hitch in my voice. In the end, it doesn't matter. Love is for fools.

"I'm asking you to trust me. Nothing more, nothing less."

He has no fucking clue what he's asking for. Trust is a commodity I can't afford. And yet… "Okay, Powers."

"Kieren. When it's just you and me, call me Kieren."

I nod. "Kieren, it is."

He's waiting for me to do the same, to give him my real name, but that girl's dead. All the versions that came before the woman I am now are, and I'm not sure I'm ready to drag any of them from the grave just yet.

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Chapter Four

POWERS

I DON'T LET her see my disappointment that she didn't share her real name. Today's been rough on her, and it's going to get worse before it gets better. But it will get better. If there is one thing I know about myself, it's that when I set my mind on something, I never stop until I achieve what I set out to do.

She thinks she's settling. She's somehow managed to convince herself that she's not worthy of love when I've been in love with this woman since I first laid eyes on her, talking shit about herself behind the bar in the saloon.

One day, I'll show her that I'm in this to win. Because what I said about the old ladies being extra protected is true, but there are a dozen other ways we could go about this without me claiming her. Only none of the other ways end with her being mine. I'm not a fool by any stretch of the imagination. I'm well aware that this might all blow up in my face, but I've worked with bombs for years. I'm used to diffusing situations.

"Let's get you out of this tub before you get cold. We'll clean up, and then I'll make us both something to eat."

She nods. All the life seems to have drained out of her, but I'll get her back. I'm more than willing to put in the time and effort.

I stand up and strip off my clothes while I'm still in the tub, so I don't soak the floor, and I step out. I grab a towel from the rail and wrap it around my waist before turning the tap in the separate shower stall to warm up.

Pulling the plug in the bath, I take a washcloth, dip it in the water, and wipe her face clean. She sits listlessly and lets me do it, and I almost wish she would lash out at me, say something—do something.

"Up you get, Lil." I offer her my hand, which she takes, and I help her to her feet. The water rushes down her body, making the T-shirt she's wearing stick to her like a second skin. I lick my lips as I reach for the hem. When she doesn't tell me no, I pull it up, revealing a plain white bra, which is mostly see-through, and a plethora of bruises. I grind my teeth thinking about how she got them and remember to check in with G tomorrow to see if he managed to find anything out about it.

I toss the wet tee in the slowly draining tub and reach around to unhook her bra. I should be a gentleman and look away. I've seen Lil in skimpy outfits before, of course, but never naked. I never thought the first time would be like this, but I won't pretend to be something I'm not. I pull the bra away and groan when I see her bare breasts, her nipples hard, just begging to be sucked.

She lifts her gaze, and finally, something flashes in her eyes instead of that hollow stare.

"You're the most beautiful woman I've ever seen," I tell her truthfully and let her hear the reverence in my voice.

"None of it's real. It's all just an illusion. The girl inside is beaten down and tired, Powers. It's anything but pretty in here." She touches her forehead.

"Bullshit. I get you're tired, babe, and we'll get that sorted. But don't tell me about pretty. I see it, sure, but I feel it too. It's in how you treat people, how you make people laugh and smile and feel like they're the most important people in the world. That's what makes you pretty on the inside, and that's what shines so fucking bright it makes you beautiful on the outside."

She swallows and looks at me as if she doesn't know what to make of me, and I can't say I blame her.

I hook my fingers into the waistband of her yoga pants and peel them down over the curve of her hips, dragging her panties with them. My mouth waters at the sight of her neat little landing strip. I'd love nothing more than to drop to my knees and find out if she tastes as sweet as she looks, but the bruises marring her thighs have my rage threatening to boil over.

As if knowing where my head is at, she reaches out a hand and runs her fingers through my hair. “They’ll fade. They always do.”

I look up at her and see the ghosts encroaching again, so I press a kiss to one of the worst bruises. “The only bruises I ever want to see on you are my fingertips on your hips from when I’m holding you tight and pounding inside you.”

She shivers, the clouds in her eyes passing.

“Step out of them.”

She holds my offered hand and does as I ask, leaving her completely naked in front of me.

“Let’s take a shower and get you warmed up. And then you can borrow one of my T-shirts, and we’ll watch a movie in bed, okay?”

She nods, a tear slipping down her cheek. “Sounds like old times.”

Unable to help myself, I slide my hand into her hair at the back of her head, careful of the bump, and pull her against my chest. Her hands press against my ribs as her temple rests against my collarbone. We stand there together as steam fills the room, neither of us in any hurry to pull away. Yet I do, knowing she’s dead on her feet and needs to rest.

Silently, I lead her to the shower and help her in before stepping in behind her. She steps under the spray, letting the water run over her face. I don’t miss the hitch in her breathing. She’s using the water to hide the fact she’s crying. I don’t make a big deal about it. She has to get it out, and I’d rather she did it here with me than alone.

I reach for the floral-scented shampoo and lather some into my hands before carefully massaging it into her hair. She whimpers, making me pause. “Am I hurting you?”

“No, it feels good.”

My semi-hard cock thickens at her words and her soft, breathy sighs. I nudge her to step farther under the spray to rinse before I wash her hair again. Once that’s done, I grab the conditioner, slick it through her hair, and leave it for a minute to do its thing.

She turns toward me with a frown. “You know what shampoo and conditioner I use?”

I give her a look that says, “What do you think?”

She sighs and presses her forehead against the hollow of my throat. “Can I tell you something?”

“You can tell me anything.”

“You say that now, but one day you’ll wish you could take those words back.”

“If that day ever comes, then I’m not the man I thought I was, and you’d deserve better than an asshole like me.”

I feel a soft kiss just above my heart before she looks up at me. “I hate the smell of lilacs.”

I frown and look down at the top of her head. She tips her head back so I stare into her pretty green eyes.

“It’s the scent she always wore.”

And likely the reason for the nickname. Fuck.

I swallow, my hands moving to her hips so she doesn’t pull away. I want to ask her questions, but I’m worried the second I open my mouth, she’ll shut down.

When she bites her lip and braces herself, I realize she’s waiting for me to react. I want to ask her when she stepped in and became Lil, and what happened to the woman whose life she stole. Aside from winding up on a slab in the morgue, nobody really knows. I don’t ask, though. I keep my questions to myself for now, knowing it’s too soon to push.

“So what scents do you like?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Then that’s what we’ll do when you’re feeling up to it. We’ll go to the store, and we’ll smell them all until you find one you like.”

“You’d do that for me?”

“I’ll do anything for you. Even drag your stubborn ass back home where it belongs. Now tip your head back so I can rinse the conditioner out.”

She does as I ask, and I make quick work of rinsing it clean, mostly because my cock is rock hard and I don’t trust it to behave itself. I grab my shower gel and show it to her. “If you’re sick of lilacs, you can use this as long as you don’t mind smelling like me.”

“I don’t mind. I like how you smell. It always makes me feel calm.”

“Then help yourself to it anytime. I like the idea of you smelling like me. You can borrow my scent until you find one of your own.”

“Why are you so good to me, Kieren? I’m not sure I deserve it.”

My cock throbs when she says my name. “Who the fuck gets to decide what you deserve but you and me?”

“A whole club, actually.”

I huff out a laugh. I dare those motherfuckers to say something. I've been on edge the whole time she's been gone. The only way I can think of getting rid of it is by fucking or fighting it away. As she's not ready for the first, the second will have to do.

"Whatever we face, we face it together."

She smiles. It's small but genuine. "Together."

* * *

She's lying in bed with my T-shirt on, her hands tucked under her jaw, fast asleep. The movie we started watching plays in the background, but I'd rather watch her sleep. Maybe that makes me a creeper. I don't fucking care. After knowing what it's like to live without her, I'm more than happy to spend my days in a perpetual state of exhaustion if it means I get to watch her sleep beside me.

The sound of my chirping cell phone has me silently cursing. I reach over and grab it so it doesn't disturb her, and see a message from G.

I've got something. You have a minute?

I check the time. Just turned eleven.

Any chance you can come to me? I don't want Lil to wake up alone.

I watch the dots as he replies.

Be there in five.

I carefully ease out of bed and pull a pair of sweats over my boxers. Lucy lifts her head and watches me from her spot beside the bed.

"Lucy, guard," I order her. She'll protect Lil in my absence. It might seem overkill, but I'm not taking anything for granted. This motherfucker has already proven he's resourceful.

I head downstairs quietly and make my way into the kitchen. I pull a couple of beers from the fridge and pop the caps off, leaving one on the island, and take a swig of the other. A few minutes later, I hear a soft tap at the door. I walk over and open it, letting G inside.

"Hey, Powers. How is she?" he asks quietly as I close the door behind him.

"I told her about Capone. She figured out something was wrong, and I couldn't lie to her about it, not when it was only going to be a matter of time before the truth came out."

“I get it. It would be worse if you lied to her. She’s not dumb. The second she walked into the saloon, she’d have known something was wrong.”

I run my hand through my hair and lead him to the kitchen, where he takes a seat at the counter and slides his laptop bag from his shoulder.

“This beer for me?”

“Figured you might need one.”

He nods and takes a deep pull. “Amity is shooting an ad for a new athletic clothing company, so she’s been working on location a lot. And while she’s been occupied, I’ve done nothing but dig into James. At this point, I’m surviving on about three hours of sleep a night.”

“Shit, man, you can’t go on like that. I know you feel like it’s on you to figure all this out, but you’re no good to us if you work yourself into an early grave. Not to mention, tired eyes and brains make mistakes.”

“I know. After I’m done here, I’m crashing for the night. Amity is due back in an hour, and she’s off tomorrow, so don’t expect to see either of us before lunch.”

“You perhaps. But Amity runs in the morning before the rest of us have even got out of bed. Good luck convincing her to skip it.”

“Luckily for me, she likes my dick more than she does running. And if she skips a workout, well, let’s just say our workout becomes a whole lot more rigorous.”

I chuckle as I take the seat beside him, watching as he sets the laptop on the table and opens it up.

His fingers fly across the keys as he types something, and then the screen lights up. “I found footage of Lil’s attack. It wasn’t easy, what with her getting taken in as a Jane Doe.”

“Safer than carrying ID and having them call my next of kin—something I wasn’t sure I could change without it being flagged, thanks to the friends he has in his pocket.”

We both turn at the sound of Lil’s voice.

She stands in my T-shirt, her legs and feet bare, with her hand on top of Lucy’s head, who sits beside her.

“I woke up, and you were gone,” she says to me.

I walk over and wrap my arms around her, kissing the top of her head before pulling back. “You okay?”

“I honestly don’t know anymore,” she answers before her eyes drift over my shoulder. She bites her lip. “Hi, G,” she whispers.

She tenses when G approaches, but she doesn’t pull away. It isn’t until he’s standing beside me that I loosen my hold, and he pulls her into his arms. I fist my hands, not liking her touching anyone but me. I could just about handle it when she wasn’t mine, but not now.

“You scared the shit out of us. Don’t you ever do that again. You have a problem, come to us. We’re your goddammed family.”

“I didn’t think you’d want me if you knew the truth.”

“Then you seriously underestimated us, Lil. Wait…do you still want to be called Lil?”

Her lips twitch, like she’s finding something funny, but whatever it is goes right over my head.

“Lil’s fine.”

“Okay, good.”

He gives her another hug, which is one too many. I pull her from his arms and lock my arm around her, glaring at him.

“Like that, is it?”

“Yeah, it’s like that.”

G holds up his hands in capitulation. “Alright then. I wish you both the best of luck. None of this shit is going to be easy.”

“Nothing has ever been easy for me, G.” Lil sighs. “I’m not sure I’d know what to do if my life wasn’t always in chaos.”

“I hope one day you get to find out the answer to that.”

“She will,” I tell him emphatically.

“Good. Now, I’ve found the footage of your attack. I don’t know if you’re up for watching, but I can always bring it back when you feel better. It would be good to know if you recognize your attacker.”

“I’m okay. If it gets to be too much, I’ll tell you,” Lil assures him. He looks to me anyway. I give him a small nod to let him know I’ve got her.

We all move back over to the island, only this time I pull out my chair for Lil to sit on. She climbs on and tugs her T-shirt down a little as G leans over and starts playing the video.

“Did some digging once I knew what hospital you were in and your injuries, matched them up to a police report, which gave me a place and an estimated timeline. Here.”

We watch as Lil walks out of a shop with a bag of what looks like groceries. Her head is aimed down, and before she turns her back on the camera, she glances around, likely out of habit, before she starts walking away. She's gone maybe eight feet when someone slips out from a gap between two buildings, wraps their arm around her neck, and drags her into the gap. She drops the bags, the contents scattering across the ground.

I grip the edge of the island so hard my hands turn white. Lil lays one of her hands over mine. "I'm okay," she reminds me. I feel like a dick. I'm the one supposed to be making her feel better, not the other way around.

A couple walks into the screen and notices the bag on the ground. The video doesn't have sound, but Lil must have screamed or something because their heads whip to the left. The woman covers her mouth with her hands before she springs into action, charging into the alley.

"Damn, I wish I knew who she was so I could say thank you," Lil says softly as the guy takes off after his girl.

G speeds up the recording. A moment later, the attacker runs out of the alley, briefly looking toward the camera. G freezes it and blows it up, showing the guy's face. It's not the clearest picture, but it's not bad, all things considered.

Lil leans forward, studying the man carefully before she looks up at G. "I don't recognize him. I'm pretty sure I've never seen this man in my life."

I frown. "Could James have hired him?"

She flinches at James's name.

"It's possible," G says. "But I looked into crime in the local area, and there has been a spate of attacks, all against women, all in a fifty-mile radius. Most of the victims who were snatched were grabbed from behind and didn't get a good look at their attacker. Those that did gave a description that pretty much matches this guy."

"The other women…are they okay?" She rubs one of the bruises on her thigh, and I know exactly what she's thinking.

"The women that could give a description? They were able to do so because he faced them while he was raping them," G tells her gently.

Lil shakes her head, tugging the T-shirt down a little farther. "That couple saved me from that. Do you think you could find them so I can send them something? I know it's probably silly, but…"

"Doesn't sound silly at all. I can pull their information from the police witness statements. I'll have it ready for you tomorrow."

“Thanks, G.”

“You got it. I’m gonna let you get some rest. I’ll look into this guy further, but as it stands, I’m not sure he’s connected to you in any way. I think this was a case of wrong place, wrong time. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. That’s a woman’s lot in life. I should have paid more attention when walking past the alley. I know better.”

“Don’t do that. Don’t blame yourself,” I tell her.

“Why? The world does. The justice system does.” She waves me off when I’m about to say more. “It doesn’t matter anyway, and I agree with G. This isn’t…him. It’s not his style.”

“Attacking women is exactly his style, according to dozens of HR complaints.”

“You misunderstood. He would absolutely do this and worse, to anyone *but* me.”

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Chapter Five

LIL

I LEAVE them to it and head back to the bedroom. My statement just opened the door for a dozen questions, but I don't have it in me tonight. Tomorrow will come soon enough. There is no way around it, but who wants their biggest shame spread across the place for everyone to see and judge? Oh, they won't want to judge me, but they will. How can they not? My choices led me here. My choices led a killer here. Dress it up or down, it changes nothing. A man is dead because of me, yet again. How many lives does he have to take before I finally give in and surrender? Because that's the only way to stop this madness.

I take a deep steadying breath and sit on the edge of the bed. It's his voice in my head I'm hearing. Going back won't stop him from hurting the people I love—he'd take them out to punish me and show me what would happen if I ever left him again. I should have listened the first time, but that was before I realized the scope and power this man truly has.

I lie down, tug the blanket around me, and face the window. It's started to rain. I've always been a rain girl. There is something about staring up at the sky as it washes away your sins. Lucy jumps up onto the bed and rests her head on my hip. I stroke her fur as my eyes get heavy. I fight it a little longer, preferring the rain to the darkness that comes with sleep, but exhaustion wins out in the end.

By the time Powers makes it to bed, I'm out cold. I don't feel him climb in behind me after making Lucy move to the foot of the bed, and I don't

feel him wrap his arm around me and pull me back into him. What I do know is I don't dream of monsters chasing me for the first time in a long time, and perhaps that has something to do with the man watching me sleep.

When I wake up, my body feels like it's on fire. I come to with a gasp, my back arching off the bed as pure, unfiltered pleasure rushes through my veins like a drug. It takes my brain a few seconds to pull itself from my slumber-like state and realize I'm not dreaming. I look down at Powers, who lifts his head, his eyes locking on mine as his lips pull up into a devastating grin. His chin is wet from my arousal, and his eyes are feverish with lust.

I'll admit, I did not have this on my bingo card this morning. For some reason, I figured he'd treat me like I was breakable because of the bruises. That, of course, is the last thing I want, and I should have realized he knew me well enough to figure that out.

"I was hungry. I got tired of waiting for you to wake up." He flicks his tongue over the tiny bundle of nerves, making my legs shake. He slides his rough hands over them, spreading me wider.

"I'm surprised," I admit, my voice sounding choked.

"You want me to stop?"

"If you stop, I'll kill you with my bare hands."

He chuckles before lowering his head. He buries his face back in my pussy, a starving man gorging himself with zero restraint. I don't even think of hesitating. Nothing else matters in this moment—not the bruises on my body or the guilt in my heart. Right now, there's just him and me, and god, how I wish we could stay this way forever.

He slips a finger inside me, making me gasp before a second finger joins it. He glides them in and out as his mouth focuses on my clit. I try to hold back, not wanting this moment to end because when it does, life will crash back cold and unforgiving. I'm tired of second-guessing my actions, tired of running scared. But in this moment, I feel invincible, as if nothing can touch me, and I don't want to give that up.

Powers is relentless, though, fucking me with his fingers, pressing them against a spot inside me that I swear has my whole womb spasming. I bite my lip so hard I can taste blood, but still I hold back, reaching out to grip his hair, needing to push him away. But instead, I pull him closer. I whimper. I won't be able to hold it back much longer. When Powers looks up at me like a sex god as he eases another finger inside me, it's game over.

In a fight between my body and brain, my body takes over, forcing me over the ledge I'm dangling off with enough force that I'm not sure I'll survive the fall.

I come hard with his name on my lips, my whole body weightless with euphoria before everything comes crashing back down. It's as if the floodgates I thought I had on lockdown have been kicked open, and everything I've bottled up comes pouring out through the broken dam. Before I know it, my cries of pleasure have turned into sobs. Some in relief, but there is ample guilt and fear in there too.

Powers curses before he crawls up beside me and pulls me into his arms. "It was too much too soon. I'm so fucking sorry."

I shake my head, but it takes me a while before I can find my voice. "I wanted to." I hiccup, my breath hitching painfully in my chest. "I don't even know why I'm crying."

"You've been through a lot. And through it all, you've had to keep your guard up. I think that's the first time you've probably let go in a long time."

I tip my head up, his chest damp against my cheek from my tears. "Thank you."

His lips twitch. "You thanking me for making you come or making you cry?"

I chuckle but feel myself grinning. "Both. I think I needed to come and to cry."

He presses his lips to my forehead. "Whatever you need, Lil, I'm here for you."

I slide my arm around him and hold him tightly. I don't say anything else. I don't need to. Something tells me he knows exactly how I feel.

* * *

"Relax, you're going to make yourself sick." Powers pulls me in for a hug, and I let him, even though it does nothing to relieve the tension in my body.

"I'm trying, but I can't pretend I'm not terrified."

"We don't have to do this now. They can wait."

"You heard what Havoc said. He'll only be able to keep them away for so long. They'll turn up here, and I need this place to be a safe one that I can escape to when it all becomes too much."

“Alright, but I have no problem punching someone if they make you cry.”

I huff out a laugh. I’ll cry. There is no way around it, but I’m not going to let him punch someone over it. “Let’s just get it over with.”

He moves to step away, but I grab his hand and press it against my heart, swallowing before I speak because I really need to get these words out. “No matter what happens. No matter what you hear or think about me, know that what I felt, what I feel for you, is real. I know that’s not enough, but—”

His mouth covers mine, making me freeze for a second before I melt into him. His hand cups my face as he deepens the kiss for just a minute before pulling back. “It’s enough.”

I offer him a shaky smile, wondering if those words will still hold in a day, a week, a month.

“Alright, let’s head out. Sooner this is done, the sooner we can leave.”

I don’t think it’s going to be quite as simple as that.

I slip on a jacket to ward off the chill, though it’s mild out. I find the extra layer comforting, something to sink deeper into for added protection.

“Be good, Lucy. We won’t be long.”

Lucy looks our way from her bed before closing her eyes and ignoring us completely. I chuckle and let Powers lead us out the door.

The walk up to the saloon has never felt both so long and so short before. Usually, we pass someone along the way, but right now it’s eerily quiet. There is no music as we approach, and with the gray clouds rolling in, the whole place is giving off an ominous vibe.

“Deep breath.”

I look over at Powers and nod, taking a deep breath before slowly blowing it out again. He pushes the doors open, and we step inside. It takes a moment for my eyes to adjust, and when they do, I see everyone turn to look our way.

Oh god, I can’t do this.

Powers’s hand tightens around mine, as if he knows I’m two seconds away from running.

A hulk of a man steps up to me and wraps me in a bear hug. “I’m so mad at you for leaving,” Kruger growls into my ear before he places me back on my feet. “But I’m glad you’re back.”

I blink back tears. “I’m sorry.”

“I know.”

He gives me a sad look before he walks away. Havoc walks over next and puts his fingers between his lips and whistles. “Alright, time for church before the women get here because they’ll steal Lil right out from under us.”

“Lil, right,” someone huffs, making me flinch.

“You got something to say, Probe?” Powers all but growls.

“Not a thing,” he says, his hands in the air. I don’t miss the tightening of his jaw when I find him in the crowd. If looks could kill, I’d be dead right now.

When Circus steps up next to him, I feel my legs shake. He folds his arms across his chest and looks at me. There’s no anger or hatred on his face, but there is no happiness at me being here either.

“Church, now!”

Havoc turns back to us as everyone starts moving. “The girls will be here in a little while to whisk you away from church. But we need to know what the fuck is going on. You take your time and ignore any fuck that gives you attitude, okay?”

“Okay.”

He looks at Powers. “Keep your temper in check. I don’t want to have to remove you, but I will if shit gets out of hand.”

“The only way it will get out of hand is if they target Lil. I won’t stand around and let them attack her any more than you’d let them pull that shit on Tink.”

“Fuck. You’re right. I forgot she’s your old lady now. Won’t happen again. We’d better start by announcing that. That way, the guys will reel themselves in before they cross the line, knowing the consequences for their actions will be worse.”

I bite my tongue, hating that I’m only important now because I’m Powers’s old lady. But that’s the MC way. You’d think I’d be used to it by now, but perhaps being away from the club has put things more into perspective.

“Meet you in there.”

As he heads out, G stumbles down, bleary-eyed. “So much for not seeing us until lunch, huh?” Powers jokes. G flips him off.

I don’t say anything. I follow them both into the room church is held. It’s my first time coming in here, and honestly, I think it’s going to be my

last.

God, I’m going to throw up.

Havoc points at the two empty seats to the left of the head of the table, so I make my way over there and take the first empty one, which is next to Dice. He gives me a smile when I sit, which eases some of my tension. You know, as long as I don’t look at anyone else.

“Alright, I know we have a lot to cover, but if you can’t keep your shit together, I won’t hesitate to throw you out of church. That will be your only warning because Powers won’t be generous enough in giving you a second,” Havoc begins.

“Why Powers?” Hoops asks. I peek up through my lashes to look at him across the table.

“Because he has claimed Lil for his old lady.”

“She’s been back five minutes, and he’s claiming her? I thought prospects couldn’t fuck a club girl?” Crane states.

“We’ve never fucked,” Powers snaps at him. Crane snorts like he doesn’t believe him.

“I get that you all assume that because I’m a club girl—or was now, I guess—that I’m an easy slut. And you know what, I don’t care anymore. But Powers is your brother, and you don’t believe his word?”

“She’s right,” Kruger grunts, leaning forward so he can glare at me. “And don’t talk shit about yourself like that.”

Probe growls. “Does Delphi know your fuck—”

“Do not finish that sentence, Probe, or I swear I’ll rip your tongue out of your head,” Kruger warns him.

The room goes quiet as I sink into my seat, trying to fade away into the background.

“Look at her,” Havoc snarls. “Fucking look at her.”

I hear a sigh before Probe mutters, “Yeah, alright. I was out of line.”

“Damn fucking right you were. You want her to share her story, then shut the fuck up. She’s already surrounded by men in an enclosed space, days after being attacked and almost fucking raped. You think she feels safe here, Probe, huh? No, she doesn’t. She probably doesn’t feel safe anywhere. But so help me god, if you make her disappear into herself any more, I’m going to throw you in the octagon with Ambros and get that fucker to knock some sense into you.”

I don’t look up to search out Ambros, not after what happened to Star and Citi. Powers told me they are an item now, so he must hate me something fierce.

“You’re pissed that she’s not the girl you thought you knew. I get it,” G adds, his eyes locked on Probe. “But right now, I’m guessing you’re not the man she thought you were either.”

Probe flinches as if G’s words make a direct hit.

Fuck this. I straighten my shoulders and lift my head. “Ask me your questions so we can get this over with. And then if you want me to leave, I’ll go.”

“Like fuck you will,” Powers snarls.

I look at him with sad eyes. “All my life, I was searching for a place to belong. For a while, I hoped it would be here. Raven Souls has been the closest thing I’ve had to family for a long time.”

“Family doesn’t lie to each other,” Toot pipes up. The man who is usually the joker of the bunch has been quietly watching me with a cool gaze.

“No? Then how come you’ve been lying to Mac all these years about Greer?”

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Chapter Six

POWERS

MAC WHIPS his head around to look at his brother. “What is she talking about?”

“Now is not the time,” Havoc barks at them before it can devolve. Something tells me that conversation won’t go down well. He turns to Lil. “Why don’t you tell us what’s going on?”

She taps her fingers on the table, looking so fucking lost that I want to pull her into my lap. But this has to be done—for her, for the club, and for us. And then we can deal with the pieces, wherever they may fall.

“I don’t even know where to start,” she admits.

“Just start at the beginning,” Dice tells her gently.

“Right, the beginning. To understand that, I’d need to go all the way back to when I was a kid.” When nobody argues, she sighs and leans back a little, dropping her gaze to her hands on the table as she slips into the past.

“My real name is Lilith.”

She looks at me, a small smile on her face. Now I know why she’s fine being called Lil. The smile slips as she continues. “I don’t know what my last name is or was. Not sure I ever had one.”

The room goes silent as everyone throws each other a confused look.

“My grandparents used to belong to a cult that called itself the Untainted. Some shit went down, and they fled with my dad when he was a boy, along with a dozen other members who lived completely off the grid.”

“The Untainted? Why is that so familiar?” G taps on his laptop a minute before images of news articles about an incident a few years back, involving another MC, appear on the wall. The Vegas chapter of Kings of Carnage.

“I remember this,” Kruger says, staring at the info. “The old lady of the presidents Priest, Saint, and Bates was kidnapped and taken to a church…” His voice drifts off before a picture of a rundown place appears with a grisly headline above it. “All Saints Chapel, that’s it. The psycho was a serial killer. He nailed Reign to a fucking cross.”

“Wait, was that the place that was filled with the corpses of the congregation?” Mack asks.

G nods. “Yeah, it was fucked-up, especially since the killer turned out to be a cop and Saint’s father.”

“And I thought my family was fucked-up,” Hoops mutters.

Lil doesn’t say a word. She’s sitting so still that if I couldn’t see her chest moving, I’d worry she wasn’t breathing.

“Lil?” Havoc says her name softly, everyone turning back to look at her.

“They were bad people, all of them. They used God as a shield when, truthfully, he would have been sickened by their actions. Eventually, their numbers dwindled until only the youngest were left behind.

“There were five left in total. All boys. My father became the ringleader and convinced them they could have a better setup. All the blessings of God, the women, yada yada. They built a new house, put up secure fencing, and set booby traps for intruders, which were unlikely given how far off the beaten path they were. They had their own garden and greenhouse, and eventually some animals too—cows, chickens, sheep.”

“They made it so they had everything they needed,” Toot murmurs.

“Except for one thing.” Lil looks at him, but it’s Circus who answers.

“Women.”

Lil nods. “They decided to start with one. They’d share her—or that’s what they thought. Only my dad had no intention of sharing.”

Her hands start shaking, so she pulls them from the table and lays them in her lap. I reach over and take one, finding them cold and clammy.

“They stole transient women, mostly, or sex workers. People who wouldn’t be missed. They had their fun, and then my father had them disposed of, saying they weren’t quite right.”

“Jesus.”

She looks at me. “He was a product of his upbringing. Fucked-up, but true nonetheless.”

She looks away again before continuing. “I don’t know what made my mother special, but it was enough for my father to kill the rest of the men so he could keep her for himself. My first memories are hazy. It won’t surprise you to know there was no love in our house. I remember my mother was just a vacant shell. I didn’t know why until years later.

“They were both older by the time I came along. When I turned seventeen, they were in their sixties. My mom died in her sleep four days after my birthday. My father had been sick for a while, but doctors were not an option for us. He told me all this from his deathbed. I don’t know if he was proud of himself or trying to atone for his sins. That man could have drowned in a vat of holy water, and it still wouldn’t have been enough to wash away his filth.”

She pauses for a moment and takes a deep, steadying breath. “As soon as he died, I shoved a few meager belongings into a backpack and started walking. I didn’t know where I was going, but anywhere had to be better than there. Turns out I was wrong. I was wrong about a lot of things.”

Her face is pale, her body is trembling, and I don’t give a fuck what anyone thinks. I slide my chair back, then reach over and scoop her up and place her in my lap. I wrap my arms around her, hoping some of my heat will seep into her cold skin.

Havoc gets to his feet and walks out, leaving us frowning. Before anyone can follow, he’s back with a bottle of water in one hand and a bottle of scotch in the other. “Pick your poison.”

“Water. Lil doesn’t drink,” I answer for her, reaching for the bottle.

People look surprised. “What?”

“What do you mean she doesn’t drink? I’ve seen her drinking that cheap-ass box wine. She’s the only reason we stock it,” Crane says.

“She empties it and fills it with apple juice.” Dice chuckles. “It’s close enough in color that nobody pays enough attention to it to call her on it.”

“What the fuck for?” Kruger frowns, confused.

“Because whenever I turned a drink down, someone always felt the need to pressure me into having one. Like, I’m not fun sober. I switched out the wine to solve the problem and acted accordingly, a little tipsy.”

“I still don’t get it,” mutters Kruger.

“It doesn’t matter. I don’t like being drunk and not in full control of my body.” Before he can say anything again, she sighs. “My father made moonshine, and I was forced to drink it whether I wanted it or not because a drunk daughter is a compliant one. When your memory is hazy, it’s easy to convince someone they didn’t say no, that they begged for it.

“I’m sorry, Havoc, I need a second.” She jumps off my lap and hurries to the door, yanking it open, leaving us all in silence.

“Did she just say her daddy…” Toot’s voice fades away as the knowledge—that Lil’s father hurt her in a way no daddy should— sinks in.

I get to my feet, my eyes seeking out Havoc.

He nods. “Go, we can wait.”

More books to choose from.

Look up **Lokepub** on Google and find a novel you like.

I head out, not waiting another second, and make my way to the restroom, figuring it’s the most likely place she’d head. I’m correct. I push my way inside and find her staring blankly into the mirror, her face damp where she’s splashed it with water, her hands gripping the counter, her frame hunched.

I don’t hesitate to walk over and yank her into my arms. She doesn’t resist. Instead, she slides her arms around me, her hands pressing into my back.

“I’m sorry. I’ve barely started, and I’m already making a mess out of everything.”

“You did not make a mess out of anything. And you’re doing great. But if you need a minute, then take the damn minute. I’m just going to be right here beside you in case you need me, okay?”

She nods against me, but she doesn’t move back. I keep on holding her. I’d hold her forever if she needed me to.

Eventually, she pulls and looks up at me in resignation. “Okay, let’s head back.”

“You sure?”

She nods, though she looks anything but sure. I take her hand after she dries her face and lead her back in. This time, the guys say nothing, but I don't miss the looks of concern.

"You okay, Lil?" Kruger asks.

Her smile is stilted. "Yeah."

"Where was I?" she asks as I crack open the bottle of water and hand it to her.

"You were walking away from home," I prompt.

She takes a few sips and nods before continuing. "It took me six days of solid walking to reach a road. But if there was one thing I was good at, it was surviving in the wild. The road was the first thing that threw me. I must have stood there and stared at it for an hour, so completely flabbergasted by what it was that I nearly died of a heart attack when a car came speeding around the corner. I froze. The car was going too fast to stop. Thankfully, it had slowed enough that when it hit me, it didn't do as much damage as it could have.

"I don't know what happened in the in-between parts where I was passed out, but I woke up in a hospital in a state of panic. I had a broken leg, wrist, collarbone, and fractured skull. When they realized I had no fucking idea what anything was or did, they assumed I had head trauma, and I let them. I didn't know what else to do. I had nowhere to go but back, and I didn't even know how to get there.

"Once I healed, they handed me a bill for medical expenses and sent me on my way. I'll spare you the details, but I spent a lot of time in and out of homeless shelters and sleeping rough. I begged, borrowed, and stole just so I could eat, and with the rest of my free time, I learned. I went to the library every single day for three years. Took every free course they ran, read every book I could get my hands on. I know what I need to know now, but that knowledge is limited by its relevance—meaning history and geography, in particular, are black holes for me. I'm good with money because I had no choice but to learn fast, and math comes easily to me. My mom was a voracious reader. I think it was her only escape. She taught me to read and spell, and she read to me daily, which helped, or I'd have been even more fucked.

"I was trying my best, but then I made the mistake of pickpocketing the wrong wallet," she says quietly, shame coating her cheeks red.

"We've all done far fucking worse to survive, Lil."

“Maybe, but it’s not something I’m proud of. “

“You said you picked the wrong pocket. Let me guess, James fucking Taylor?” Mack curses.

But Lil shakes her head. “No. Just some random guy who was having a bad day that I made worse.”

“What did he do?” I ask when she falls silent.

“He threw me off a bridge. And that’s how I met James fucking Taylor.”

* * *

It’s like my brain completely glitches. All the sound disappears from the room as the rush of blood fills my head.

“I broke over half the bones in my body, including my back, hips, and pelvis.” I hear her say when the noise comes rushing back in.

“My face was unrecognizable, and for a while, they didn’t think I was going to make it.”

“How the fuck are you not littered with scars?” Probe chokes out.

She turns her head to look at him before replying. “I had a really good plastic surgeon.”

And that’s when the penny drops. Jesus, this woman—girl, really, back then—didn’t stand a chance.

Kruger bangs his head against the desk while the rest of us stare at her in horror.

“I don’t even know how long I was in the hospital, but James came to see me every day. He might be evil on the inside, but there is no denying he’s very handsome on the outside. I was young and sheltered, and the only kind of sexual encounters I’d had were at the hands of my—”

She shakes her head. “He wooed me, for want of a better word. He helped me heal, and he took care of me. He knew someone who worked as a marshal and somehow got me a new name, *Lilith Taylor*, a Social Security number, and even a birth certificate. He made it sound like it was for my safety because the man who threw me off the bridge hadn’t been found.

“When it was time for me to leave, he asked me to move in with him, and I said yes. I was so infatuated with this handsome, smart, and worldly man that I missed all the red flags until it was too late.” She drinks some more of her water, her hands shaking again.

“He convinced me to study to become a nurse so I could travel around the world and work beside him in countries that needed medical staff badly. It felt good to give back instead of take, so I said yes and worked my butt off. I thought everything was great until I ran into someone at the hospital when I was doing a clinical, and they nearly passed out from shock. They hugged me, shocked that I was alive, and then asked why the hell I’d come back. I honestly didn’t know what she was talking about, so I wrote it off as her mixing me up with someone else. But then a couple of days later, I was looking up something in one of his medical journals, which he keeps in his office. When I pulled the book from the shelf, there was a photo behind it, as if it had slipped down the back and been forgotten. It was a photo of me and James in wedding attire. Only we were never married, and that woman wasn’t me, even if we shared the same face.”

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Chapter Seven

LIL

"THAT MOTHERFUCKER!" Powers roars, getting it first. Then I see the penny drop around the table with everyone else, too.

"Hold on. Are you telling us that he reconstructed your face to make you look like his wife's?" Ambros asks incredulously.

I nod, remembering that twisted, sick feeling in my stomach as I felt my life starting to unravel all over again. "He'd told me he was married once, and his wife died in a boating accident. I felt sorry for him. It was clear he loved her from the way he spoke about her, but I didn't know enough about love to understand the difference between love and obsession." I finish the rest of my water, my mouth suddenly dry.

"Something instinctual told me to keep my mouth shut and dig, and so that's what I did. The internet was an interesting concept to me. While I knew the basics, I didn't know how to do deep dives or search for hidden information. I didn't let that slow me down, though. I found the missing person's report on his wife and researched everything I could about the woman with the sad eyes, and wondered if that's what people saw when they looked at me. After looking into her, I dug into James. But that's where I made a mistake. I couldn't find anything suspicious. The media made him sound like a saint, and I was starting to believe it was all in my head. I paid someone to look into him for me. I don't know if the guy just wasn't careful or if he went to James with the information, hoping for some payout. James

had him killed, along with one of my only friends on the same clinical placement as me. She was my punishment, he told me, for being ungrateful.

"I told the police, but James had friends on the force. Powerful friends. I ended up being forcibly admitted to a psych ward for evaluation."

"For how long?" Powers chokes out.

"Six months. They pumped me full of lithium and fuck knows what else. I did what I knew best. I became the person I needed to be to survive."

"You became the wife he wanted," G says softly.

I nod. "I was docile but not withdrawn. He wouldn't want me to draw attention to myself. I worked hard, but I made sure I never shone. It wouldn't do me well to receive more praise than him. I made him believe I'd given in. And then I tore apart every inch of that house, looking for clues or some proof that he killed his wife because that's what I believed. Until I found a blank page in an otherwise empty notebook that changed everything."

"I'm so fucking confused," Crane sighs.

"All the things James supposedly bought for me were actually Lilian's. My dressing room was her dressing room, which had lain untouched except for the regular dusting by the cleaning lady. It was because of her that I was looking for a notepad in the first place. I needed to leave a message to avoid the upstairs bathroom as it was being remodeled. In the bottom drawer of the vanity, I found a pad and pen. But when I started to write, I realized I could see the indentations of whatever had been written on the page above it. I used a pencil to shade over it lightly and found the words "Raven Souls MC Ohio" on it, along with a number and the word "Poacher." It took me forever to realize Poacher was likely a club name, though he was long gone by the time I got here. Nobody has even mentioned him."

I look over at Havoc, who is shaking his head. "Doesn't mean anything to me either. G?"

"Sounds familiar—"

"He was a nomad," Probe jumps in. "Been a while since I heard of him, to be honest. He was an old-timer who lost his family in a freak accident, and after that, he could never settle in one place for long. He wasn't a Raven Soul. I can't remember what club he was originally attached to, but most clubs were more than happy to let him use a barstool when he was passing through. As far as I remember, he was a good guy who never did

anyone any harm. He was just sad, you know? Blade is the one you need to talk to. I have no doubt he'll remember him."

"I'll call him after this," Havoc tells him before his eyes come back to me. "So that note made you think James hadn't killed his wife, but that she ran?" His voice is skeptical. I get it, but I can't explain it any differently. It was just this hunch I got.

"All of her things were in that house. She took nothing. She couldn't if she was faking her own death. I imagine he has her birth certificate and shit as he does mine for safekeeping, but there was nothing personal in that place. If she took nothing and her room was untouched, then where the hell was that woman's essence? You'd think I'd feel like I was living with a ghost, but there was nothing there. That note was the only thing I'd ever seen that was even remotely personal."

"Alright, but how did that lead you here? Not being funny, but it could have been anything."

"It was all I had. I—"

Knocking at the door has us all pausing. Before Havoc can say anything, the door opens, and Con sticks his head in. "Cops are here."

The room goes wired at that. I get a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach at the look he's giving me.

"What the fuck do they want?" Havoc snaps.

Con shakes his head. "Not what, who. They're looking for Lilian Taylor."

My head drops in defeat. "He knows I'm back."

Powers looks over at me and curses.

"I'm coming." Havoc sighs. "Did you tell them nobody by that name was here?"

"I wasn't at the gate. Scooter is. He called up. The name didn't mean anything to him."

Havoc looks over at me. "Stay here. Midas, call the lawyer just in case."

"I'm on it," Midas agrees.

I toy with the now-empty water bottle as Havoc and G head down to talk to the cops.

"You okay?"

I look over at Powers and shake my head. "The cops won't leave without me."

"I wouldn't be so sure," Kruger grunts.

“This isn’t the first time the cops have come for me. James has more than any one man should have on his payroll.”

“Things are different now. He’s on the run.”

“If you underestimate him, you’ll die,” I tell him flatly, making Circus growl. “He has an ungodly amount of money, most of it cash kept in bolt holes across the country, he can use as and when he needs it. The rest is in offshore accounts. We’re talking about millions at his disposal, and that’s not including the trust funds his parents’ estate left for him. The police might have frozen those assets, but that won’t matter.”

“Figures. Guys like this are always fucking loaded,” Hoops complains.

I shrug. “Nobody said life was fair. If it were, James would look like a giant dick, so his outside looked like the inside.”

A couple of people chuckle, but I’m antsy, fidgeting in the chair, waiting for a call or a knock on the door to summon me.

“Havoc’s got this, Lil—” Kruger starts, but the door opens again.

A puffed-out Con says, “Sorry, guys. Lil, Havoc wants you down at the gate.”

“Fuck!” Powers snaps. Con wisely leaves so nobody shoots the messenger.

I get to my feet and glance around the room, wondering if this will be the last time I see these guys. “Something you should know…James always wins.” I blow out a shaky breath, walking to the door, Powers hot on my heels.

I pause for a moment, my hand on the knob as I soak in the smell of leather, oil, and scents one last time. “For what it’s worth, I’m so sorry. I truly love each and every one of you. Thank you for being my salvation, even if it was only for a little while.”

I pull the door open and step out, unable to stay without breaking down. Powers’s hands slide up my arms and pull me back into him before I can get too far. “Take a breath for me first.”

I nod, take a deep breath, and blow it out slowly.

“Whatever we have to face, we face it together. You and me, okay?”

“Okay.”

“Count me in too.” Kruger’s voice sounds from behind us. I turn but find my view blocked by Powers’s large frame until he steps aside.

“I’ve always got your back, Lil,” Midas says, walking toward me, squeezing my shoulder. “If it weren’t for you giving me a kick up the ass,

I’m not sure I’d have convinced Legs to take a chance on a loser like me.” He winks, walking past.

Dice and Hoops walk out next, each giving me a shoulder squeeze and a nod as Kruger hangs back and watches them pass. Powers presses in closer to me as the others step out.

Some of the others walk past, and that’s okay. But when Probe walks out and stares at me before storming away, I feel a burning in my chest.

When Circus steps out, I hold my breath. He doesn’t say anything. He walks toward me, stopping an inch in front of me. “We looked for you. He…” Circus swallows. “Capone looked for you. He’d be so fucking happy you’re back home.”

“I’m sorry. I thought I was keeping everyone safe by leaving,” I choke out as the tears start to fall.

He curses before yanking me to his chest. “Don’t fucking cry.”

I sob harder.

“Dammit, woman.” He hands me off to Powers, who wraps me up in his arms.

When I can finally catch my breath, I turn to Circus, who looks at me with such a tortured expression, it’s like a blade running across my stomach. “I’m not mad, okay? I just miss him.”

He leaves before I can say anything else, which is just as well. I’d likely dissolve into a puddle of tears again.

“He’ll be okay,” Kruger assures me, but I don’t know if that’s true or if he’s saying that to try and make me feel better.

“We’d better go before the cops get antsy.”

I nod and wipe my eyes, looking up at Powers. “I’m sorry, I’m always crying all over you.”

“What’s the point in having shoulders like these if not for a beautiful woman to cry on?”

“Excuse me while I go vomit.” Kruger gags, walking ahead of us. It makes me chuckle, which, given what I’m about to face, surprises me.

“Thank you, Powers, for everything. If I don’t get the chance to tell you later, know I loved being yours, even if it was only for a moment.”

He frowns, his grip tightening on me. “Why does it feel like you’re saying goodbye?”

“I don’t know what’s going to happen. I just know that it haunted me last time, never getting to tell you how much you meant to me, how much

I'd wished I could have stayed. If this is it, I never want you to question that."

"Fuck that. You aren't going anywhere," he snarls before his hands are in my hair and he's kissing me almost brutally for daring to say such a thing. I wish I could promise him I could stay. I'd love nothing more than to figure out what this is between us. Something tells me it really could be epic. But fate has never been kind to me, and I don't expect it to start now.

"Um, guys, Havoc wants to know what the holdup is. Cops are getting twitchy, and nobody likes a twitchy cop," Con says reluctantly.

I pull away and put on what I hope is a brave face, though I feel like a lamb being led to slaughter. "I'm coming."

I grip Powers's hand as he leads me through the saloon and out the door. We make our way down to the gates, my heart racing like crazy. Sensing movement behind me, I turn and find Kruger and Midas following, and behind them are Dice and Kruger. I turn back around, tucking that feeling of not being alone away for later. Hopefully, it will keep me warm in those colder moments that inevitably seep in.

When we pass through the warehouse that holds the bikes, I brace my shoulders and lift my head, refusing to cower in defeat, regardless of how freaked out I am.

Havoc and G are standing there with their arms crossed, looking pissed off, when they turn to me.

"Lil, this is Officer Smith and Officer Jacks. They want to ask you a few questions."

"Down at the station," Officer Smith says, looking smug. And he would. This isn't the first run-in I've had with the guy. He knows my role—or old role now, I guess—within the club, and treated me like I was a whore because of it. If he thought he could arrest me for solicitation, he wouldn't have hesitated.

"You said nothing about going to the station," G snaps.

I move closer, gently touching his arm to let him know it's okay. The last thing we need is G getting arrested. Amity would lose her damn mind.

"What seems to be the problem, officer. Is this regarding my attack?"

"Attack?"

"Yes, I was attacked and left unconscious. If it wasn't for a couple jumping in to help, I'm not sure I'd be here talking to you now."

“Be that as it may, that’s not what we’re here to talk about. We are here to question you in conjunction with James Taylor.”

I flinch at his damn name again, unable to help myself. “What about him? I haven’t seen that odious man in years.”

“Yes, well, we’d like to question the accuracy of that, what with you being his wife and all.”

“I hate to break it to you, Officer Smith, when you seem to have so diligently done your homework, but he was never my husband.”

“Funny, we have evidence to prove differently. Now, we can either do this the easy way or the hard way.”

“Did he really just fucking say that? The man’s a walking cliché.” Someone chuckles from behind me, making his face flush red, which of course angers him further.

He pulls out a set of cuffs before walking my way.

“I’m not creating a fuss, officer, so unless I’m under arrest, I don’t think those are necessary.”

“In that case.” He steps closer, grabs my arm, spins me around, and pushes me against the side of the cruiser. “Lilian Taylor, you are under arrest for perverting the course of justice and refusing to come quietly.”

He continues to read me my rights. I watch the reflection in the windows as Havoc and G struggle to hold a pissed-off Powers back. When I’m yanked up unceremoniously, I wince, the cuffs digging into my wrists.

“I swear to god—” Havoc snarls.

“You’ll shut your mouth, is what you’ll do. I’ve had enough of bikers thinking they run shit around here,” Smith snaps at Havoc before he can finish. Havoc’s whole persona shifts, like a dragon emerging from dormancy. Only an idiot wouldn’t feel the death vibes coming from him.

Havoc’s eyes move to me. “Don’t say a word. Your attorney will meet you at the station. I’ll be sure to send a copy of everything our cameras just recorded to him, as well as every fucking news outlet if necessary.”

I offer him a shaky smile. “Just look after Powers for me. I don’t trust him not to try and break me out,” I half joke.

Two minutes later, I’m shoved into the backseat of the car, and the door is slammed shut in my face. I stare out the window and swallow at the look of fire in Powers’s eyes. I really hope Havoc does as I ask, or we might just find our police station nothing more than a pile of ash by tomorrow.

“I’ll be there to take you home,” Powers yells. Somehow, god help me, I believe him.

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Chapter Eight

POWERS

I WATCH them take her away, and I do nothing. None of us do. We watch as she looks out the window with wounded eyes. I don't move until the car is out of view, and then I tear myself out of Havoc and G's hold and whirl on them. "What the fuck was that?"

"Calm down." Havoc says, but it's like pouring gasoline on a fire.

"Calm down? We just let them take her. She's not even properly recovered from her attack, and we've spent the morning interrogating her. And now she's getting fucking arrested on top of everything else? Tell me, Havoc, why the fuck would she stay after all that? Would you?"

"I get you're pissed, Powers, but Havoc is your president. This isn't the way," G says firmly.

Havoc sighs and steps forward. "Look, if the shoe were on the other foot, I'd be pissed too. But my hands were tied. If we had stopped them from taking her, they'd have charged the lot of us with obstruction. And that would have left all the women vulnerable, including Lil. We have to think smarter because it stinks to hell that they turn up here now, the day after she returns."

"Someone's talking," Kruger grunts, moving closer, his phone in his hand. "I've messaged ELM. They're going to dig, and Nathan is heading down to the station to keep an eye on things, at least until the club lawyer gets there."

“Wise. I wasn’t happy with how they treated Legs when she was taken in for questioning. Cops in this place seem to have a real hard-on for the club girls. You noticed how Lil knew both of them? Far as I know, she hasn’t had any run-ins with the cops since she’s been here.” Midas looks to the rest of us, and we shake our heads.

Havoc narrows his eyes before he looks over his shoulder at Dice. “Reach out to the old ladies, let them know what’s happening. Tell them not to go anywhere alone. I’m not taking any fucking chances. If one of them leaves without an escort, they’ll deal with me.”

“Got it,” Dice says.

Havoc turns to Hoops. “Track down the club girls and tell them to get their asses here ASAP. I want a word. I think Tina’s been helping out with her sister’s kids, so if she can’t get away, tell her to find me later.”

“Yes, Pres,” he says and heads off

Havoc looks at me. “What are you thinking?”

“I’m thinking the cops in this place give us a wide berth, but that doesn’t mean they do the same for the women.”

“Wouldn’t they say something though?” G frowns, but Havoc laughs.

“Would Amity?”

“My woman’s a superhero. I don’t think we should use her as a baseline here.”

“Delphi wouldn’t say anything unless she thought the kids were in danger. Shit, let me fire off a text to Theo so he knows not to leave until Con gets there to collect him.”

Kruger steps back as Midas folds his arms over his chest, his jaw ticking. “Legs wouldn’t say anything if she thought I might get into trouble, and after what went down at the precinct before, she knows I’d go in and tear the place apart.”

Havoc licks his lips. “Tink would. Mostly because she’d worry about the others being targeted, not because she was being targeted herself,” Havoc admits.

I shake my head, really thinking about what they’re saying. They’re right. “Lil wouldn’t have done anything that might have exposed her.”

G eyes me. “You think James bought them off?”

“I think they sound like corrupt cops, the exact kind James likes. At this point, I’d be more surprised to find out he didn’t.”

He nods. “I’ll look into their finances. Don’t want ELM taking risks that might put them out of commission.”

Kruger’s cellphone pings. He pulls it out, reading the text received. “Nathan is just pulling up to the station now. Says there is a lot of traffic in the parking lot, far more than usual.”

“Reporters?”

“Nathan thinks Feds.”

“Fuck. I’m heading down to the station too.”

“You kick off, you could make this worse for her,” Havoc warns.

“I’m used to following orders, even those I don’t agree with. I know when to keep my mouth shut, even if I think it’s the wrong call. But I’m never going to let her think I’ve abandoned her. I won’t be that guy.”

Havoc runs his hand through his hair but nods. “Fine. Keep your nose clean.”

I nod, heading back toward the warehouse, but I don’t grab my bike. I jog through and head to my apartment. I open the door and find Lucy sitting there as if waiting for me. “Got a job for you, girl. Wanna go see Lil?”

She wags her tail and follows as I walk through to my office space. I pull out the items that have been waiting for me since we arrived back from Atlanta. I slip the vest over Lucy, followed by the harness. I check the paperwork and shove it in my pocket. Lucy follows me out the door, staying at my side until we reach the truck. I pull the rear passenger door open and wait for Lucy to hop up. I clip her harness to the dog seatbelt attachment and close the door.

Midas laughs at me as I walk around to the driver’s seat and climb in. “That’s fucking genius. When did you get it?”

“I know a guy. Might not be legal, but since when has that stopped us?” I give him a wry look, daring him to argue with me.

He holds his hands up in surrender. “I kinda wish we thought of it sooner.”

“It wouldn’t have mattered. Much as I’d love to get them made for all the women, just in case, Lucy has only really bonded with Lil.”

“No, I get it. Go get her to Lil. Nobody is gonna fuck with her with Lucy watching.”

“That’s the plan.”

He taps the side of the truck as he steps back, leaving me space to reverse out of the spot and turn around. Tick, one of the newer prospects,

nods and opens the gate for me. I make my way to the station, keeping to the speed limit. I won't risk getting pulled over because that would mean breaking my word to Lil about being there for her. Like I already told Havoc, I won't be that guy. And I meant it.

There are no parking spots at the station. Nathan wasn't kidding. I drive to the end of the street and around the corner, having to drive all the way past the high school. There is no parking on this road other than for pick-ups and drop-offs. Turning once more, I park in the first space and place the permit on the dashboard, indicating I can park here thanks to Lucy's service jacket.

I jump out and unhook Lucy before clipping her lead to her harness. I walk back the way we came, passing the high school, not due out for a while yet. The road is relatively quiet for now. I pick up the pace to a light jog, a sense of urgency pressing on me that doesn't ease even when we do make it to the station. I arrive at the same time as a man, built like a brick shithouse in a tailored suit, reaches for the door. He takes me in, his eyes moving to my cut before they drop to Lucy. "Powers, right?"

"I know you?"

"As you haven't been arrested yet, no. I'm Lane, lawyer for the Raven Souls. I'm here to see my client."

"Lil. She's my old lady. This is her service dog, Lucy."

His eyes zero in on Lucy again, taking in her jacket, labeling her as just that. If he knows who I am and he knows my story, he'll know who Lucy is. I'll give the guy credit—he says nothing to refute my claim.

"How is she with strangers?" he asks quietly.

"If nobody fucks with her, she'll be fine. The jacket tells people to back the fuck off. If they mess with her, that's on them."

"That's fair. You have papers for her?"

I hold them out. He scans them and grins. "Perfect. Will she be okay to walk in with me?"

I nod, dropping down to Lucy and giving her a pat on the head. "Guard Lil."

She licks my face, making me grin. Fuck knows if she gets what I'm saying, but she'll figure it out. Lucy's a smart cookie, and she loves my girl. I get to my feet and hold the door open so he can pass after I hand him Lucy's leash. I walk in behind him and move to join Nathan, who I see sitting against the far wall, a couple of empty suits on either side. I take a

seat next to him. He's about to speak, but I nod for him to check out the lawyer.

I lean forward and listen as Lane explains who he is, that he wants to be shown in to see his client immediately, and that she should have her service dog with her. When the cop at the desk starts stalling him, the lawyer tears into him. He pulls out his phone to call the mayor, which has the cop scrambling. The cop picks up the desk phone and calls someone, his eyes lifting to Lane, who stares down hard at him.

A few minutes later, two men walk into view. One of them in a uniform, one of them in an ill-fitted suit. Both of them are wearing scowls.

"Oh yeah, that guy on the left is definitely a fed. I smell the bureaucracy on him," Nathan mutters.

I nod but keep my eyes on the scene. They're all talking too quietly for me to hear, but when the agent in the badly fitting suit looks over and sees me, his scowl deepens before he relents and lets Lane and Lucy through.

I let out a relieved sigh and look over at Nathan, who is watching me with interest.

He lowers his voice. "Service dog?"

I shrug, unable to explain to him the pressing need I had to get Lucy to Lil and how I must have, somewhere in the back of my mind, planned for something like this to happen to make everything seem legit. Hopefully, Lil doesn't say something to blow Lucy's cover, though I'm sure Lane will be on guard for that.

"What happened before I got here?"

"Not much. I was told to wait, and I'd be seen soon. The waiting room itself is kinda quiet, as you can see, which makes you wonder who the fuck all the cars belong to."

"You get the plates of any?"

He looks at me like I'm a dumbass, which, of course, I am. This is what he does.

"Right, my bad," I mutter.

"I get it. These fuckers seem to have a hard-on for your girl."

"Not the first person to say that. What I wanna know is why? When she went to them, they weren't interested in her story. Now they want to use her to get to James, potentially putting her in danger. Fuck that."

"You know how these guys are. Why do you think women have such a hard time reporting shit to the cops to begin with? They're either not

believed or dismissed as dramatic. Or my personal favorite, they're told the cops' hands are tied. But if she gets murdered, she should definitely call them."

I'd laugh if it weren't so tragically fucking true.

We sit there for what feels like hours, and not a fucking soul comes out to tell us what's going on. A steady stream of people comes and goes, giving us a wide berth. They must see the violence bubbling under my skin and read the warning for what it is.

At one point, Nathan disappears and returns with coffee for both of us. He leans a little closer when he takes his seat once more. "Four of the cars are government-issued. Definitely Feds. Nothing suspicious on the others so far. Three belong to officers, and one is registered to whom I'm guessing is that guy over there."

"There were more than eight cars when I drove past."

"The team is still running down the others. There were a couple of plates that the cameras only picked up partials for, so it's taking longer."

He stops talking when a door opens, and the sound of claws taps across the floor. I stand and hand my coffee off to Nathan, recognizing the sound of Lucy approaching. I see Lane first. Just behind him, with her head down, is Lil. As if sensing me, she lifts her head and offers me a wobbly smile. I stalk toward her, noticing the men following her out. I keep my eyes on them, not liking the way one of them in particular is watching her when she is led around the counter.

"Don't leave town, Mrs. Taylor," the asshole says, which has Lane whirling on him.

Lil ignores him and breaks into a run. I brace as she collides into me, pulling her tight to my chest and wrapping my arms tightly around her. "You came," she murmurs into my chest.

"Nothing on this earth would have stopped me from getting to you."

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Chapter Nine

LIL

As the car pulled away from the clubhouse, I tried to memorize every detail of Powers's face. I never wanted to forget what might have been. If ever there was a shot at me finding a happily-ever-after with a man, it would be with him. But there is a long way between now and forever with dangerous obstacles in the way.

Smith was whistling a merry tune, acting like this was the best day of his life. There was something seriously not right with the man. He got too much sick satisfaction out of watching other people's lives crumble.

I imagine there are many reasons people become cops. Some want to be part of a legacy laid out for them, perhaps inspired by a parent or grandparent. Others join to make a difference, or because they like the idea of being a hero. Maybe a cop saved them once and inspired them to do the same for others. I'm sure there are dozens of stories about what type of person it takes to become a good cop, but nobody ever mentions what it takes to become a bad one. They're a special breed on their own. Putting on a uniform doesn't make you any less racist or homophobic than you were before—now they have a badge to hide behind and a gun to make them feel important. And women, particularly women like me who are anything but the pure and virginal traditional wifey-in-the-making, are the root of all evil to guys like Smith. Oh, he'd happily paint me as the scarlet woman, tempting men like I was Eve, and Raven Falls was Eden.

Smith is the type of guy who would take what I wasn't offering and blame me for his weakness. Without that uniform, I have no doubt he'd be wearing orange. But cops stick together, perpetuating the cycle of abuse instead of breaking it.

He starts making comments about knowing what it truly means to be fucked, but I tune him out. I wasn't lying when I said James wouldn't hurt me. I'm his favorite toy, after all. If this cop laid a finger on me, James would slit him from scrotum to scalp.

My concern is how deep the cops might be with him. If it's one or two, I should be safe. But if the whole station is in on it, he could walk right in and drag me out, and not a single one of them would stop him. It sounds incredible, I know. We're talking about a wanted man who is now on a dozen international watch lists, thanks to what the Ravens have uncovered. But power and money offer a man a level of protection that supersedes morality.

"You think you're something fucking special, but you ain't shit. Just another whore who thinks her pussy will save her."

"Who do I need saving from, Officer Smith?"

He huffs out a laugh. "You know."

"No, I don't. Please enlighten me."

He turns in his seat to glare at me. "Come on, fuck a rich guy, convince him with that tight snatch of yours to put a ring on it, and the first sign of trouble, you bail? Typical."

"Just so I'm clear where I stand, you're not here in hopes that I might be able to help you apprehend a wanted criminal. You're here to return me to one. I hope you were heavily compensated for this transaction, because James is unforgiving toward anyone who damages his property, and these cuffs are dangerously close to breaking the skin."

He swallows and looks nervous for a moment. He knows exactly what James is capable of. Most people only see the polished veneer he shows the world. Those unfortunate enough to see beneath it tend to meet untimely ends. For Smith to be worried, he has to have seen James in action, and that's enough to have my heart skipping a beat.

If the whole station is compromised, I'm fucked. I wasn't joking about James having the balls to walk in and collect me himself. My only hope is that it's just a couple of cops. That will make things harder for them, especially if Havoc can get his lawyer to me in time.

“He’ll never believe a slut like you over me.”

“A man who wears his uniform like a lie? It’s not about believing my word over yours. He knows me. He knows who I am and what I’ve done. He knows the lengths I’ll go to escape him again and again. It’s you who doesn’t know who he’s dealing with. All I have to do is tell him you touched my ass, and he’ll put a bullet in your head before you can even protest your innocence. But then innocence doesn’t matter to you, does it?”

We pull up at the police station, and I shut up. Coming up with a plan is impossible when I have no clue what’s coming next, but that’s okay. I know how to adapt when necessary. I take a deep breath, noting all the cars outside. That means there are a lot of people here. That’s good. More witnesses. I use that to fuel me, straightening my shoulders, hiding my nerves behind a meek smile I’ve made into an art over the years.

Officer Jacks is the one who gets me out and walks me in. He’s more gentle with me. That has little to do with his worry over what James might do to him—that’s just his approach. That’s what perhaps makes him worse than Smith. Smith at least acts like an asshole all the time, waving that dickhead flag for all to see.

Jacks is different. He’s the quiet guy, the soft one who watches and pays attention to the small details. He thinks he can nice his way into someone’s pants. And when that doesn’t work, he starts with the gaslighting and manipulation before sliding right on in to blackmail. As far as I’m concerned, he’s a few steps over the line that turns him from a cop into the kind of predator he’s supposed to hunt.

Smith leads the way, slamming the door open and walking in like some pompous peacock spreading his feathers. Jacks’s hand slides from my wrist up to my elbow, where he gives a little squeeze, making my arm go numb for a second. A little warning to behave. I tense when he slides it up to my bicep, his fingertips skimming the outside of my breast. I wonder if he’s seriously about to grope me in a police station when he moves so his lips are half an inch from my face. “Be a good girl and answer the questions, and everything will be okay. Nobody wants you to get hurt in all of this. You didn’t do anything wrong.”

I fight back the eyeroll. *Be so for real right now, office assfucker.* He takes my silence as compliance, which isn’t a surprise at all.

They take me into an empty surveillance room and walk me over to one of the chairs at the table. My hands are uncuffed as the chair is pulled out

for me, and I'm guided into it with a hand on my shoulder. I sit and say nothing, clocking the giant mirrored window. I've watched enough TV to know that's not an ordinary mirror. I have no doubt people are watching me from the other room. I shiver, hoping whoever is in there watching isn't James. I look away just in case.

"Name," Officer Smith barks, taking the seat in front of me.

"I won't be answering any questions until my lawyer is present. And even though you didn't offer me one, I know I'm entitled to one, so I'll wait for them to arrive."

They both look at each other for a second before Smith slams his fist down on the table. "You're just making this harder on yourself."

I shake my head. "So be it."

Smith storms out, but Jacks is beside me, his hand moving to rest on my thigh. I jump away, but he digs his nails in to hold me in place. "That wasn't being a good girl now, was it?"

I don't answer. I look straight ahead, seething with anger and a healthy amount of trepidation. This guy is just trying to push my buttons. Whoever is on the other side of that glass won't let it go too far. I bite down on my lip, reminding myself of this when he leans closer again.

"Nobody is coming to save you. I could fuck you over this desk, and nobody would bat an eye."

I turn my head slowly to look at him. Whatever he sees in my eyes has him leaning back a little. "Try it, and I can guarantee only one of us will be leaving alive."

He jerks his hand away as if I burned it. Unfortunately, not because of me, but because the door bangs open, revealing two men in suits. One looks like it was custom-tailored, the other bought off the clearance rack at Walmart. Both look like Feds, regardless of the financial discrepancies between the two.

They take the seats opposite me and look at Jacks in disdain. "You may leave," the smartly dressed one says to him. Jacks bristles beside me, but he recognizes when someone in the room has a bigger dick than him. He stands up and backs down like a good little beta male. It's those tendencies that have him bucking his constraints and taking out his frustrations over his inadequacies on women.

He walks out and slams the door, leaving me alone with two men who have yet to identify themselves. They both sit there watching me for ages,

and I wonder if this is part of their act, hoping I'll get nervous and break first. If that's what they want, they've seriously underestimated what I've had to deal with. This is like a cake walk compared to the mental gymnastics James had me jumping through.

Eventually, the one in the expensive suit speaks, his fingers laced together on the table in front of him. "My name is Special Agent Bowser. This is Agent Mikos. We want to ask you some questions regarding your husband, James Taylor."

"He's not my husband, and as I said to the previous officers, I won't be talking without my lawyer present."

"I don't think you understand the severity—"

The door opens, and in walks a huge man in an even nicer suit than Special Agent Bowser. I have to bite my lip at his name, finding it hard not to think of him as the large green reptilian character from one of my favorite video games.

I jolt when a furry body rounds the table and presses against my leg.

"Lucy!" I whisper, bending down to give her a fuss, which is when I catch sight of her little jacket declaring her a service dog.

"What is the meaning of this?" the pompous agent snaps.

"Now I know you weren't about to interrogate my client without her lawyer present," the guy drawls. So this is my lawyer. I instantly like him for not cowering to the agent with the over-inflated ego.

"We were just getting started," Agent Bowser growls as the lawyer moves to sit next to me.

My attorney looks me over, his gaze softening. "I'm Lane Arlington. How are you doing, Lilith?"

I swallow, surprised he used that name. The twinkle in his eye tells me it's intentional.

"I'm okay."

"Good, I'm glad. Your boyfriend was nice enough to bring me your service dog, which should have been arranged to begin with." He turns to glare at the Feds.

I dip my head to hide my smile. This was Powers's doing. "I appreciate it. I was worried I might have a panic attack. Everyone here has been less than friendly."

"Yes, they have a surprisingly bad track record with female victims at this station, something I think I'll have my team dig into. I'm hoping these

lovely agents will have more respect for the law, though." The threat is left unsaid, but the message is clear.

Agent Mikos coughs to clear his throat, which snaps his partner out of his musings.

"We'd like to ask you some questions—"

"Is it standard practice now to have female victims harassed and intimidated into answering questions when no crime has been committed?"

"That's for me to decide."

"Actually, it's not. And I would be careful about building your house of cards here because I'll blow the whole fucking thing down. I don't give a single fuck whose payroll you're on."

Silence prevails for a minute, enough to make Agent Mikos squirm in his seat before Agent Bowser starts asking his innocuous question. "A woman matching your description was seen with whom we believe to be Dr. James Taylor. Where were you three nights ago?"

"You don't have to answer that," Lane tells me.

"No. It's okay. As I told the cops who addressed me, I haven't seen that man in years. As for my whereabouts, I was in a hospital in Atlanta after being attacked. And yes, there are both witnesses and camera footage."

His mouth snaps shut. Guess he didn't do his homework after all.

Mikos takes over with a frown. "I'm sure you can understand that we are anxious to apprehend your husband for questioning so that he can answer for the crimes he's been charged with."

"He is not my husband. He's married to the Lilian Taylor who came before me. The woman who was missing when I came on the scene. I'm Lilith Taylor. It's her face I'm wearing because her husband is a sick fuck who did my reconstruction surgery after I was hurt, and he built my face in the image of the woman he was obsessed with. We share a face, a name, and a psychotic ex. But I never took the vows she did, thank god."

That strikes all three of them mute. James would never tell people that part, of course. It makes him look exactly like the creep he is, though he's somehow managed to convince people before that I was the one who provided the photo. Even going as far as claiming he thought I was Lilian's twin. The fact that people bought that bullshit always dumbfounded me. But it fit his narrative, especially when he pretended to cops that I was the one who manipulated and stalked him, preying on his feelings for his missing

wife. It's one of the things that helped him get me locked up in a mental health facility.

If they'd done their research, they'd have known about that and could have used that against me, but they didn't. They took the order to find me and, at a guess, take me in for my own safety, which, of course, would end with me being delivered back into the arms of the man I ran from.

I sigh as they ask me dozens more questions before repeating them over and over until I feel like my head is going to explode.

"Enough!" Lane eventually yells. "Your conduct has me wanting to lodge a formal complaint with the FBI for the handling of this case. If it's left up to you to investigate, I can easily predict that James Taylor will walk free. My client is done here, and so are you. If you ever need to ask her some ridiculous questions again, call me first." He leaves a card on the table before standing and indicating that I should do the same.

"I have—"

"Harassed a victim who was shunned when she initially reported what he was doing. And now you want to use her, at best, as a scapegoat. Or, at worst, as bait. And I refuse. My client has been through enough."

I move when he indicates for me to, and Lucy follows, leaning against my leg as we make our way to the door. Lane opens it and walks through, leaving me to follow. At first, I'm surprised he didn't insist I pass through first. He seems like that type of guy, but then I realize it's a power play. He wants to walk into the room, drawing all eyes to the huge, pissed-off man so they might feel his wrath and duck for cover.

Seriously, this guy is impossible not to like. I've never met a lawyer like him before, not that I've met many. I'm just grateful he's on my side.

When I get back out into the reception area, I'm half expecting Smith and Jacks to hop out and drag me to a cell. But when I spot Powers moving toward me, all those thoughts fly out of my head. Before I know what I'm doing, I'm running to him, colliding with his body hard enough to knock some of the wind out of myself.

"You came." I know he said he would, but I couldn't afford to hope.

"Nothing on this earth would have stopped me from getting to you."

I look up at him and feel something warm move through me. Before I can say anything, Lane calls my name. When I turn, I see the agents have gone, and the chief of police is standing next to him.

“G forwarded the chief of police here a copy of the clubhouse footage of your arrest.”

The chief looks red-faced, and I can’t tell if it’s due to embarrassment or anger. I keep my mouth shut so I don’t make it worse.

“You are free to go. I’m very sorry for the inconvenience.”

I feel my eye twitch at the word inconvenience.

“I appreciate the apology, sir, but a man I’ve been hiding from now knows where to find me, thanks to someone here. Now everyone I know is in danger. Residents of your town may lose their lives because of this. I’m not sure you realize the severity of who you’re dealing with. Oh, and while we’re at it, might I suggest you check the cameras from the room adjoining the interrogation room I was in. I noticed the red light of a recording device, but I’m not sure that either of your officers did. Might want to find it before they do, though.”

He stares at me, stunned for a second before he swallows, nods, and hurries away, leaving both Powers and Lane radiating with anger.

“What—”

“Not here,” another voice pipes up. I look over Powers’s shoulder and spot Nathan, who walks over with a smile on his face. He nudges Powers out of the way to give me a hug. “It’s good to see you, gorgeous.”

“Nathan,” Powers warns, but Nathan shrugs him off.

“This isn’t the place for private conversations. Let’s head out. The air in here is giving me a headache.”

I smile and walk to the door, which Nathan rushes to pull open. Lucy stays at my side as I walk out and take a deep breath. Nathan was right. The air in there is enough to make anyone want to smack their head against a wall.

Powers’s hand presses against my lower back as he moves with me, scanning the area before nudging me aside so Lane can follow us out.

“Now explain that comment, missy,” Lane says, folding his arms over his chest.

I look at him and then at Powers and see what Nathan saw that I missed: raw rage. If I spill now, they’ll storm inside and tear the arms off the officers. That’s the last thing I want.

“Can we do it back at the clubhouse? I really just want to get out of here.”

I’m not sure either of them is buying my excuse, but they don’t push it.

“Fine. I’ll meet you there. I need to talk to Havoc anyway,” Lane says before heading toward a sexy black Jag.

“Nathan?” Powers asks.

“I’m of more use back at ELM, but I wouldn’t mind a ride since I got dropped off. I’m assuming you brought the truck because of the dog?”

“I did. We have to walk for it, though. Had to park down past the high school.”

“These loafers are practical as well as sexy,” Nathan states, making me laugh.

“Did one of your ex-wives tell you that?” I tease as Powers slips his hand in mine and leads the way.

“Maybe. What’s your point?”

I laugh again, enjoying the feel of the air on my face after being cooped up. Powers tenses, making me look up at him.

“Something wrong?”

“Keep walking, but move a little in front of us.”

I do as he asks, Lucy moving a few steps ahead as she sniffs around.

“What do you see?” Nathan questions, his phone already in his hands.

“Looks like the agents are following us.”

“Why? They have to know we’re not going to lead them to James. Idiots,” Nathan grumbles.

My breathing speeds up when I realize that’s the last thing they’re thinking about. “They probably already know where he is. They’re looking for a chance to grab and deliver me.”

“You’re serious?” Nathan says.

I nod. “Nothing about them was on the up. If Lane hadn’t arrived when he did, I have no doubt they’d have walked me right out of the station and shoved me into their car—for my own protection, of course.”

“Of course,” Powers mutters.

Nathan curses. “This fucker has way too many allies for a psycho.”

“That’s why he has them. And they’re not allies—they’re accomplices. He would never do for them what he gets people to do for him, but he doesn’t have to. He pays those who are easily bought and takes out those who aren’t.”

I stop talking when Lucy freezes solid, then sits down next to a light blue Ford Taurus. “Come on, girl.” I click my tongue, but she ignores me.

Powers is so focused on the Feds that it takes him a minute to notice something is wrong.

“What’s she doing?” I ask when she refuses to move.

Powers sucks in a sharp breath as he reaches out with both arms to stop Nathan and me from going any farther. “She’s telling me she’s found something.”

“What’s she found?” Nathan questions, looking around.

I swallow hard, my mouth suddenly dry. I know what Lucy used to do before she retired.

She found bombs.

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Chapter Ten

POWERS

I FEEL my heart drop to my fucking feet before my training kicks into action.

"Back up slowly," I tell Nathan and Lil. "Nathan, I want you to head back to the station, find the chief of police, and tell him what Lucy can do. Tell him we have reason to believe that there is a bomb outside the high school."

"Powers." Lil's voice shakes. She's staring at her watch.

"What's wrong?"

"The school lets out in twenty minutes. We need to get that place evacuated now!"

"Fuck!"

Torn between keeping Lil safe and a bunch of kids, one of whom is Theo, the decision should be easy. But it's really fucking not. The thought of Lil anywhere near this bomb makes me want to throw up, but she'd never forgive me if I placed her above the children. That's just not who she is.

"I'll go to the school and warn them. God willing, Nathan should be here soon with the cops, and they can take over."

"I'll go."

"It has to be me. We don't know if that bomb is set to explode or if he's watching and plans to detonate it himself. I'm the only safe person here. He'll take you out in a heartbeat to punish me. I know you well enough that

you won’t just walk away, and I respect you too much to try and make you. Please do the same for me.”

I snarl, fucking hating this. “When we find him, I’m going to gut this motherfucker.”

“And I’ll hand you the knife.”

She reaches up and kisses me, tears pricking her eyes. If he’s watching, this will paint an even bigger target on my back, but neither of us can just walk away, not if this is the last kiss we might get.

“God, I’m getting really fucking sick of these life-and-death situations. One day I’d like to just sit in the silence with you and watch the world pass by.”

I kiss her brow. “It’s a date.”

She offers me a worried smile before she pulls back.

“Go, baby. You get those kids out, and you keep your fucking head down doing it.”

“Okay. Please be careful.”

“I just got you back, not gonna do anything to risk losing you again,” I tell her, making her smile. She turns and sprints toward the high school. I watch her go until I lose sight of her completely, then turn to Lucy, who hasn’t moved.

“Just like old times, huh, girl?”

I slowly move closer and make my way around the car as carefully as I can, checking the wheel arches before I get on my back and gently ease myself under the car. I hear footsteps thundering toward me, but I ignore them, needing to know what I’m dealing with. After a thorough search, I can’t find any incendiary device. I use my feet to inch my way back out again, feeling something ease a little when I hear the sound of motorbikes in the distance. The cavalry is coming.

Once I’m out, I look up and have to shield my eyes before I notice Nathan standing over me. He holds his hand out to help me out, which I take and inch him away from the car again.

“You didn’t have to come back.”

“The fuck I didn’t. This is my town too. I have friends whose kids go here. We need to warn them. Fuck knows how long the cops will take. I’m not sure they believe the threat is serious.”

“Even if they do, we don’t have a local bomb disposal unit. It will take them a couple of hours to make it out here. I’m gonna step away and make

a call. You should head over to the school and help Lil. She's trying to make them evacuate, but with the police dragging their heels, they might think it's a hoax."

"I'll make them fucking listen," he snaps, jogging over to the high school.

I order Lucy to come to me, and she does, sitting at my feet. Her stare remains on the car as I dial a number I haven't called since everything went to hell in a handbasket.

"Well fuck me sideways, it's Boy Wonder. I was just thinking about you."

"Must have been a premonition, Mitch, hopefully not of my death."

"Whatcha need?" His voice snaps, all joviality leeching from it at my tone.

"I've turned on the location on my cell phone. I don't know how far out you are."

"Gimme a sec." I hear him fiddling around as two bikes turn the corner onto the road, heading my way. I step forward and hold up my hands, indicating for them to stop. Thank fuck they do.

"You're an hour out, but I know a guy with a chopper on standby if you need me. That will cut the time in half. Tell me what's happening," Mitch asks as Havoc and Kruger jog toward me.

"I'm outside the high school, and Lucy just alerted me to one of the cars."

"Fuck. Let me guess—local cops have their fingers up their ass, and you're the closest expert on hand."

"That about sums it up. I need equipment. Looks like the device is in the trunk of the car, but without popping it open to look, I don't know what I'm dealing with. And I have no way of knowing if it will trigger the device."

"Shit, okay. I have some shit on hand, but it's not fancy."

"I don't need fancy. I need something that means I'll make it home to my girl."

He sucks in a sharp breath. "I'm on it. There somewhere I can land this bird?"

"Use my location. It will bring you to the high school. They have a huge football field out back. Just watch out for the kids. We're trying to evacuate before school gets out."

“Got it. I’m on my way.” He hangs up as both Kruger and Havoc reach me.

Judging from the looks on their faces, they either heard me or Nathan filled them in on what’s happening.

“There’s a fucking bomb?” Havoc snarls.

“Lucy thinks there’s one in that car. Can’t see anything on the exterior. My guess is that it’s in the trunk.”

“Has she ever been wrong?” Kruger questions.

I stare at him, which is all the answer he needs. My girl is never wrong.

“Where the fuck are the cops?”

“Nathan told them what went down. Don’t know any more than that, and I don’t give a shit. Right now, we need to get those kids out of—” My mouth snaps shut when we hear the fire alarms blaring from the school.

“Shit, what now?” Havoc groans.

“Not what. Who. My guess is Lil just lost her patience.”

“She’s not the only one.”

Kruger’s phone chimes. He pulls it out as a police cruiser turns the corner. I jog over to it, arms wide, forcing them to stop. When he does, I move to the driver’s window. The cop just looks at me.

“Dude, I don’t have time for this. There is a bomb in that car right there, and any kind of vibration might set it off.”

“Sir, back away from the car.”

I roll my eyes and turn my back on him, but I don’t move. I don’t trust this idiot not to start driving again.

“That was Nathan. Lil pulled the fire alarm. The principal is threatening to have her arrested, but protocol means the kids are heading out back to the evacuation point.”

“Good.” I look down at my watch, noting school is due out in ten.

His phone rings then. When he grabs it, his eyes widen. “It’s Theo.”

“If you don’t move out of the way, I’ll arrest you,” the cop says behind me. He must have lowered the window.

“If you arrest me, who are you gonna get to defuse the bomb?” I snap, my eyes on Kruger.

Kruger nods into his phone, a look of relief on his face. “No, I’ll tell him. And listen to Lil. She won’t let anything happen to you. Love you too, kid.” He hangs up and shoves his phone in his pocket again. “Lil kidnapped

Theo from class—his words, not mine." His lips twitch, making me think Theo has no problem getting kidnapped by a gorgeous woman.

"She set off the fire alarm, got most of the kids out of the building, and headed to the far end of the football field. Lil called Con to come, but to park near the station. She's sending Theo to him so he'll be safe at the clubhouse."

"Good, though I'd feel a lot fucking better if she went back to the clubhouse herself."

"Good luck with that. We tend to attract women who run into danger rather than away from it," Kruger drawls, and he'd know. Delphi blew herself up to save Legs and Midas.

The chirp of a siren has me turning to see another cop car approaching, along with a firetruck from the next county over.

"Let's move back until the cavalry arrives. If that thing goes off, we're still in the blast zone."

Havoc and Kruger don't need telling twice. We walk past the first cop, ignoring him, and move to the next car when it stops, and the two officers get out. They approach as a couple of firefighters jump out of the truck and head our way, too.

"Fill me in. Chief says there's been a report of a bomb?"

I don't blame him for his surprise. Shit like this doesn't usually happen in small-town USA. I point to the Taurus and fill him in on what happened with Lucy and what steps we've taken so far.

The fire marshal listens, nodding before slapping his teammate on the chest. "Take Rogers and Henenez and head over to the school. I want every child and teacher accounted for and out of the blast zone. Do we have any idea how big that might be?" He looks at me.

"Not until I can pop that trunk. I have a guy flying in with some safety equipment. But until then, I'm as blind as you are, and I'm not willing to risk anyone's safety."

When Lucy growls, I look down at her. She's looking back at the car. The hairs on my arms stand on end. I look at Havoc and swallow. "Run!"

I turn, grab Lucy's lead, and yell. "Run, everyone. Take cover." I sprint toward the firetruck, planning on using it for cover. Thankfully, the others don't hesitate and follow suit. We dive behind it and crouch down as silence swallows us all.

The annoying cop rolls his eyes. "Knew this was a fucking—"

The world explodes in a riot of noise and flashes of color. I cover Havoc as Lucy pins us both to the ground and covers me with her body.

My ears ring and my head throbs. I can see Havoc's lips moving, but for a moment I hear nothing. And then everything comes rushing back in.

"Lucy, off," I order. She moves off me and waits beside me as I get to my feet.

"Is everyone okay?" I ask. My voice sounds weird as I hold out my hand to Havoc, who grabs it and lets me yank him to his feet.

"I'm getting too fucking old for this shit."

Kruger gets to his feet with a groan, holding his head. "Son of a bitch."

"Get to the high school, now. Go." I hear the voice behind me shout. I spin around to find that the front of the high school has taken some damage. A few people are lying on the ground, but most seem to be moving, thank fuck.

"Lil," I say her name gently, reminding myself that she's smart and resourceful. She wouldn't come back out the front without me giving her the okay. I jog toward the school with the firefighters, noticing another truck at the far end of the road blocking traffic, which explains why there have been no parents hurrying in to collect their kids. Thank fuck these guys don't mess around, or this could have been a whole different ball game.

"Sir, I can't let you in there," the firefighter next to me says.

I shake my head and point to the dog. "We're the only way you're gonna know if there's a secondary device. Help is still a while out yet."

"Shit." He looks from me to Lucy. "Captain?" he says, talking into his shoulder radio, relaying what I just said.

"Get him suited up. Might not protect him against a full-on blast, but it will give him some protection against the flames. I'll send Jenkins over with a spare."

"You heard the man. You get suited up first. Anything happens to you, we're fucked."

"No pressure." I chuckle, making him slap me on the shoulder.

Turns out it's not Jenkins who runs the suit over but Kruger. "Theo is on his way back to the clubhouse. Last he saw Lil, she was out back, ushering the kids away from the building."

"Thanks, man. I'm going to do a loop of the school to make sure there are no other devices, then find her. Better fill the cops in on what I'm doing

so they don’t charge in and arrest me.”

“My day just keeps getting weirder,” he says, shaking his head.

I pull the uniform on after handing Kruger my cut. “Look after that for me.”

“You know I will. Oh, and when you find Lil, hug the shit out of her for me for getting my boy out. If anything happened to him, it would have killed Delphi.”

It would have killed him, too. But thankfully, my woman is as stubborn and hard-headed as I am, and that served us well today. I can only hope we’re this lucky next time.

And something tells me that there will be a next time.

As I head in, I pull out my cell phone and call Mitch. He answers after the first ring. “I’m heading to the chopper now.”

“Might as well turn around.”

“Ah fuck. I can still come.”

“No need to paint a target on your back, but I’ll call if shit changes.”

“Fine. Though I want to hear what the fuck is going on later.”

“You got it,” I tell him before hanging up. Right now I have shit to do and a woman to find.

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Chapter Eleven

LIL

I'LL ADMIT, I jump out of my skin when I see a firefighter charging at me, but then I spot Lucy running full pelt and recognize the way the man moves.

"Powers?"

He rips off his helmet a second before I'm up in his arms, and his lips crash down on mine. Relief surges through me, cool and crisp like summer rain after a month-long drought.

"Fuck, it's good to see you."

"It's good to see you too. I heard the explosion. I was so worried." I brush my thumb across his forehead, noticing a small cut.

"We were far enough away when it blew that the worst injuries were a blown eardrum or two and some scrapes. I'll make sure people know to watch out for primary blast injuries, but we were lucky."

"We all were. The principal didn't want to listen to start with. I get it—I could have been a crazy person—and with the danger kids already face in school thanks to guns and shit, I didn't blame her for being wary. I just didn't have time to argue my point. I tracked down Theo and pulled the fire alarm outside his room, not wanting to have to look for him in a crowd."

"Smart. Any injuries?"

"Not from the blast itself. Got a sprained ankle from someone taking a tumble down the stairs, and a diabetic had a hypo, but she's doing much better now. I still want the paramedic to check her out. They here yet?"

“Arriving on scene now,” a voice says from behind me.

I turn and find the fire captain with his helmet under his arm. “Hear we have you to thank for the evacuation.”

“Sorry about pulling the alarm. It was all I could think of.”

“No, you did well. You both did.” He looks at Powers. “You sure there was nothing else?”

“As sure as I can be. Nothing caught Lucy’s attention, at least. But I’d talk the principal into keeping the school closed tomorrow for a long weekend anyway, as a safety precaution until the cops can get a team out here to sweep the place again.”

“Already working on it. Not sure the principal likes me much, though.”

“Join the club.” I chuckle, feeling exhausted now that the adrenaline is wearing off.

“Why don’t you go home and crash? I bet there are a lot of anxious people wanting to see with their own eyes that you’re both okay.” He offers Powers his hand, and they shake before he holds his hand out to me. I shake it too, happy it worked out today. But I can’t help but feel the tendrils of panic racing up my spine, telling me this is just the beginning.

I slip my hand into Powers’s and let him lead me out before I remember I’ve left Nathan behind. “Shit, we forgot about Nathan.”

“I passed him on the way in. He was talking to one of the cops. Said to take you home and rest. You’ve had a long day. He knows what he’s doing.”

“Don’t we need to stay and talk to them, too?”

“After the way they treated you this morning? They can suck my fucking dick,” he snaps, making me glad the building is empty of kids.

“Hey, you’ll get no arguments from me. I could fall asleep standing up,” I tell him, sliding my hand over the top of Lucy’s head when she nudges me.

“You’re so getting steak for dinner, pretty girl.”

“Damn right she is.”

We head outside, and I gasp when I see the damage. “Jesus.”

“We were lucky the blast radius wasn’t far enough to take out the school.”

I swallow, feeling sick to my stomach. “Luck had nothing to do with it. He didn’t care about the building. He cared about the kids. If they hadn’t gone out the back, they’d have been standing out here, laughing and joking,

waiting for rides, catching the bus. He didn't care which kids he took out. He was after the spectacle."

"So he wasn't targeting Theo?" He looks at me.

I shake my head. "He used him before. He paid the money that had his abusive stepfather released on bail. He did that because he could. To show the club that none of you were safe.

"This wasn't about Theo. There was no way to be sure he was one of the people who came out this way, or that he didn't stop to talk to friends first, or have football practice, for that matter. At most, it would be traumatic for him. Losing people you know, even if you aren't friends, has a knock-on effect. Especially at this age. It makes you question your own mortality when teenagers usually have the mindset that they'll live forever."

He looks at me oddly, making me flush.

"I didn't like feeling dumb."

"You were never dumb."

"I was. I was uneducated and woefully unprepared for the real world. I learned everything I could about—well, everything. I'm not a master of anything, but I know a little about a lot of things, enough to hold a conversation without embarrassing myself. And psychology was one subject that fascinated me."

"It baffles me that you have no idea how amazing you are."

My mouth snaps shut at that. Shock renders me mute. Before I can say anything else, I catch two familiar faces heading our way and feel myself tense.

"What is it?" Powers asks, looking at me before he feels them approach.

"Mrs. Taylor, we'd like to ask you a few questions," Special Agent Mikos says as Agent Bowser moves in closer.

Powers blocks them. "You've got to be shitting me," he snarls. I see Havoc and Kruger approaching and feel myself relax a little. They'll hold Powers back if needed.

"I can assure you we're not," Bowser snaps.

"You've already spoken to me. I have nothing else to say."

"That was before a bomb exploded in the town you're currently inhabiting."

"Again, I have nothing to say that will help you catch the person that did this. But you and I both know this was likely James's work."

“The man is a plastic surgeon, not a bomb maker.” He rolls his fucking eyes at me.

“Was a plastic surgeon. That’s what you meant to say, right? He was. Now he’s just a sick fuck intent on hurting people just because he can—”

“I think it’s time for you both to get back in your fucking car and leave before I show you how I got my name. I give zero fucks about the badges you have on your belts.” Havoc seethes like he’s breathing fire. The agents turn, their hands resting on the butts of their guns.

“I could arrest you for—”

“I don’t care!” Havoc yells, leaning closer. Now I’m wondering if Powers and Kruger will be able to hold him back.

“You were following them. You know exactly what went down because you were watching. You know what you didn’t do? Help. We have you on camera, watching all the chaos unfold, watching all these people—including Powers and Lil—put their lives on the line. And you did nothing to help. The only time you got out of your fucking car was when you saw them walk out.”

Neither of them knows what to say to that, but I don’t miss the cold look promising retribution in Powers’s eyes.

“I’ll be seeing you, Lilian.” Bowser smirks, knowing damn fucking well that’s not my name. I take it for the warning it is. James might not want to hurt me, but this guy has no such problem doing so. Sure, James would kill him for it, but it would be too late by then.

None of us move as we watch the agents walk away, doing nothing to help any of the bystanders. They climb into their car and leave before I take my first deep breath of relief.

“Fucking pricks,” Havoc mutters before he looks at me, his eyes scanning me from head to toe. “You good?”

“I am now that I know everyone is okay.”

“A large part of that is because of you,” Kruger says, reaching over to give me a hug. “Thank you for getting to Theo. Means a lot.”

“I might not know him, but Powers gave me a crash course on some of the things I missed. I know how much he means to you and Delphi. I wasn’t leaving this place until I found him. Luckily, he recognized my name and had no issue leaving with me, or things might have been a little trickier.”

“He’s a teenage boy, and you’re hot, Lil. That kid would have followed you off a damn cliff.”

“Okay, let’s not make it weird,” I grumble, making him laugh.

As soon as Kruger pulls back, Powers tucks me into his side and wraps his arms around my shoulders. “I’m taking her back to the clubhouse. I know we have more shit to have out, but she needs rest.”

“Agreed. Go. We won’t be far behind you. Everything else can wait until later.”

It should annoy me that they’re talking about me like I’m not here, but I can’t summon the energy to care. I let Powers lead me through the chaos and down to the parked truck, thankfully on the other side of the fire truck blocking the street. He holds the door open for me and helps me in before he opens the back door for Lucy.

I fasten my seatbelt, rest my head against the window, and am out for the count before the engine even starts up.

I’m so out of it, I don’t notice the note left on the windshield. But Powers does.

* * *

Soft voices pull me from sleep. I can tell they’re trying to be quiet, but I’m not used to the noise of having anyone around when I’m sleeping anymore. It sets off some kind of internal warning.

I feel a warm weight across my legs and crack my eyes open to see Lucy out cold herself. Glancing around, I see Legs and Delphi talking to each other, sitting in chairs on my left, while Neveah and Citi sit in chairs on my right. Seeing them together like that is still a little jarring, but I’m so happy that Citi escaped and made a life for herself here near her sister.

I swallow, remembering what James did to her and her daughter. I tense up, which draws Delphi’s attention. She looks at me warily, and it takes me a second to remember why.

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So much has happened since that fateful night. It almost feels like a lifetime ago.

“Hi,” she says softly, making the others turn to look at me.

“Hey.”

“I know you might not be comfortable with me being here, but I just wanted to thank you for what you did for Theo.”

“You’re welcome. And you don’t have to leave. I really don’t mind.”

“I don’t want you to feel uncomfortable.”

“Well, it’s not every day a girl wakes up surrounded by women that resemble a coven, but that’s not on you.”

She snorts out a laugh but takes her seat again.

“Let me just say this once, and then we can just put it behind us for good, okay?” I tell her, shuffling to sit up, feeling awkward lying down while they loom over me.

“What happened to me wasn’t your fault. I made a choice. Me over the old ladies and kids. And I still stand by that choice. I didn’t know then how things were going to play out. I hadn’t even known I’d been spotted until one of the prospects grabbed me by my hair and dragged me into the barn. What happened in there happened—no changing that. But I’d have done worse if it meant the kids weren’t subjected to it.”

“I don’t really understand what you did, or how, or even when, to be truthful. I didn’t really know the other Lil. She kept to herself, other than when she was with one of the men. She was polite, but we weren’t friends. She wasn’t friends with anyone. Not like you.”

I blow out a shaky breath, making a loose hair skate across my face. “I didn’t want to be friends with anyone either. I know why she was the way she was. Having friends meant having people to lose. That way was safer. But I’d been alone for so long that it was impossible to shut everyone down. I hoped James would eventually forget about me, but deep down, I knew that would never happen. Not unless he thought I was dead and he could move on to his next… I couldn’t do that to the girl who would come after me. I never faked my death, not like Lilian did. But I ran and hid, not thinking about the fact that I’d made myself a game.”

My eyes move to Citi. “If I’d have stayed, or gone back when I realized he’d found me, he may never have touched you or Star, and I’m so sorry for that. Capone is dead because of me, and that’s something I can never take back.”

“No. I’m so tired of us women being weighed down with guilt that is not ours to carry. Capone died because a monster slipped into our lives. But he wasn’t the only monster we’ve encountered. There are always monsters lurking in the dark, ready to strike. If I had killed myself when I had the chance, I wouldn’t have buried so many babies. But then I wouldn’t have Star. If Delphi had seen past the mask her husband wore, she’d have a little boy right now, only she wouldn’t have the teenage one who currently owns her heart. And Legs wouldn’t have Hero and Midas because Delphi wouldn’t have been around to save them. We could have all done things differently in hindsight, but different doesn’t mean better. It’s a hypothetical world that doesn’t exist. What Snake did wasn’t Delphi’s fault, and what James did wasn’t yours. And we’re done blaming ourselves for shit that happened to us.”

“Okay, Citi,” I whisper, seeing how passionate she is about this. And she’s right, of course. Even if the world often beats into women that the buck usually starts and ends with us.

“I’m glad you’re back, Lil. I need you to rest up so I can kick your fucking ass,” Legs says, folding her arms.

Delphi sighs. “Really. She just saved a high school full of kids.”

“I didn’t really. I—”

Delphi glares at me, so I shut up.

“Yeah, yeah.” Legs sighs and nudges me over. I make space for her to lie next to me.

“You missed a lot.”

“I know,” I say softly.

“You never met my son.”

I swipe a stray tear from my face. “I’m sorry.”

She tugs me into her arms. “If you ever run away again without telling us, we’ll shave your head.”

“That seems a little—” She yanks my hair. “Ouch. Okay, fine.”

She wraps her arms around me a little tighter, her voice thick with emotion. “I was so fucking worried.”

There is nothing I can say that will make it right. But maybe I should just go with the truth, split my guts open, and lay them bare for them all to see. And if they judge me, so be it. It’s not like I’m not judging myself.

I start at the beginning and tell them everything I told the guys in church, only I don’t share the finer details or how I felt. The women will

already get it on a level the men just can't.

"He gave you her face?" Citi hisses like she's personally offended on my behalf.

I nod, playing with a strand of Legs's hair. All of the women have piled onto the bed during my storytelling, each of them snuggled into each other, offering me the support I'd been so desperately craving but was too afraid to ask for.

"That's fucked-up on a whole new level, and I'm the kid who got abducted."

I snort with laughter. "I think we're all a little fucked-up, but yeah. I didn't want to believe it at first. I mean, I loved him. How could the man I loved do something so heinous to me?"

"Boy, do I get it." Delphi sighs.

I reach out and give her hand a squeeze. "I was heartbroken, and then the numbness set in, quickly followed by denial and then anger."

"You were grieving what you lost in him," Tink whispers.

I shake my head. "I was mourning what I'd lost of myself. I already had so little. I'd spent my formative years not existing and then slowly becoming a ghost that most people walked right through. But he saw me, or I thought he did. Instead, all he saw was potential. And none of it was for my benefit."

A tap at the door stops me. I turn as it opens and find Powers with an exasperated look on his face.

"She was supposed to be resting," he chastises the others.

Tink rolls her eyes. "Does it look like we're auditioning for a tampon commercial?"

He opens his mouth but then frowns. "Huh?"

We women laugh, all too familiar with those stupid adverts that think any of us feel like rollerblading or skydiving when our uteruses are trying to tear their way out of our bodies.

Tink sighs. "It doesn't matter. It's not funny if I have to explain it. How did you know we were here anyway?"

"Delphi told Theo, Citi told Star, Legs told Midas when she was handing Hero to him. It was only you who tried to come up with a cover story."

"Nobody said anything to me about cover stories." Citi looks confused.

"That's because the rest of us aren't as nuts as your sister." Delphi sighs.

“I resent that,” Neveah sniffs, though she doesn’t deny it.

“I’m curious now. What was your cover story?”

Powers chuckles and folds his arms, silently telling Nevaeh that if she doesn’t spill the beans, he will.

“I told them I was going running,” she mutters, making us all laugh. “It’s not that funny.”

“Please. You, run?” Legs cracks up again.

“She’s not that bad,” Delphi says. “Sometimes she runs for cake.”

“And from pedophiles,” Citi adds, making us glare at her. She bites her lip. “Tough crowd.”

Neveah throws her hands up in the air. “I panicked, okay. What was I supposed to say?”

I grin. “Literally anything else.”

“I hate you all.”

“Liar.”

“Hate to break up the shenanigans, ladies, but I need to steal my girl.”

All their heads whip around to look at me.

“Your girl?” Legs states.

“I wasn’t hiding it. I just hadn’t gotten that far in my story.”

“Next time, start with that part, dammit,” Legs complains, getting to her feet.

“Okay, we’re leaving, but we’re doing it under protest,” Nevaeh states, jumping off the bed.

“Noted,” Powers huffs, holding back a laugh.

Nevaeh turns to me. “We’ll be back for the rest of the story. Hopefully, Amity will make it back for it, too.”

“Is she okay?”

“Oh, she’s fine if you don’t count the crippling mental illness she has, which convinces her running down the side of a building is a perfectly good idea.”

I look to Legs, who shakes her head. “She’s filming back-to-back projects, and right now she’s on location in Miami.”

“I’d be jealous, but I’d never have the balls to do what she does.”

“No, you’ll just run into a building that might blow up,” Delphi chirps.

“You’re one to talk, Miss Grenade.”

“Touché, lovely. Touché.”

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Chapter Twelve

POWERS

I WAIT for everyone to leave before I walk over to the bed, take off my boots, and lie down beside her.

"Did you get any sleep at all?" she asks as I pull her against my chest. She snuggles into me, her hand over my heart, her head on my shoulder.

"I got about an hour with you before duty called."

"You wanna nap now? I'll make sure nobody bothers you."

"You looking after me, baby?"

"Somebody's gotta."

I dip my head as she tips hers up, and glide my lips over hers. She whimpers into my mouth, and the sound reboots my brain, throwing out all common sense. Before I know it, I have her flat on her back, and I'm leaning over her as her knees cradle my hips.

"You should be resting," she mutters half-heartedly.

"I'm rested. I'm sooo rested." I chuckle against her lips before she opens for me and I slip my tongue inside. She darts hers out to taste me, ripping a groan from the deep, primal place inside me.

I try to remember all the reasons we should be taking this slow, but as I tear off her clothes, leaving her completely naked and at my mercy, all reason goes out the window. The woman is a siren, calling to a primitive part of me that's unable to resist. I slide down her body, spread her legs wide, and dive in. I spear her slick pussy with my tongue, dragging a heated moan from her that has my cock throbbing with need.

“Oh god,” she cries out, arching up, pushing herself into me.

“God has fuck-all to do with this. It’s just you and me, trickster.”

She lifts her head and gazes down at me. The words she utters nearly have me coming in my pants. “I want to taste you too.”

Now it’s my turn to groan.

Slow down. Give her time to get her head together. She’s been through a fucking ordeal—

“Please,” she begs.

Fuck me. I’m weak for this woman. I climb off the bed and strip out of my clothes, loving the feel of her eyes hungrily trailing over my body.

Once I’m naked, I take her hand and tug her from the bed, confusion marring her face until I lie in the spot she was just in. “You want to taste me, have at it. But you’ll ride my face while you do it.”

She licks her bottom lip and then, without a second of hesitation, she climbs onto the bed and straddles my face.

“Good girl,” I mumble, my hands sliding to her hips and cupping her ass. I drag my nose across her slit, breathing her in as she bends over and wraps her hand around my cock. It throbs in response. I reward her with a flick of the tongue to her clit. She shivers, her grip tightening as she slips out her tongue and drags it all the way from the base of my cock to the tip.

After that, it becomes a game of tit for tat as we reward and punish each other in equal measure. When she circles the tip of my cock with her wet tongue, I press a finger inside her slick heat. When she slides the length of my cock into her mouth and swallows around the tip, I grip her clit with my teeth, holding it steady as I flick my tongue over the sensitive bundle of nerves at a dizzying speed that has her moaning around me.

It’s hard to focus when the woman is draining the life out of me with that talented mouth of hers. She works me harder, faster, upping the ante until we’re both on the precipice of falling apart. But like fuck am I falling without her. I thrust a second finger inside her and nip her clit with my teeth, not hard enough to hurt but enough to leave a sting.

She screams around my cock as she comes around my fingers, and the vibrations are my undoing. I come before I can give her a warning, but I needn’t have worried. She swallows me down with ease until my balls are empty and I feel like I could sleep for a week.

“Jesus, you undo me, woman,” I tell her when she turns around and crawls up my body.

“Right back at ya.”

She rests her head on her hands as she sprawls over me. “Think we could stay like this, just for a little while?”

“I’m not sure a nuclear bomb could make me move right now,” I admit, making her chuckle. She scoots up a little higher, her wet pussy sliding over my abs, making my cock perk up once more.

She tucks her head under my chin and lets out a soft sigh. “Two minutes and then we’ll move.”

“Two minutes,” I agree, feeling my eyes get heavy.

* * *

Two minutes turned into two solid hours, but we obviously needed it.

Now, as I watch Lil eat grilled cheese and tomato soup, I’m happy to see she has more color back in her face, and the dark circles don’t look as prominent.

“You’re staring,” she teases without looking at me.

“And I refuse to apologize for it. I went months without seeing you at all. Now I’ll look until my eyes stop working.”

She does look up at me then, her lips parting in surprise before a soft look crosses her face. “I don’t know what to say when you say shit like that.”

“You don’t gotta say anything, trickster. You just gotta let me look my fill.”

“Still with the *trickster*, huh?”

“You convinced a whole-ass MC that you were not just someone else, but someone they all knew intimately. That’s not only tricky but also pretty fucking ballsy. Somehow, I didn’t think you’d like that nickname, though.”

She laughs and shakes her head. “I admire your restraint.” She takes another bite of her grilled cheese before looking at me thoughtfully.

I wait her out, seeing her thoughts play out on her face before she finally speaks. “So you were thrown into the thick of it again today. We haven’t really talked much about what you did for Uncle Sam, and I won’t push you to. Just know if today stirs up old ghosts and you ever want to talk, I’m a good listener.”

I reach over and grab her chair, dragging it closer. I lean over her and tuck a strand of her hair behind her ear. “Where have you been all my life?”

“I’ve been waiting for you to come find me.”

I slide my hand under her jaw and tip it up before I kiss her hard. I pull away before I say fuck the food and swipe it to the floor and lay her on the counter so I can eat her instead.

“I don’t like to talk about it because I feel cheated. When I got hurt, it wasn’t even by a bomb I was working on. I’d been called in at the last second to join another team that had a teammate out with appendicitis. The lead guy on the job cleared the area, declared the bomb disarmed and safe, and then ordered me to do the cleanup. If it hadn’t been for Lucy, who took me down like a linebacker the second everything went to hell in a handbasket, I’d have been dead. Instead, I shattered my knee, got a shit-ton of shrapnel embedded in my skin, and was medically discharged with a thank you for my services. I left my team behind. And even though it wasn’t my fault, I felt guilty as fuck about it. I should have been there with them.”

“I’m sorry. That’s fucking shitty. I’m glad you’re okay, though. Even if it didn’t turn out the way you hoped. Lucy really is a fucking wonder dog.”

I grin at that because my girl is awesome.

“I’m surprised they let you keep her when they discharged you.”

“She was diagnosed with PTSD. Nobody wants a hostile dog in that kind of environment. And given how shit played out, I think they hoped it would buy my silence.”

“And did it?”

“Fuck no. My team was rightly pissed. They lodged complaints, as did I, and the asshole was sanctioned. Last I heard, he was pushing paper at some desk in Washington with two divorces under his belt.”

“Good. Should have locked him in a room with Lucy for a little while. The fucker was lucky if you ask me.”

“So bloodthirsty,” I tease.

“He didn’t do his job, and you nearly died because of it. I understand accidents. I understand errors. I don’t understand people not doing their jobs because they are cocky, arrogant, or lazy. And from the way you spoke about him, I know exactly what kind of asshole this guy was.”

“My old lady is smart.”

She jolts at that, her eyes going wide. “That is going to take some getting used to.”

I bury my nose in her hair and breathe her in. “Not for me. I’ve been thinking of you as mine long before you really were.”

She turns, making me pull back so I can see her face. “You really mean that, don’t you?”

“When are you going to get it through that gorgeous head of yours? You’re mine, and I’m yours, and the second I get that patch on your back, I’m fucking you while you wear it and nothing else.”

“Don’t tease me with a good time,” she murmurs huskily, leaning over to kiss my jaw.

I laugh as she resumes eating, and I’m more than happy to sit here and watch her eat, content to have her here in my space, in my home—a place I’m hoping she’ll agree to live in permanently. I can picture it now, all her feminine touches scattered around, making this house feel more like a home. But then, it’s always been like that with Lil. Every time she came over, she brought with her a sense of rightness I hadn’t felt since I was with my team.

When my phone chimes, I reach across the counter for it and chuckle. My thoughts must have conjured him. “Mitch.”

“Still alive then? Good. I’d hate for your luck to run out.”

“Nah, I have my lucky charm right here.” I wink at Lil, who grins, shaking her head before getting up to put stuff in the dishwasher.

“Good for you, man. Good for you. So what the fuck happened today?”

I look at Lil, hesitating because this is club business and not something I can discuss with him. I never really thought about my two worlds colliding, and yet here we are. “You see the news lately about the plastic surgeon the FBI is looking for?”

“Sounds vaguely familiar, but I’ve not been back stateside for long. And as luck would fucking have it, I’m flying out again in a week.” He sighs, sounding tired.

“You okay?”

“Yeah. I think after my time’s up, though, I’m out. I’ve re-upped twice now, but something’s telling me it’s time to bow out. My head’s not in it anymore. And when your head’s not in it…” His voice trails off.

“Is when you end up dead.”

We’re both quiet for a second before he clears his throat. “Anyway, I just wanted to check in and make sure everyone was okay.”

“No fatalities and only minor injuries. It was the best possible outcome.”

“Nice when it works out that way.” We both know times like that are few and far between. “Well, now I know where to find you. I can send you a care package in case anything like this goes down again. Text me the best place to send it, and I’ll make sure to get it sent out before I’m shipped off.”

“You tell me how much I owe you and I’ll—”

“Fuck that. This one is on me. You saved my life and then left before I could return the favor. This is the least I can do.”

I don’t bother arguing. He can be a tenacious motherfucker when he wants to be. “Fine, thank you. Make sure you drop by when you come back. It would be good to catch up, plus I’d like you to meet my MC brothers. You never know, you might find this way of life suits you too.”

“I’ll do that.”

“Take care of yourself while you’re out there.”

“I always do. Stay safe,” he says before hanging up.

“You good?”

I look over at Lil and nod. “Yeah. It’s funny, I haven’t spoken to the guy in years, and yet it was easy.”

“You built it up in your head, probably because you felt guilty, like you said. But it’s clear he has nothing but affection for you, and I’m sure the rest of your old teammates feel the same way.” She walks over when I open my arms to her and presses herself against my chest. I wrap my arms around her and hold her tightly.

“Thank you.”

She tips her head back, looking bemused. “What for?”

“For being you.”

She huffs out a laugh. “Ironic really, given how even after all this time I have no idea who I am.”

“That’s okay, trickster. I know exactly who you are…You’re mine.”

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Chapter Thirteen

LIL

I'M NOT AS tense this time when I walk into the saloon, but I still feel more like a visitor than a family member returning home, which sucks.

It's busy when I step inside, which isn't surprising given everything that has happened today. I assume most people were called back to be filled in on what's happening. Judging by the looks I get as I walk in, most people know what went down.

I greet the people who greet me first, but I don't bother to approach the ones who hang back. I won't force myself on anyone, and if they'd rather cut me from their lives because of the trouble I brought into theirs, I'll respect that.

Theo spots me and walks over, giving me a hug that lingers just a little too long for Powers, judging from his grunt.

"Hey, Theo, how you doing?"

"Better now I know you're alright. Everyone said you were, but adults sometimes lie to protect kids, and some other bullshit. I needed to see for myself. It didn't sit right with me leaving you there." His voice deepens a little at that.

I lean over and press a kiss to his cheek. "One day, you're going to make a great club brother."

He flushes under my praise before someone calls his name. "I've gotta go, but I'm glad you're okay. Thanks for coming for me."

I offer him a wonky smile. If I try to speak, it will come out choked, so I don't even try. Smart kid that he is, he has figured that out. He winks at me and disappears into the crowd.

"How old is that kid again?"

Powers laughs as G walks over and hugs me. As soon as he lets go, Powers pulls me back to him, making G grin. Before he can say anything to wind Powers up, I throw G a warning look. "Don't be a dick."

"How can you even suggest that?"

"Because I know you."

"Please, I'm a changed man."

"Really. So Amity knows you can cook, then?"

His eyes widen before he looks around covertly, making sure nobody overheard. "Now, let's not get carried away."

"You guys are such assholes."

"I can cook," Powers says with a casual shrug.

"I wasn't talking about you, honey." I pat his chest, his eyes heating with need at the endearment.

"Before you throw her over your shoulder and make good on that look in your eyes, we need to talk to Lil first," G warns him, making Powers scowl.

A loud whistle splits the air, dragging all of our attention to Havoc in the center of the room. He waits for everyone to quiet down before he speaks.

"Those of you needed in church, head there now. We have things to discuss that can't wait. Everyone else, stay put until we're done. If you have to leave for any reason, do not go alone. And let a prospect know where you're going. It might sound overkill, but I'm not taking any chances with this asshole."

There are some grumbles, but for the most part, people aren't complaining too badly. Nobody wants to be told they can't go somewhere. But after losing Capone, and what went down today, people are coming to realize how serious it is.

I spot a couple of club girls, Glory and Rose as Powers slides his hand into the back pocket of my jeans and urges me toward the room where they hold church. I give them a small smile, but both of them glare at me.

"Well, okay then."

"What the fuck?"

“Leave it, Powers. It’s just the way things are.”

“Bullshit. They don’t get to treat you that way—”

“But the brothers can, right?”

His mouth snaps shut. As much as he hates to admit it, I’m right. “It doesn’t matter if it’s a patched brother, a prospect, an old lady, or a club girl. People get to feel how they feel. A person died. He was murdered by a man I brought into your lives. Whether it was intentional or not is irrelevant.”

He mutters something under his breath but passes the girls without saying anything. I keep my head down, and my nerves kick in once more. Something about being in this room, with all these men, makes my story that much harder to tell.

“Where are the old ladies?” I ask Powers quietly. I didn’t see any of them inside.

“Not sure.” Powers shrugs.

“They’re out back,” Midas says as he passes. “Havoc didn’t want them jumping on you the second you walked in the door. He wants this dealt with first.”

I don’t know why his words feel so abrasive against my skin, but they do. As a general rule, women aren’t allowed in church, though exceptions are sometimes made. Like with me now, for instance. I guess needing a friend for moral support never crossed any of their minds, and I’m not about to make myself look weak by asking for one.

We take the same seats as before, only this time Powers moves his chair until it’s touching mine. When we sit, his leg presses against mine, offering me a comforting presence.

Once everyone settles down, Havoc looks over at me. “I know it’s been a shitty day, and if I thought we had more time, I’d let you rest more. But I can’t shake the feeling this was just the beginning, and things are about to get a fuck of a lot worse before they get better.”

“So we might lose more brothers because of this?” Probe asks.

“The fucker placed a bomb in a car outside the high school. What the fuck do you think?”

“Do we even know it was him for sure?”

“It was him,” Powers states. The absolute snap in his tone makes me look up at him.

“Oh yeah, and how—” Before Probe can finish, Powers yanks something from his pocket and slams it on the scarred wooden table.

Havoc picks it up before I can read it, but I don’t need to. I recognize the handwriting. My stomach plummets like I’ve swallowed stones, which is stupid. I knew it was him. Of course, I did. But I guess having it confirmed snuffs out the last ember of hope.

Havoc’s jaw tenses as he reads before his eyes come to mine.

“What does it say?” Toot questions as I swallow and force myself not to wilt under his gaze.

“It says you’ve had your fun. It’s time to come home.”

“This guy is off his fucking rocker,” Crane grunts.

“Tell us something we don’t know.” Mack sighs. “So what now?”

I turn to look at him. “Now you call in your allies, and you prepare for the worst. Because he won’t stop until he has me.”

Probe grits his teeth. “We got kids here. More women than just you—”

Powers snarls, but I tilt my head. “You think I should just go back? Sacrifice myself to the monster for the greater good, huh?”

“Like fuck!” Kruger spits.

“You motherfucker,” Powers roars and attempts to get up and launch himself at Probe. But I dig my nails into his leg hard, forcing him to stop.

“I would, you know,” I say softly, making the room fall silent. “I’d give myself to him in a heartbeat if it would keep any one of you safe. Or if it would bring Capone back.”

Circus flinches but says nothing.

“It wouldn’t save you, though. He’d take you all out and raze this place to the ground just to punish me. When I ran, I truly thought he’d follow me and you guys would be forgotten. I didn’t mean to hide so well. Old habits die hard, I guess. It became easier to live off the grid than to hide inside it, where he could find me easily. Hell, the only reason I went into the city in the first place was to grab tampons. And we all know how that turned out.

“I didn’t know he made you guys try to find me or made you suffer in hopes of drawing me out. He must have thought I was checking in, but I couldn’t hear your voices and not want to come back. It would have killed me.”

I lace my fingers together and take a shuddering breath. “So you can send me back, Probe. Back to a man who won’t lay a hand on me but who will make me watch as he systematically and methodically takes out every

single person I've ever cared for until there is nothing left of me but a shell of a woman I could have been. And that would be fair, right? I brought this all on myself. But does your death, and his and his—" I point around the table to his brothers before continuing. "Does it make it worth it? Will you look down on me and feel smug, feeling like I paid my fucking dues? Tell me, Probe, will it be enough then?"

He opens his mouth to reply, but I lean forward and glare at him. "Maybe you could loan me your gun, and I could blow my head off. Decorate this room with my sins, and you can be the one who lives with the knowledge that his next victims are on you. Because if he doesn't have me to chase, he'll find someone else to torment, and the cycle will start all over again. Will that be enough? God knows I've thought about it over the years. If I could have spared the ones I loved by ending my life, I'd have done it without a second of regret. But I'm where I am because Lilian faked her death. Now I get to spend the rest of my days wearing her face, answering to her name, and hiding from her husband so I can spare the next girl the same fate."

My chest is heaving by the time I'm done, but Probe does look a little contrite. I'm not sure it's enough, though. Why can't he just fucking ignore me like everyone else who's mad at me?

Powers gets to his feet and takes my hand. I look up at him and see fire in his eyes. "So fucking quick to judge. Nobody said dick to you when Tink was taken on your watch because the outcome bought us Citi. But what if she'd died? I mean, it's not like you got hurt protecting her. You got taken out for not paying attention to your surroundings—"

Probe jumps to his feet. "You don't know shit, you fucker. You're barely a day out of prospecting."

"And you're old enough to be put on the bench. I keep my mouth shut out of respect, but you're attacking my woman like you have a right to? Fuck that. I'd pick Con to watch her back any day over yours. The truth is, it has less to do with your ability to protect her and more to do with my belief in you that you would. I couldn't wait to become a brother, and now, because of you, I'm questioning if I was a damn fool."

"Both of you sit the fuck down!" Havoc roars. Probe does immediately, but Powers hesitates for a second. I know everyone at the table clocks it because they tense.

I squeeze his hand, and eventually he does sit, but not before tugging me into his lap. I might have protested if it were not for the fact that I can feel him vibrating with anger.

“It’s okay. I’m okay,” I tell him softly, reaching up to cup his jaw and tilt his head down so he stops death-staring at Probe.

“It’s not okay. None of this is. I get it—we lost a brother. And yeah, I wasn’t as close to him as the others, but it doesn’t mean I’m not feeling his loss too. I’m just not willing to blame an innocent fucking woman. We all played our parts in this. We kept shit from the women, which meant we didn’t know some of them had encountered James before, because none of us thought to compare notes. Citi became a victim because of an error on Kruger and Havoc’s part. The whole club failed to kick Pig out when we knew he’d never cut it as a prospect. And even Capone wasn’t faultless. He left drinks unattended in the truck that multiple people have access to. One Star had already been hidden inside one time. That’s a fucking warning nobody listened to.”

“Why would he even think that someone would slip something in their fucking drinks?” Circus snaps.

“Must be nice being a man,” I mutter, earning a glare from him. I shrug. “That wasn’t me trying to be a dick. That’s me pointing out the fundamental difference between men and women. You won’t find a woman in this building who would leave a drink unattended and go back to it.”

“Nobody here would slip something into a woman’s drink,” Crane says, offended.

I look at him sadly and hold up my hands before flipping down my fingers. “Pig, Hicks, Bear, Snake—” I’m cut off before I can continue.

“That’s different. They’re bad fucking guys. We’re not. Not like that anyway.” Crane folds his arms.

“Oh, my bad. I couldn’t tell. They wore the same cut, had access to all the women and kids, knew shit that even the old ladies weren’t privy to. But if you can tell me how to spot the difference between a good guy and a bad one, hell, between a good brother and a bad one, I’m all ears.”

His mouth snaps shut before it opens again, but nothing comes out. He frowns in concentration, and I can almost see how everything he took for granted starts to unravel. “Fuck.”

“That about sums it up. We have to assume all men are potential predators until they prove otherwise. And even then, in my case and

Delphi's, that's not always enough." I run my fingers through my hair, feeling a headache start to throb at my temples. "Can I just tell you the rest and then be done?" I can hear the tiredness in my voice, so I know everyone else can too.

"We're listening," Havoc says, narrowing his eyes at Probe, daring him to say something.

I close my eyes and take a deep breath before I begin. "After finding the notebook and the name of this place, I knew I had to come here. It seemed as good a place as any to start my journey. I knew I had to run. And I knew I had to do it alone, so I planned as methodically as I could. Squirreling away small amounts of money and playing the doting girlfriend until he loosened the reins a little. I knew it was a test, so I fought every urge to run then. I just spent my time doing as much research as I could.

"When I felt like my act had been convincing for long enough, I slipped something into my guard's drink and ran. I didn't come directly here. I tried to make my journey look random, just in case someone was tracking me. I stayed on the fringes of the grid and set a false trail before I eventually made my way to Raven Falls. I never expected to find Lil still here after all that time. I thought she'd be long gone, if she'd ever been here at all. So imagine my surprise when I saw her in the diner with a couple of MC brothers. She was acting like she didn't have a care in the world, and yeah, I get it, she'd been living clear and free for a few years. I was just so fucking pissed. Don't get me wrong, I get why she ran. I don't even blame her anymore. But in that moment, all I could see was how free to laugh and joke she was while I was trapped as her stupid understudy, forced into playing a role made for her."

"You didn't sell her out," Probe states.

The only reason I respond is that he doesn't pose it as a question. "No, Probe, I didn't sell her out. That's not who I am, and you should know that."

"How? I don't even know you."

"Because you knew the other Lil so well? Tell me, what was her favorite color? What food was she allergic to? What about her drink of choice or the book she had read so many times it had pages that were dog-eared and torn?"

When he doesn't answer, I shake my head. "You didn't know her. None of you did, or you'd have noticed the woman living with you for the last six

years was an impostor. I'd know if any of you changed. I might not assume you were an impostor, but I'd know something was very fucking wrong. Because I took the time to get to know you all."

To prove my point, I look at Toot. "Your favorite color is purple, but you tell everyone it's black because you don't think it's manly enough. It's purple, though, same as Greers." I point to Mac next. "You're allergic to pineapple. It's not a life-or-death situation, but you break out in hives, and your voice goes all hoarse and scratchy for days."

I point to Midas. "You have a dog-eared copy of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, but you've never read it. You bought it second-hand, which is why it looks that way. You tell yourself you'll read it one day, but you won't because you haven't been able to get into it the other eight times you tried. Your favorite books are the *Percy Jackson* series."

Everyone turns to look at him, but he shrugs. "What? They're good fucking books."

"My point is that I know you guys. And you might not know me on the same level, but you know me a fuck of a lot better than the last Lil. So no, I didn't sell her out, but you can be damn sure I confronted her."

"What did she do?" Powers asks before anyone else can jump in with their bullshit.

I look at him and swallow. "She set me up."

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Chapter Fourteen

POWERS

"WHAT DO YOU MEAN, she set you up? Set you up how?" I question.

She leans back into me, wiggling a little to get comfortable, making my dick start to harden. If she notices, she doesn't let it show. I focus on her words and the faces of those watching her. Even Probe looks curious, which is just as well. I'm about ready to rip off the man's head for his fucking attitude problem.

"I followed her around for a while, trying to figure out the best place to approach her, while keeping a low profile, but she was always around someone else. And then I saw her purely by chance, heading off in her car somewhere alone, so I followed her. We ended up in the hospital parking lot. I don't know why, but it felt like she was pouring salt in my wounds. I confronted her before she went inside, worried I wouldn't get another chance. She went so pale, I thought she was going to pass out.

"I don't remember everything that was said. My anger and fear were riding me too hard. But she said she needed a chance to talk to you—well, Blade—and explain her case before anyone saw me and connected the dots. She said they didn't know she was running from her ex. She told me that she hadn't told you guys anything about her past other than that she was training to be a nurse. Like me, she ran before she could finish her degree."

"If she were training at the local hospital, wouldn't her name have popped up in the system? James would have easily found her," Dice asks.

“She wasn’t using her married surname. She was using Brown, her maiden name, which is why I now use it—or did while I was here.

“She asked me to give her a couple of weeks to get her shit in order in case you asked her to leave. But she was hoping you’d hear her out and help us both. I’d seen you guys around. You seemed terrifying, and the thought of having you at my back was the first feeling of relief I’d had in months.”

I smooth my hands up and down her back when her voice cracks. “I didn’t have anywhere to go, so I stayed at a shelter and did what I do best—researched the hell out of the town and the club. I made sure to wear a wig and glasses when I went out so nobody would confuse me with Lil—her idea—and we met up frequently. I told her all the shit that had happened to me, and she told me about her life here and all of you guys. I felt like I knew you all before I met you.” Her voice fades into a whisper.

“Hey, look at me, baby. Stay with me. You’re not there anymore. Whatever it is that’s haunting you has already happened, and you survived it.”

She blinks, coming out of it a little before she nods. “Sorry.”

“Nothing to be sorry for. You sure you're up for this? It can wait.”

“No, it can’t,” she whispers sadly. I see her draw on an inner strength that somehow makes her even more attractive.

“She told me to meet her here at the clubhouse. Told me to come without the wig and glasses. She actually gave me an outfit to wear and told me the more we looked the same, the easier it would be for Blade to accept her story. He was apparently still on the fence, and who could blame him, right? It all seemed so farcical.”

She swallows and pushes back into me, seeking comfort or warmth—I don’t know—but I’m happy to give her whatever she needs. I wrap my arms tightly around her and rest my jaw on top of her head. The next parts of her story are going to kill me.

“When I got here, it was like a ghost town, and I don’t mean that as a pun. The gates were open and unattended, which I thought was odd at the time. But my only real references to MCs were what I’d seen on TV or read about. I headed up this way. I could hear laughter and yelling, but I couldn’t tell where it was coming from. I almost turned back. I think I knew something wasn’t right, but I was worried about Lil by this point and carried on.”

She turns her head to Havoc. “That’s when someone grabbed me. I didn’t recognize him from any of the descriptions Lil gave me, but he was wearing a cut. I tried to explain I was here to meet Blade, but then he covered my mouth and dragged me to the barn. When we got there, he shoved me inside, and I landed on my knees. I was in so much pain that it took me a second to realize that the room was filled with terrified women. Some were sobbing loudly, some were silently crying. All of them were cowering away from the men up front.

“I knew then that something had gone horribly wrong. I couldn’t see Lil in the crowd of faces, but I did see a couple of kids. The girl couldn’t have been any older than twelve, and when her terror-filled eyes locked on mine, it was like going back in time again. I was twelve and scared, knowing something really fucking bad was going to happen to me, but nobody was coming to save me. I didn’t know who she was, but I wasn’t going to let anything happen to her. Not if I could help it. I was already broken. What difference would a few more cracks make to me anyway?”

I feel myself shaking at her admission. My beautiful, brave woman, sacrificing herself for a girl she never met.

“When Snake grabbed my hair, I didn’t even try to fight him. I didn’t explain that I wasn’t the Lil he thought I was. I didn’t think of anything but that girl. Even when he forced himself down my throat, I let my mind drift away to that field of flowers I used to hide in as a child. You know what happened next—Sunshine and Blade killed Snake, and the rest of the women were spared. Some of them took off, some of them were too scared to move. I should have run then. I should have snuck out the way I snuck in. Instead, I stood there in a daze. I wandered out of the barn sometime later, as the final showdown took place.

“I stood by the door and watched as a man I knew as Bear—from Lil’s description—forced Sunshine to her knees.”

“Bitch, please. All women are the same. They’re only good for two things: sucking and fucking. Isn’t that right, Lil?” she says in a deep, mocking voice, making Kruger jolt.

“See, Bear thought I was Lil, too. Everyone seemed to. His words ignited my anger. I couldn’t believe that this shit was happening again, and all because of men and their jealousy and envy of others. I told him men don’t take what women would give them freely if they were real men to begin with.”

I stroke my fingers down her face. “You are absolutely fucking right,” I tell her vehemently.

“He said, if I didn’t want to see Sunshine die, I needed to round up my little pussy brigade and get them back in the barn along with the brats. He said all this while pressing a gun to Sunshine’s head. I had no idea who she was at the time, and she didn’t seem to know me either. But in that moment, we were the same woman. We were all women. And we had had enough. You know how it all played out in the end. Blade killed Bear, Sunshine survived unscathed, and everyone celebrated the win.”

“Not Delphi,” Kruger grunts.

Lil nods. “I didn’t know Delphi, though, remember. And even if I had, I didn’t know any of that went down. I would have assumed she jumped ship with the rest of the women.”

Circus leans forward. “And the other Lil? What happened to her? You said she set you up, but it sounds to me like she got caught up in the crosshairs herself and—”

Lil shakes her head, cutting Circus off. “I went looking for her. Searched her room, which seemed untouched, but of course, I knew that meant nothing. She’d faked her death before. There was nothing stopping her from doing it again.

“Eventually, I went to the hospital. It was the last place I could think of. I went in a wig and wore contacts, making myself look just different enough that I could pass as her sister. Most people wouldn’t tell me anything, but there was one woman there who was pissed about being left in the lurch. She said Lil had quit two weeks ago, without an explanation, leaving them short-staffed.”

“The day you confronted her in the parking lot,” I guess.

She nods. “I gave her an excuse about a family emergency, and she gave me permission to clean out her locker and belongings, which I did. She’d left her keys behind, so why not?”

“That’s why you were always cagey when anyone brought up you working there, because you never did,” Midas says softly.

She’s crying now, swiping at her tears like she’s embarrassed. “Lil left me a note.”

The mood in the room shifts again. “Take a second, Lil. There’s no rush,” Dice says gently. I give him a nod in appreciation and notice most of

the others are looking at her with concerned expressions, even Circus and Probe.

"I still have the note. It's in a safety deposit box, but I've got a copy of it on my phone if you'll let me read it?" She looks at Havoc, who nods. She pulls it out with a shaky hand and clears her throat before she begins.

To the other me.

I don't even know your real name. I didn't want to know; it would have made this so much harder to think of you as a person and not just my replacement.

I hiss at the callousness of her words. Lil shivers, so I rub my hands up and down her arms.

I know you think you get it, but you don't. I married him. Gave him everything, but it was never enough. He told me what to study, what to wear, what I could and couldn't eat—the demands were endless.

The first time I left him, I went to my parents. My father was firmly on James's side. I wonder if he was still on his side when James killed him.

My mother was on my side until her husband was killed. Then she blamed me for bringing that man into our lives, forgetting that it was she and Daddy who introduced us. It didn't matter in the end. She died in a car accident a month later. I knew it was James, but he made me sound like I was crazy. He threatened to have me committed to a long-term mental health facility. I knew then I had to be smarter about it, so I faked my death and chose a life for myself that was as far removed from my old one as possible.

I won't say it was paradise. I missed the money, the clothes, the respect that came with being a plastic surgeon's wife. Nobody cares about club whores, but it's being a nobody that stops him from finding me. So I stay, I fuck and suck and pretend to enjoy it."

There is some cursing, but I focus on Lil. I never met the other one, so I have no feelings beyond my anger toward the woman.

"I've known for a while it was time to move on," she continues. *"The monotony of it all is killing me. I think my next reincarnation might involve a sugar daddy so that I can have the best of both worlds. I know you think I'm a horrible person for doing this, but can you really be sure you wouldn't do it too?"*

She swallows. *"Bear and Snake are planning a coup. They've been tight-lipped about it, but Lenny likes to talk when I'm sucking him off. I*

know when it's going to go down, and I know how some of it's going to play out, but I only know what Lenny does, and clearly, they've kept some stuff from him. Either way, if you're reading this, you know I set you up, and for that I'm sorry. Part of me hopes you died and never see this and realize how much of a selfish coward I am. If you are reading this, though, you have two choices. One, be me. It's what you've been training for, after all."

"What a bitch," Ambros snaps, making her head jerk up toward him. "I'm serious. I get some of these guys feel some loyalty toward her, but she was never *our* Lil." He points to himself, Hoops, Dice, and me.

"Let her finish, man," G says before anyone jumps in to contradict him.

Lil takes a deep breath before continuing. "*The other choice is to tell them the truth. Of course, they won't believe you because I never did get around to speaking to Blade. They'll either kick you out or bury you; guess it depends on who wins, Bear or Blade."*

Probe hits the table with his fist and gets to his feet, making Lil flinch. He freezes when he sees her reaction. His face falls, and all of a sudden, the anger he's been carrying like a cloak slips from his shoulders, and he just looks worn out and old.

"I'm not mad at you, Lil. Even when I am, I would never lay my hands on you. I'd never hurt you like that."

"You don't need to touch me to hurt me, Probe. I'm somewhat of an expert on that fact."

He dips his head, his shoulders slumping.

The room is quiet for a moment before Havoc clears his throat. "According to the timeline, Lil died not long after what went down here. She didn't move on and find a sugar daddy."

"Well, she didn't kill herself. Not if she was found in a grave," Midas states with a grunt.

"Anyone remember if Hannibal said where the grave was?"

G starts typing on his laptop, but it's Lil who answers. "She was buried at Yellow Creek State Forest."

G looks at her. "How do you know that?"

"Because I'm the one who buried her."

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Chapter Fifteen

LIL

I BRACE, waiting for the explosion of anger and threats, for them to tear me apart piece by piece. I'm so fucking sick of it all that I don't even care anymore. Let them take their pieces.

"What happened, Lil?" Circus asks. He's kept quiet the whole time, watching me with a blank face, making him impossible to read. He looks at Ambros, a man whose woman and little girl were put in danger because of James. Yet I can't tell if he wants to kill me or hug me. It's as disarming as it is terrifying because Ambros could probably kill me with one flick of his wrist.

"I'd been staying at the shelter at night, too scared to be here after dark. It wasn't much better during the day. I was jumpy as hell, and I kept expecting someone to stand up and yell impostor, but nobody did. I was trying to figure out my next move—run or stay. I wasn't sure I could be a club girl. In the end, I figured men had been taking what they wanted from me, using my body for years for their own personal needs. Maybe if I used my body to secure my own safety, I'd feel better about it. It was a twisted rationale. I know that now, but my headspace back then was so dark and… everything just felt hopeless."

I close my eyes and take a deep breath before I open them again. "And then she came back. It had been about two weeks since that night. Everything was crazy here, so nobody paid much attention to me in the

beginning. When she grabbed me outside the shelter, it was the first time anyone had spoken to me since my exchange with Bear.

“Jesus, we really dropped the ball,” G grumbles.

I shake my head. I get it. A lot had happened, and most of it was not good. “She was frantic, mumbling shit I didn’t understand. She yanked me into her car, which nobody had noticed was missing, and sped away from the shelter like we were being chased. And when she told me James had found us, I believed her. My fear was responding to hers. I couldn’t shut it off. I’d just decided to stay, and now I was running again.

“She drove through the night, barely speaking to me. All she would say was that she had a plan that would fix everything for both of us. Eventually, she tossed me a bottle of water and a protein bar and told me to rest—she’d explain everything. I drank the water, ate the food, and as we got farther away, sanity started to prevail. This was the woman who wrote me the fucking note, the woman who led me into danger. When I told her to take me back, she ignored me. At first, I thought she didn’t hear me because I slurred my words.”

“Fuck,” Powers curses, ready to explode out of the seat. “She fucking drugged you?”

I nod, remembering the snippets of memories, the flashes of fear and panic before I eventually became more lucid. “It was in that moment that I knew I had to stop thinking of her as an ally and think of her as an enemy. In the end, it was her planning that aided me. She drove us to a spa-come-hotel about a hundred miles from Yellow Creek State Forest. Booked herself in for a bunch of treatments over the course of a few days and then switched cars.” I say before anyone can ask, “I don’t know where the other car came from or if she had help of any kind.”

“She dosed me again before we left for the park, which meant I was out of it for most of the journey. When we got there, she had to wait for some of the drug to leave my system so I could walk—I was too heavy for her to carry. She parked in a heavily wooded area and made me walk for maybe fifteen minutes before we came to an open grave.”

“She’d been there already and dug a fucking grave?” Toot’s anger pulses along with Powers, who is so tense I’m worried he’s going to snap.

“Why kill you? I don’t get it.” Crane looks so confused.

“Fear, I guess. She’d been at the clubhouse for years. She forgot how different life is outside it. She was alone, and she hadn’t planned on leaving

until I showed up. She had no money stashed away to take with her."

"She wanted to come back," Mack grunts.

"That was my guess. The grass isn't always greener, and the protective bubble she'd been living in, away from prying eyes and cities full of cameras, popped. She knew James would find her—ironic, really. Because it would be me he was looking for. And now she'd left me with all the protection, and she had none. Only she couldn't just come back with me here. After everything she did, I was never going to keep my mouth shut. She knew there would be a coup, and she did nothing because it worked in her favor. That was fucked-up. People died that night—women and children who would have been—"

I shake my head, not going there again. "She needed me gone so she could come back, and she knew nobody would miss me. I didn't really exist. I was just an echo of her.

"She ordered me to get into the grave. She picked up this huge branch and said she didn't want to hurt me, but there was no other way. I agreed. There was no other way."

I turn to look at Havoc. He'll be the one who ultimately determines my fate.

"You don't live on the streets and not know how to defend yourself. I punched her in the face, and when she dropped to her knees, I hit her again. Once she was unconscious, I stripped her and myself and swapped our clothes. I pushed her into the grave and used my bare hands to cover her over. I don't know if she was dead or alive, but I buried her anyway. I hunted, set small traps to catch rabbits, grouse, and squirrels, and then I buried them above her. The smell of decomposing animals would hide the truth. Once that was done, I walked back to the car, thankful I was now wearing all black because I was filthy. I drove the car back to the spa and switched back to the other one. I called someone to come and collect the old one and crush it. I had some spa treatments to show I was there, mostly to confuse the timeline if Lil's body was ever found. And then I drove to the nearest tattoo parlor and had a Raven tattooed on the inside of my wrist."

"You came back and decided to stay," Circus says.

"I was so tired of being lost. And I didn't want to be alone anymore. She'd gone undetected here for six years. I thought I could too, as long as I left a false trail every year or so by popping up on camera, using a credit

card in Florida or Washington, to keep him looking for me and not grooming someone else."

"Every time you had to head out of town to see family…" Kruger shakes his head. "I searched for family when you left. When I couldn't find them, I figured you'd used a different name, and that was why I couldn't find them. Not that you don't have any."

"I have a family. If they'll still have me, that is."

Probe gets up and walks over. I brace myself, but he crouches down beside me as I turn toward him. "I'm sorry. None of this was your fault. But I needed someone to blame, because without blame, all I feel is grief," he admits. "I found Capone as a scrawny seventeen-year-old who was dumpster diving, trying to find food for himself and his junkie mother. I saw something in him, convinced him to become a prospect, even offered to pay for his mom's rehab, but the second he became a prospect, she OD'd. He never once blamed me, but fuck, I blamed myself. If I hadn't brought him in, his mom might still be alive. Capone would be alive."

"And Star would be dead."

He drops his head, his shoulders shaking. He knows I'm right. I cup his face, tip his head back, and offer him my own teary smile. "He loved you. He loved you all. Out of everyone here, he knew he was exactly where he was supposed to be. I think he knew he was destined for something more than dumpster diving, something greater than any of us can comprehend. And he'd hate that his choice was hurting you so much."

He takes a shuddery breath and nods before getting to his feet and kissing my forehead. "I'm sorry I'm an asshole."

"I already knew you were an asshole. I still love you, though."

He grins, his crooked teeth making him look manic. "Welcome home, darlin'."

Havoc calls an end to church after that, which is just as well. I'm dead on my feet. I feel like all I've done lately is sleep, and it's still not enough.

"I'll likely have some follow-up questions or ideas we might want to bounce off you. Because, like it or not, you know him best. But it can wait until tomorrow. Think if I keep calling church, the guys will string me up anyway."

"They know you're just trying to protect this club and this town. They respect that. You're a good president, Havoc."

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“You think so, huh?”

I close my eyes and smile. “What color are my eyes?” I feel the brothers around us go still as Powers’s warm hand slides from my hip to the small of my back.

“Green, why?”

I open them and feel eyes on me as I answer. “You never slept with me, never stared into my eyes for longer than it took for us to have a brief conversation.”

He folds his arms and frowns. “What’s your point?”

“Lil’s eyes were blue,” I say softly, but those around me heard me, judging from the surprised grunts. “The signs were there, but nobody saw them. Not even Blade. I was only able to hide who I wasn’t because nobody cared who I was.”

I let Powers guide me away. As much as I’d like to join the old ladies, I don’t have it in me anymore. I need to sleep this day away and fortify my walls. I hate feeling weak and vulnerable.

“Home?”

I nod. “I need Lucy snuggles.”

“Just Lucy?” he whispers into my ear.

“No, not just Lucy. I need you to.”

“You have me.”

“When do you have to go back to work?”

“Tomorrow, but you can come with me if you want.”

I make a face. “Can’t say the pawn shop is my favorite place to be.”

He stops walking and looks at me. “I see there is a lot I still need to fill you in on.”

“Oh god, should I be worried?”

“No, not about this.” He starts telling me how Midas gave Au to Delphi after Kiki set her business on fire. It’s now a bookstore-come-café.

My mouth must be permanently stuck open from shock. “Holy crap. You guys have lived a dozen lifetimes since I’ve been gone.”

“And gained a dozen gray hairs, trust me.”

“That’s okay, I think men with gray hair look sexy and distinguished.”

“Distinguished, huh?”

“Oh yeah.”

He opens the door to his apartment, nudges me inside, and closes it. Before I can say hi to Lucy, who lifts her head at our entry, he spins me around and presses me to the door and slams his mouth down over mine.

I’m so surprised by his actions, it takes my brain a second to catch up. But when I do, I climb him like a fucking monkey, attacking him with just as much fury as he is me.

After months of being numb to everything, it’s amazing to feel so alive. I want to sink into it and soak it all in. Powers is clearly of the same mind. He slides his hands under my ass, taking my weight as I wrap my legs around his hips and my arms around his neck.

He carries me back to his room, his lips never leaving mine until he lowers me to the bed and takes a step back. “You want me to stop at any time, you tell me, and I stop. There is no fucking gray area, you hear me? You are not a club girl anymore. You’re mine. But even if you were a club girl, I would never take you if you didn’t want me. That’s not who I am.”

“I know, Powers. I’m not scared or nervous. Okay, maybe a little nervous. But mostly because I’ve been thinking about this, about you, for a long time.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah,” I whisper.

He stands tall and slides off his cut, throwing it over the back of the chair. He strips his T-shirt off next, pulling it over his head, leaving nothing but golden skin on display.“Tell me what you think about. I want all the details,” he orders as I watch him strip off his jeans, followed by his boxers.

“I imagined what it would be like to feel your lips on mine. I wondered if they’d be soft and coaxing or firm and demanding.”

“You have a preference?”

“Both are good. I have a feeling with you, I’ll like most things.”

“I’m more than game to find out.”

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Chapter Sixteen

POWERS

THE SMILE she beams at me makes me feel like a fucking king. Once I'm naked, I stand there and let her look her fill. She licks her lips and rubs her thighs together, looking for some relief, but I don't want her to feel relieved. Not yet. I want her to ache as much as I do.

I grab the waistband of her shorts and yank them down her legs before tossing them aside. Her lace panties are next. I slowly inch them down her thighs, bending down to breathe her in as I do. I press my nose to the thatch of curls and groan at the heady scent that's uniquely her.

She whimpers as I press a kiss to her navel.

"I'd have known." She looks at me, confused for a second, before understanding dawns. "I'd have known your touch, your taste, your smell anywhere."

She sits up and cups my jaw, using it to guide me to her mouth. Sliding her hand into my hair, she kisses me, softly at first, dragging her tongue across the seam of my lips before I part them and she pushes inside. She whimpers into my mouth, her hand tightening in my hair as she holds me close.

I try to let her lead, I really do. But fuck me, this woman is going to be my undoing. I'm about to spread her wide and thrust inside her, consequences be damned, when she pulls away. Before I can complain, she has her T-shirt off and thrown across the room, her bra following behind it.

The bruises on her body are changing color from a vivid purple to a sickly green, but they do nothing to distract from Lil's beauty. I've seen beautiful women before, but there is something almost otherworldly about Lil—strong in the places where she glued herself back together, fragile in parts, like a bomb ready to detonate at any moment. Lucky for her, I'm somewhat of an expert when it comes to bombs.

I dip my head and place a kiss on the swell of her breast. She cups it, offering it to me. Who the fuck am I to resist? I suck her nipple into my mouth as I reach up to tweak the other, rolling it between my fingers before I pinch it. She arches into me, then pulls away and lies flat on the bed. She spreads her legs wide before slipping her fingers down to her pussy and stroking herself.

"You're playing with fire, trickster."

"Maybe for once, I want to get burned."

I lean over her as I pull open the top drawer of the nightstand and search blindly for a condom. She wraps her hand around my dog tags and licks a trail up the column of my throat, making my hips jerk in response. With a hiss, I pull back. She lets go of my tags and watches through heavy lids as I get to my knees between her spread thighs.

She eyes the condom as I grip the wrapper between my teeth. "Just so you know, I got a full workup after I left here, and it came back clear. I also have this." She lifts her arm and touches a spot on her inner bicep.

"Implant?"

She nods, biting her lip. "You can use a condom. I just wanted you to know that I'm clean. I know club girls get—"

I lean down and cover her mouth with my hand. "I'm sure whatever you're about to say will piss me off, so how about you listen instead. I'm clean too. Got tested a while back, and I haven't been with anyone since before you left."

Her eyes open comically wide.

"It was always you, Lil. Now we can use a condom if you want, but don't do it for my benefit. I'd love nothing more than to take you bare. Fuck, I might come just thinking about it," I mutter as I move my hand.

She reaches for the condom on the bed where it fell and throws it to the floor before spreading her legs wider. "What are you waiting for, biker boy? Come fuck your old lady already."

If there were ever a switch to flip me from man to monster, Lil just tripped it.

She reaches for me, lining me up. The second I feel her wet heat, I surge forward, bottoming out inside her, making her scream my name as she drags her nails down my back. I don't give her time to adjust. I'll beat myself about that later, no doubt. But right now I'm mindless with need as I fuck her with deep, almost brutal thrusts that have the bedframe bagging against the wall.

"I knew you'd feel like this. Your pussy is fucking addicting, Lil. No way will I be able to keep my hands to myself after this."

"I don't want you to keep your hands to yourself. I like them on me."

Faster and faster I fuck her, staring into her eyes as I do, tying her to me in yet another way.

Mine. She's finally fucking all mine.

I sound like a caveman, and I don't give a single fuck.

"Touch yourself, Lil. I want to feel you come undone."

Cupping her breast with one hand so she can play with her nipple, she slides the other between us, stroking her clit in that practiced way. I'm not going to last much longer. This is too much, too fucking perfect.

"Kieren!" she gasps out, her hips lifting as I plant myself deep and come with a roar, the moment triggering her release too. She yells so loudly that Lucy runs into the room before turning tail and leaving again.

I chuckle as I catch my breath, burying my face in her hair, my softening cock still inside her. "I think we've traumatized the dog."

She giggles as I lift my head to look at her.

"On the plus side, you've ruined me for all men."

"Yeah?"

Her hand slips around my tags as she pulls my head down, her lips brushing against mine. "Oh yeah."

* * *

"Wow, this place looks amazing. How on earth did you get it done so quickly?"

"It was already a racetrack of sorts, just not on this scale. Capone and Circus worked their asses off with their teams to get it done. Even I can't believe what they pulled out of the bag."

“They were dynamite together,” she whispers, still trying to get her head around losing Capone and how Circus looks so damn lost without him.

I slide my arm around her back, resting my hand on her hip, pulling her closer so I can kiss her temple. “You were close?” I ask softly.

She looks up at me as I let her see that there is zero judgment in my eyes.

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“Not like I am with Kruger, but he was always good to me. Some of the brothers are pretty dismissive of the club girls. Not mean, just…we’re there to fulfill a need. That’s it. They don’t want conversation, or—if I’m being brutally honest—to have to put in more than a token effort in making sure we receive pleasure. The girls are there to provide a service. An O is a bonus, not a necessity. Capone wasn’t like that. I don’t know what he was like with the original Lil, and obviously I couldn’t ask, but with me he was sweet. I suspect it was because of what happened to me at Snake’s hand.” She shrugs, which makes me frown.

“You said yourself that he was a good guy, so why do you sound so surprised?”

She pauses for a second as the automatic doors swoosh open.

“Nobody knew that I hadn’t taken each of those brothers into my body willingly, or at least with a sense of duty that comes with being a club girl. I’m a firm believer that consent should be given regardless of any preconceived notions. However, club girls tend to be a gray area for most MCs. Admittedly, I think Raven’s Souls are better than most, especially after learning a little about Legs’s past. But still, the club was essentially being gentle with me for having a blow job forced on me when…”

“When sometimes that’s part of the deal,” I grumble.

She nods as I take her hand and lead her through the foyer. I can see she’s trying to take in as much as she can, but I need her in my office. The

tour can come after. She hurries to keep up with me until I unlock the door and pull her inside my private space.

She scans the room, finding the walls lined with posters depicting race days throughout history—some she's likely heard of, like the F1 and the Indy 500. The others I'm not sure about. Her eyes move to the large desk in the middle of the room, just in front of a bank of windows that overlooks the track.

"Whoa. That view is something."

I stare at her face and nod. "Yeah, it's pretty fucking spectacular."

She looks over at me. When she finds my eyes on her instead of the view, she swallows at the intensity in my expression. Her lips part as I stalk toward her.

Sliding my hands to her hips, I guide her to the large viewing window and start pointing things out. "Down there is where the garages are. On a race weekend, that area is teaming with people, getting everything ready. Over there are the hospitality facilities where people can get food and drinks. We've even started doing meet-and-greets there, with some of the more friendly drivers." I slide my hands around and cup her breast through her shirt.

"I take it some of the drivers aren't so friendly?"

I huff out a laugh before nipping her ear with my teeth. "You could say that, but I don't want to talk about dipshit drivers."

She turns in my arms. "Oh yeah? What do you want to talk about?"

"Who says I want to talk about anything? I'd much rather use my mouth for something else."

She throws her head back and laughs. "You're insatiable."

"It's you. You drive me fucking crazy. I swear I've had a hard-on since the day I met you."

"Sounds painful."

"You have no idea."

"Maybe I should kiss it better, you know, being as I'm the reason for it being so hard."

"You make a valid point."

I scoop her up, making her squeal before I carry her over to the desk. I use my arm to swipe everything to the floor, ignoring her shocked gasp as I lay her on the cool wood, leaving her head to fall over the edge. Her hair

skims the floor as she looks up at me, watching as I unbuckle my belt and slide down the zipper of my jeans.

"If it's too much or you want me to stop, tap my leg three times, okay?"

"Three times, check."

I stroke myself as she licks her lips. I'm the luckiest man on the planet to be here right now with the woman of my dreams. For the first time, I can honestly say I'm glad things worked out the way they did overseas. Without the fucked-up knee, I wouldn't be here. And that to me sounds like a fucking travesty.

"Open your mouth, trickster. Let me in."

The second my cock touches her lips, she opens wide, moaning as I ease myself inside her hot, wet mouth. I pull back slightly before pushing in a bit farther, wanting to see how much she can take. When she starts to gag a little, I wait for her to tap my leg, but she never does. Instead, tears flood her eyes as she looks up at me. And fuck me, I almost yank my cock out of her mouth and come all over her face at the sight.

I pull back and start fucking her mouth as I would her pussy. I don't go too hard or too fast, wanting to savor each stroke, especially when I'm feeling her tongue working up and down the length of me too.

When I feel myself getting closer, my speed picks up, the urge to shoot down her throat riding me hard. "Can you take me farther? I want to fuck your throat." Jesus, my voice doesn't even sound like my own with how hoarse it is.

When she cheekily gives me a thumbs-up, I thrust forward and wrap my hand around her throat. I swear I can feel my cock as I push it farther than I ever have before. When I pull back, spit runs down the side of her face, as well as tears. It shouldn't turn me on so much to see her at my mercy like this, but it really fucking does. I don't know what that says about me, but I'm too far gone to analyze it. And I trust Lil to let me know if it's too much.

When I feel the tingle at the base of my spine, I know I'm not going to be able to hold back any longer. "You're such a good girl for taking me like this. Now I'm going to fuck your throat until I come, and you're going to swallow down every drop. You ready?"

She sucks me hard in response, dragging a curse from my lips.

"Naughty girl." I fuck her mouth hard now, touching the back of her throat each time until I can't hold back any longer. On the next thrust, I

push myself all the way into the back of her throat and come so hard I have to grip the edge of the desk for support.

Gently, I ease out of Lil's mouth and hand her a tissue before heading into the attached restroom to clean myself up and grab a washcloth.

When I come back out, Lil is perched on the edge of my desk. I walk over and gently clean her face before kissing her softly. "Words fail me."

She snorts. "You should try having a cock down your throat," she says as the door opens and Midas steps in. He grimaces, having clearly heard what she said, which makes Lil laugh harder.

"I didn't think you were coming until later."

And that makes Lil laugh harder.

"That's not what I meant," he says before walking off with a curse that has me laughing too.

When we both get ourselves under control, she looks up at me with such lightness in her eyes that I wish I could capture this moment forever. But even as I think it, the darkness slowly eeks back in. I drop a kiss to her lips before I lift her to her feet.

"Let me give you the grand tour, and then we'll get some food. I don't know about you, but I'm starving."

"Sounds good to me."

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Chapter Seventeen

POWERS

SITTING at the table with Havoc, G, Kruger, Midas, and Ambros, I stare at the old ladies at the table across the room, watching in case they say anything that upsets Lil.

"Earth to Powers." A hand in front of my face snaps me out of my daze.

"Sorry, what?"

"She's not going to disappear," Midas says.

I look at him. "She has before."

He nods, conceding my point. "Things are different now."

"Not from where I'm sitting. The same threat that forced her to run is still nipping at her heels. You think she won't trade her life for someone else's? She's done it time and time again. It's instinctual at this point."

"It's different because she knows running won't keep us safe," Havoc states.

I sigh and run my hands through my hair, tired of feeling on edge. I don't see that changing any time soon. "But staying won't keep us safe either. That's the kicker. Every move he makes, she's going to be the one who feels every hit and shoulder all the blame. I don't know how to keep it from happening. It's like trying to hold back the tide when it's set to return. There'll be a showdown. It's inevitable, especially if he knows she's back. After everything that went down, he won't let us keep her or let her walk away unscathed."

"She's right about us needing to call in reinforcements," G says.

Havoc nods. “I’ve put a call in to Kings of Carnage, Chaos Demons, and Sons of Purgatory.”

“Sons of Purgatory? There’s a name I haven’t heard for a while,” Kruger comments.

“I don’t think I’d heard of them at all until Havoc arranged safe passage for us to ride through one of their cities,” I admit.

Havoc leans back and takes a sip of his beer. “One of their chapters has ties to the Chaos Demons through a couple of old ladies, but I’ve met Smoke a few times. I like the guy, but distance meant I had little to do with them. However, that’s likely to change now they’ve relocated. Smoke’s chapter is only a few hours away, closer than Hannibal’s club, by all accounts. And that’s what we’re going to need—people who can get here quickly.”

“Hannibal will send some guys if we need them,” Midas says.

“I know, and I’ll accept them too. But he can’t leave himself open to an attack either. Remember, James has tried to infiltrate their club before, and there is nothing to stop him from trying again. I assume he’ll focus his attention here because Lil is here, but you know as well as I do how unpredictable this motherfucker is.”

“How the fuck he keeps evading the cops is beyond me. He doesn’t have the skill set Lil does to stay off the grid, and his photo has been splashed across every news outlet in the country,” Kruger complains.

“He doesn’t need Lil’s skill set when he has rich friends in high places and deep pockets willing to pay off law enforcement. They don’t give a fuck about Lil or the other women, they—”

“What women?”

The table goes quiet as I lift my head and find Lil watching me with a confused expression. Does she really not know about the others?

“You haven’t seen the news?”

“Off the grid means no TV. What girls?”

I look around the table, wondering how the fuck I’m supposed to tell her.

G jumps in before I can say anything. “When I was digging into James, I found a lot of buried complaints made in numerous hospitals, across more than one continent.”

She relaxes a little. “Okay, that I did know. There were rumors around the hospital that after his wife disappeared, he had a bit of a reputation for

dating his coworkers but not wanting anything serious, and they always got attached and disgruntled when he didn't want more. A doctor as a husband is the endgame for a lot of people, so I kinda understood what I was hearing. But I was also willfully ignorant. I buried my head in the sand. What happened before me didn't matter anyway, and who am I to say how he should cope with his grief? That was my mindset anyway, though the hospital was pretty dismissive of it all, too. I guess I thought if there was anything to worry about, I'd know. Nurses and doctors are a bunch of gossips."

When nobody says anything else, she looks between us all and curses. "There was more to it, wasn't there?"

G nods. "There were a lot of sexual harassment claims brushed under the carpet from a variety of hospitals, a lot of them from war-torn places with a desperate need for doctors. He was somewhat of a hero. I didn't realize at the time I was digging—mostly because I didn't know there were two Lils—but looking back now, it seems the time he was with you is the only time no complaints were filed."

She blinks in resignation. "So if I stayed…fuck."

"This is not on you. And honestly, Lil, you can't blame yourself for everything that motherfucker did," Havoc says. "It's ridiculous. That's like surviving a serial killer, then blaming yourself when he takes someone new."

Her shoulders slump, but she nods at Havoc's words. "It's hard not to blame myself when I'm the thread that ties everything together." She frowns then. "Wait, what about when he was with the other Lil?"

"No, there were plenty of complaints made around that time and since you left. The only change was when he had you."

"Maybe it had less to do with his obsession for his wife and more to do with his obsession with his work," she says, gently touching her face.

"I'm not sure any of us can understand the whims of a madman. Well, maybe Hannibal," Kruger concedes, making Midas snort.

"So the police are hunting him down for sexual assault? I figured they wouldn't bother, what with the kidnapping and—" She swallows, skating over the murder charges. "Sexual assault is dangerously underinvestigated. I know this from my time working in both the hospital and shelter, so just how many reports are there?"

“A lot,” I tell her softly. “It’s more than that, though, Lil. A lot of the women who made those reports have disappeared. Nobody has seen or heard from them since.”

“Because the only thing harder to prove in a case of he-said-she-said is if she’s silenced and can’t say anything at all. Excuse me for a second.” She hurries out of the room.

I stand to join her, but Citi walks over and shakes her head. “I’ll go. I think maybe a different perspective will help.”

I watch her hurry after Lil and hope I’m doing the right thing by not running after her.

“Citi’s right. She doesn’t hear it when we tell her it’s not her fault. Maybe Citi can get through to her,” Havoc says.

I rub my hands over my eyes and turn back to the table. “Okay, back to the plan. You called in other clubs. Does that mean they’ll be sending men or be on standby in case shit hits the fan?”

“It’s gonna depend on the club. Hannibal will send a handful of men, as will Carnage. They’re also offering to put up any women or children who might need sanctuary. Sunshine is there right now, but Orion did want me to mention that she’s flying out to stay with her brother and his wife for a couple of weeks while shit is up in the air, which is just as well. I only have so many bodies here. Chaos Demons are sending help of a different variety, apparently. They didn’t say what that meant.”

“Mysterious as always,” G drawls.

“I’m pretty sure Viper just gets off on being a dick. I’d rather deal with Scope than him. At least with Scope, you know where you stand.”

I tap my fingers on the table. My eyes drift to the back of the room, waiting for Lil to come back. “You think James is going to drag this out, or are we about to see a town at war? Because if that’s the case, the residents here deserve to know what they’re dealing with. Tensions will already be high, given what happened at the high school. People will be scared. Not knowing what they’re facing will cause panic to set in, and when it does, we’ll be dealing with mob mentality. I saw it happen dozens of times when I was deployed.”

“It’s not going to win us any favors with the locals.” Havoc warns.

I shrug. “I wouldn’t be so sure about that. Maybe if it were just us, yeah, but there is magic in our women. Delphi is hailed as a hero, and Citi as a survivor who so many people have rooted for over the years. They’re

protective of her. Amity brought life and, more importantly, money into town when she shot her movie. She and Tink are bona fide superstars in their eyes—not just because she's a world-famous author but because she tamed the infamous king of the Ravens. Legs and Lil are a little different, I'll give you that, but their gift lies in their hearts. Babysitting, soup kitchens, helping out at the shelter, bringing food to sick neighbors, organizing charity runs—the shit is endless. I know club girls get a bad rep—or former club girls in this case—but the distinction doesn't matter. They were like this before they ever got the old lady title. It was never about that for the patch. It's just who they are."

"I feel like you need an Oscar for that emotional speech." Midas's lip twitches, making me roll my eyes.

"Seriously, never knew you could string that many sentences together," Circus admits.

I shake my head but chuckle because it's been a while since Circus joked with us. "You're a bunch of assholes, which is my point. If it were us telling the town we might have trouble coming our way and that they could get caught in the crossfire, they'd revolt. But knowing the women they've all grown to love might be in danger? They'll close ranks around them."

"He's not wrong. I've seen the shift in townsfolk over the last couple of years. I mean, we lucked out for the most part, because there was always a healthy dose of respect between them and us. Blade nurtured that, and I can't believe I'm going to say this to you of all people, but you humanize us along with the girls," G tells Havoc.

Havoc frowns. "I do what now?"

"Everything Powers said about the women is true, but the men are a different story. You're the one they look to the most, and it has nothing to do with you being the king of Ravens. Just so you know, I'm never calling you that again. I almost gagged," Toot states.

Mack smacks him on the back of his head, which he seems to do a lot. I wonder if Toot is brain-damaged because of it. It would sure make sense.

"What? It's true," Toot protests. "It's because you fucked up. You fucked up bad with Lola, and you were pretty vocal about it even if you didn't share all the deets. Men fuck up all the time. We just never know how to handle it. Some of us double down and make shit worse. And others, like you, own it. So if a big badass president of a motorcycle club can openly admit he fucked up, apologize, and attempt to make amends, then you're

removing the stigma that most of us emotionally stunted men have surrounding our emotions."

We all stare at him in shock. He tries to look nonplussed about it all, but he looks away. For Toot, who doesn't back down about anything, it's telling in itself.

Before any of us can say anything further, Havoc's cell phone starts ringing, followed by G's. A sense of foreboding washes over me as Havoc pulls his out and answers. Whatever the other person says, Havoc grips the cell phone tightly, his eyes narrowing and his jaw going tight.

"Alright, I'll be there soon."

He hangs up just as Citi and Lil walk back through the door. Both of them have red eyes, but they're smiling at each other. Whatever Citi said struck a chord with her. Of course, the second she looks over and sees the expression on Havoc's face, she pales.

"What's wrong?"

The women at the other table get up when they sense something is off, each of them moving to surround Citi and Lil as if they can soften the blow somehow. But something tells me whatever Havoc is about to say is going to undo all the hard work Citi just put in.

"James just made his next move."

"What did he do?" she spits out, her hands fisted at her side.

"He set fire to the shelter. The fire department is on the scene now. My contact says they have it mostly under control, but they have confirmed fatalities."

Her eyes slip closed, a tear running down her cheek. I get to my feet and walk over to her. Sensing me close, she holds her hands up to ward me off. I know that face. It's the one that says if you touch me now, I'll break. I hesitate, waiting for a sign of what to do.

Havoc's answer is the bomb that detonates, taking the choice from either of us. "One of the dead is the owner, April. I'm sorry, Lil. I know you were friends."

And he is sorry—I can tell by his voice. Everyone's sorry, but nobody is as sorry as Lil is. As she crumbles, the girls reach for her. But with years of avoiding bomb blasts under my belt, I'm faster. I dive and catch her before she hits the ground. I curve my body over hers, shield her from everyone else as she finally gives herself permission to fall apart.

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Chapter Eighteen

LIL

THE FUNERAL WAS a somber affair as you'd expect, but the turnout was phenomenal. People from all walks of life—those who had been down on their luck and received help from April before turning their lives around, and those who were newly trying to navigate the world of homelessness—gathered together to pay their respects to a woman who opened her arms to everyone and never showed a sliver of contempt.

She'd told me a little about her background and that of her then-husband, Jordan. When he was a young boy—maybe ten or eleven—Jordan, his mother, and his brother Sam found themselves homeless. Their story was a hard one, which involved the mom selling her body to feed her kids and a system that failed them every step of the way.

People have an odd perception of homelessness, not realizing how close most people are to it. Jordan's mom had been let go after the company she'd been with for years downsized. Dad had an affair and ultimately left to start a family, leaving the woman behind to look after the children and chase him for child support, which he somehow always managed to evade. A poor economy meant that finding a job, juggling childcare, and paying the bills were nearly impossible. An eviction notice came after two months of missed rent, and a sick child who had an eight-day hospital stay added astronomical medical debt to her already weighted shoulders.

When Sam and Jordan were fifteen and eleven, mom was arrested for solicitation. Kids were put into foster care. Nobody wanted an angry

fifteen-year-old, so Sam was bounced around until he aged out, and the state could wash their hands of him. He wound up back on the streets dealing until an addict pulled a gun on him and shot him twice in the head.

Jordan grew up with memories of his mother and brother that nobody else had. All the world saw was a whore and a dealer. They didn't know about the nights the mom sobbed herself to sleep, so hungry she could barely lift her head. But she'd made sure her boys had eaten that day, even if a john had to fuck her while she was unconscious. Sam was the one who nursed his mother's wounds, cleaned her up after the rough clients tore her to pieces, and protected his little brother, using his body the same way his mother did if it meant they didn't touch Jordan.

Jordan grew up and turned his experience into a platform. He met and married April, had a son of his own, and opened dozens of shelters across the state to help those in situations his family had once found themselves. When Jordan died of colon cancer, April carried on his legacy. She helped me more than she'll ever know. I wish I'd told her that she was the reason in those early days that I didn't just give up and lie down to die. She made me feel a little less invisible, and a whole lot more like I could make a difference, however that might look.

Without James lurking in the shadows, she'd have been the driving force in my life that pushed me to do more. But I had to hold back and hide, knowing the outcome. I hoped she didn't look at me and feel like she failed. It was that thought that haunted me every night since we got the news of her death.

I push the dark glasses up my nose when I feel them slip before burrowing further into Powers's side. He pulls me in tighter, the warmth of his arm seeping into my skin, keeping me grounded when I want nothing more than to float away. I think back to my last conversation with April.

"You can't run forever."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Yes, you do. You think I haven't seen that look in your eyes, in the eyes of a hundred other women and children? I know what fear looks like, Lil."

I take a deep breath. I can't lie to her. I did once. I skated over my association with the club, at first, because of the situation with Lil and not knowing if I would stay. After that, I was embarrassed. She looked at me like I could climb mountains if I wanted to. It made it impossible to tell her that the only thing my legs were good for was spreading. I should have

known better, though, because she never judged me. Just asked if I was happy there, wanted help getting out, and was being careful. That's the kind of person she was. The world would be a better place with more people like April in it. But thanks to James, she was gone far too soon.

"Whatever happens, Lil. I'll be here when you stop running. I'm proud of how far you've come, but don't spend so long looking for a better place that you forget to take in all the beauty along the way."

I'd thought about her words a lot while I was running. I didn't feel like I was taking the cowardly way out. I never wanted to leave to begin with, but perhaps she was right all along. Running wasn't just about escaping this place. It was about escaping the demons in my head. The ones that followed me no matter where I went.

I look up when I feel Powers urging me to move and realize the service is over and people are leaving. I let him lead me toward the parking lot, keeping my head down so I don't make eye contact with anyone. Cowardly? Yes, but I'm not sure I can look anyone in the eye and not read the guilt I've felt every damn day since the fire.

I see a pretty dark-haired woman watching us with a sad smile on her face. "Who's that?"

Powers looks over at where I am staring and nods to the woman. She gives him a quick wave and hurries away. "That's the woman Capone had a crush on. Her name is Lucy. He asked her out on a date the day he died."

"Shit. No wonder she looks haunted."

"Yeah. It hit her hard."

We keep walking, lost in thought. We're not far from the car when Powers stops us. "Can I help you?"

I lift my head at the sound of Powers's voice, and my eyes land on the handsome man in front of me with familiar gray eyes—the gray eyes of a dead woman. My breath hitches as a sob claws its way up my throat.

"You're Lil?" he asks quietly.

I blink, letting the tears fall before I nod. "You're Abel. April's son?"

He offers me a sad smile before he holds out an envelope toward me. Powers takes it when I stare at his outstretched hand. Am I being served? Oh god, is he suing me?

"What's going on?" Neveah asks as she walks up beside me, Havoc wrapped around her as per usual.

"I found these in my mother's things," Abel replies.

Powers opens the envelope and reads the paper inside, as if he wants to protect me from its contents.

“I’m so sorry,” I whisper to Abel as he watches me.

He shakes his head. “I love…” his voice cracks before he swallows and continues. “Loved. I loved my mother, but when my father died, a part of her did too. I think if there weren’t so many people who needed her, she’d have just faded away. You’re one of the reasons she hung on. Because of you, I got an extra few years with her that I might never have had.” His words hollow me out before filling me up. His eyes are damp now, but he fights valiantly to hold his tears back.

“Well, shit.” I look up at Powers and wait for him to fill me in, but he looks at Abel instead. “This legit? I get that this might be what your mother wanted, but what about you?”

“Trust me when I say I have my hands full with the rest. I think it needs to stay exactly where it is—in the hands of someone who has walked in their shoes.”

Powers nods. I look at them, confused. “April left the shelter and the land to you to do with what you want. She asks that you use it to help people, in whatever capacity that may be,” Powers explains softly.

Havoc whistles. “Damn.”

“I don’t understand. Is April leaving me the shelter? But I can’t take that. I don’t deserve it—”

“The fuck you don’t,” Abel snaps. “She told me about you—how you were there almost as much as she was, helping with laundry, food, donations, and everything in between, and you did it all for free. You worked longer than most people who are getting paid, and you did it because you care. That’s what my parents’ legacy should be about. She wanted you to have that place, and so do I. Make it something special.” He reaches over and squeezes my arm before he steps back, which is when I see the man standing not far behind him, waiting patiently.

Abel beckons him over. “This is my husband, John. John, this is Lil.”

“It’s good to meet you, Lil. April spoke about you with great fondness.”

“Really?”

His expression softens, and he reaches for Abel’s hand. “Really.” He looks at his husband, who is looking a little lost. “Time for us to head out. We’ll get our lawyer to send over everything you’ll need. We’re just waiting for the insurance company to process the claim.”

Havoc hands him a business card. “That’s Lil’s lawyer. Have it sent there.”

“No problem.”

I step forward and wrap my arms around Abel, surprising us both. “Your parents must have been so fucking proud of you.”

He chuckles and pulls away. “I think I was the reason for more than a few gray hairs, but thank you. Take care of yourself, Lil.”

“You too, Abel.”

I watch them walk away before he stops and turns. But he isn’t looking at me. He’s looking at Havoc. “Make it hurt.” He turns and carries on as if nothing happened. As if he didn’t just imply he knew exactly what kind of justice Havoc would serve James when he catches him, and he not only approves but encourages it.

“I like him,” Nevaeh says.

“You like everyone,” Havoc points out.

She huffs. “No, I don’t. I want people to think I like them because I don’t want people to not like me.”

“How can anyone not like you?” he asks, confused.

“You make a compelling argument, caveman. I am pretty awesome.”

I tune them out as Powers cups my jaw and tips my head back. “You doing okay?”

“I honestly don’t know how to answer that. Did he really give me the shelter?”

“Seems that way. Wait for Lane to go over everything so we can make sure it’s legit, but I didn’t get the vibe that he was messing with you.”

“I don’t know how to run a shelter,” I croak.

“Sure you do. Sounds to me like you’ve been doing as much as April did. Besides, you have us to help,” Neveah says, coming up beside me and linking her arm through mine.

The thought is terrifying, and yet, there is a seed of excitement too. A seed I don’t want to let bloom because everything I become attached to gets stolen away in one way or another. “You really think I can do it?”

“I really do. The question is, do you want to keep it as it is or switch it up a little?”

I let my eyes drift around the cemetery to Citi standing beside Ambros, his arm wrapped protectively around her as she talks to Delphi. The answer

is out before I even realize I've decided. "I'm going to turn it into a women's center."

Powers's hand squeezes mine in support.

"I know that might sound shitty because it will displace the male residents, but I'll make sure they have somewhere else to go. There are multiple shelters in the surrounding towns, but there is only one women's shelter, and it is always at full capacity. When I was volunteering, we often had issues with the men making some of the women, especially those fleeing abusive situations, feel unsafe. We had to call the cops on them a few times, not to mention the angry exes who turned up and caused issues.

"Not all of the cops are sympathetic, as I'm sure you've figured out. And don't get me started on CPS. That place is a cesspool right now. The guy in charge is useless. I don't know how Greer copes, but she's one of the last good ones. She deserves better than the shit she has to shovel. But without her, a lot of the kids would fall through the cracks."

"I didn't know you knew Greer that well," Havoc says.

"Our paths have crossed more than a few times, especially with domestic violence cases. Like I said, the women's shelter is always full, so we often pick up the overflow. It wasn't ideal because we couldn't give them the sense of security they needed. Perhaps now I can."

"If that's what you want to do with it, Ravens will stand behind you. I'll make you a deal. You help out in the clinic until I can find someone more permanent, and I'll get some of the guys, not just to help you rebuild but to act as security too," Havoc offers.

"Are you serious?"

"I wouldn't joke about something like this."

He looks at Powers over my shoulder. He's telling him that the shelter will act as another set of roots, tying me to the place. I pretend I don't notice. I don't need the shelter to tie me here. I never did. It was always the people who anchored me.

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Chapter Nineteen

POWERS

It's another few weeks before Lil slowly starts to come back to me mentally. She's here, of course, but she's also a million miles away, trying to process how, yet again, James slipped in and wrecked everything before slipping away. As time passed without further attacks, the club grew tense, waiting for the other shoe to drop.

It was only a matter of time, and Havoc called for a town meeting. I'm not sure if, at any point in the club's history, that had ever been done. But James won't keep his targets within the club, putting everyone at risk. Leaving them in the dark won't keep them safe. Still, I don't think this is going to be an easy thing for the townsfolk to swallow. These people have families here, children. Nobody wants them to be in the firing line, and with how unpredictable James is, there is no way of knowing where he might strike next.

We pull into the parking lot that's already overflowing with traffic. People have figured out something is going down, and they want to hear from the man himself. I can't say I envy Havoc, who pulled in a little ahead of us.

I wait for Lil to climb off the bike before I follow suit, tugging my helmet free and hanging it on the handlebars before taking Lil's and putting it on the seat.

"You ready for this?"

“Facing down a bunch of people who are about to find out they’re in danger because of me? Sure.”

I grip her hips and yank her to me, sliding one hand into her hair and gripping it tight so she can’t look away. “This isn’t your fault. And if I have to fuck that knowledge into you every single day, then so be it.”

She blinks as if she misheard me.

“Nothing else is working. Seems to me, the only time you really hear me lately is when my dick’s inside you. So from now on, when you’re blaming yourself for shit beyond your control, I’m going to remind you that you are not to blame, with my cock. I’ll fuck you hard and deep, and I don’t give a single fuck where we are or who might see. Every time you move, you’ll still feel me, and you’ll remember exactly why I fucked you in the first place.”

“Wait. Are you saying you’re going to punish me for feeling guilty with rough sex?”

I tug her head back, exposing her neck. I drag my nose up her throat to her jaw before I nip it lightly with my teeth. “If that’s what it takes? Abso-fucking-lutely.”

She shivers against me, eliciting a grin that feels as sinister as the intent behind it.

“Something tells me you’ll enjoy every second of it.”

“Not sure it’s much of a punishment if I enjoy it.”

I chuckle against her lips. “Oh, you have no idea the things I’ll do to you.”

I swallow whatever her retort might have been, covering her lip with mine and thrusting my tongue inside her mouth. She melts into me like she always does. It doesn’t take us long to lose ourselves in each other, the world around us melting away until someone clears their throat.

I pull away and look over to see half the club watching us in amusement. Tink shakes her head. “Did you find her tonsils, or do you need another minute?”

“Says the woman always getting tossed over her man’s shoulder and flashing her panties.”

Lil spins at the sound of the new voice. Amity climbs off her own bike. G walks over, but before he can reach her, Amity holds up her finger, asking for a minute before she heads toward Lil, who tenses the fuck up. “Get that

look off your face before I knock the stupid out of you.” Amity sighs before tugging Lil into her arms.

“Oh my god, Amity has been body-snatched,” Tink whispers.

“What are you talking about?” Havoc asks.

Amity whispers something to Lil.

“She’s hugging Lil. On purpose, Havoc. She doesn’t even look constipated.”

Amity pulls back and glares at Tink. “I will punch Thelma.”

Who the fuck’s Thelma? But then Tink grabs her left boob and gasps. “You wouldn’t dare!”

Legs chuckles. “You’ve named your boobs?”

“Yeah, meet Thelma and Louise. You haven’t named yours? That’s weird.”

“Okay, before this devolves into…whatever the hell this is, we should head inside.” Havoc sighs.

Toot boos loudly. “Why’ve you always got to spoil shit before the fun part? What if Thelma and Louise decide to make an appearance?” Mack smacks him on the back of the head. “Dammit, Mack, there might have been Jello involved.”

“You mention my woman’s tits again, Toot, and Jello will be the only thing you’ll be able to eat.”

Toot’s shoulders slump, but he wisely shuts up.

“I really worry about that guy,” I tell Lil as she walks back over.

She laughs. “Toot, is…well, Toot. But don’t be fooled. There is way more below the surface than what he shows everyone.”

“I figured as much. I’ve stepped in puddles deeper than Toot. But knowing some of the things he’s done and the places he’s been, it always kinda rang false.”

“Toot has tapped into something women have been utilizing for years.”

“Oh yeah, what’s that?”

“The art of being underestimated.”

“Huh. That actually makes a twisted kind of sense. He’s not the kind of guy most people run from. He acts like he’s everyone’s favorite drinking buddy, and yet he’s the best damn sniper I’ve ever seen. And I’ve met plenty over the years. Being that good isn’t something you’re born with. Oh, you might have natural talent, but without honing it, you’d be nothing special. It’s hard picturing him lying still in the rain or snow for hours,

sometimes days on end, without moving, waiting for that perfect shot. Toot and patience don't belong in the same sentence. And yet…"

My voice drifts off as I look at the man heading through the doors with new respect. "Come on, let's head in and get a seat at the back."

"Good call. That way I can sneak out if the crowd turns their pitchforks on me."

I turn my head slowly to look at her. "That's one."

"What's one?"

"One punishment I owe you."

She splutters. "I didn't say I felt guilty, just that others might blame me."

"It's the same thing."

"No, it's not."

"If you weren't thinking like a guilty party, then the thought they might blame you would never cross your mind."

Her mouth snaps shut. I lean close, my teeth nipping her ear. "Don't worry, baby, I'll help you break the habit."

It's loud when we make it inside. The row of chairs at the back is mostly empty, so I move us to the middle and indicate for Lil to sit before I do. "Take off your jacket."

"What?"

If you make me ask you again, I'll take it off myself, and I won't stop with your jacket."

She gulps loudly as people find their seats. She reaches to take it off, leaving her in jeans and a tank top.

"Place it over your lap and unfasten your jeans."

She looks at me, a protest on her lips. Whatever she sees on my face stops her. Her cheeks redden as she looks around, but when she sees nobody staring at her, her eyes land back on mine.

I lean closer so only she can hear me. "You like pushing my buttons, trickster. But would you like it if I bent you over the seat in front of you, pulled down your jeans and panties, and thrust into you hard enough to make you scream for all these folks?"

"You wouldn't," she hisses.

"Oh, but I would."

"What is going on with you? You're usually much more laid back."

“I’m tired of my woman beating herself up. I’m tired of lying awake at night because I’m so fucking terrified you’re gonna slip out and I’m going to lose you all over again. And I’m really fucking tired of knowing that if he does get his hands on you, he’ll twist everything to make it sound like it’s your fault, and you’ll believe him. I’m not gonna let him do that to you. But his voice in your head is drowning out your common sense.”

“How does you fucking me in public drown out his voice?” she snarls quietly. But I don’t miss the way she licks her lips or the feverish look in her eyes. She wants this as much as she wants to fight it.

“Because when you’re screaming my name, you ain’t hearing him.”

Her chest is heaving as she absorbs my words. For a brief moment, everything is frozen in time.

And then Havoc whistles, and everything rushes back in. “Thank you all for coming,” he starts.

I don’t tear my eyes away from Lil until she complies. Her hand slips under her jacket. I see the fabric move as she unbuttons her jeans and pulls her hand free. “There. Happy?”

I grin, leaning closer. “I think the lady doth protest too much. I think you creamed your panties at the thought of me getting you off in front of all these people. I reckon I could work you up into such a state that you’d be begging for my cock and you wouldn’t give a flying fuck who saw us.” As I speak, I slide my hand down the front of her jeans and delve inside her panties, making her gasp.

I slip two fingers inside her with ease. “Fucking soaked, just like I knew you’d be,” I growl before turning to face forward so I can listen to Havoc. I don’t move my fingers. I hold them still as Havoc talks about what happened at the high school and the shelter and his suspicions about who did it.

Lil squirms, trying to find friction, but I keep my hand steady.

“How do we know he won’t strike again?” someone asks.

Lil tenses. I slide my wet fingers free and use them to stroke her swollen clit. She whimpers softly, her hand reaching around to grab my wrist, almost knocking off the jacket that’s hiding my ministrations.

“I can’t guarantee he won’t strike again. That’s our problem and why I called this meeting in the first place. This man is proving to be very resourceful. He has lots of connections and plenty of money to aid him. The cops and the FBI are looking for him, and so far they have no leads. It’s

worth noting, though, that some of those connections are in the police force. I don't want to scare you folks unnecessarily, but you should know what you're dealing with."

"How can we protect ourselves if we don't know when he might come or who he might target?" a woman shouts, panic in her voice. Many other voices join her, the room growing louder and louder as fear takes the wheel.

I stroke Lil's clit fast, adding more pressure, keeping her off center so she can't focus on what's happening around us. All she can see is me. All she can feel is my fingers.

When Havoc loses his temper and roars "silence" into the room, I pinch Lil's clit. She comes with a gasp, her eyes rolling into the back of her head, her breathing rough and jagged as if she had just run a marathon.

I slip my fingers from her pussy and slide them into my mouth. "Hmmm, fucking delicious."

"I don't have all the answers, and for that I'm sorry. I will do my best to protect each of you, but we are blinded by our inability to find this guy, making it impossible to predict his next target. Now, I understand that some of you may be more comfortable packing up and leaving for a while, especially those with kids. I think it's a good idea. I know I'd feel the same way. If you need help, all you need to do is ask. We have people who can take care of packing, transportation, and can find you a temporary place to stay with one of our allied clubs if you need it. There is no shame in hiding. Smart people are the ones who know when to retreat."

More voices, but it's less chaotic now. A lot of people with young families voice their interest in leaving, some feeling guilty for doing so. But Havoc absolves them of that guilt, making it sound like they're doing him a favor by leaving.

"He's a good president," I say to Lil, who rests her head on my shoulder.

"He is. I think Tink is his anchor and Lola the mirror. No leader is infallible. He fucked up in a way that I'm not sure I could forgive if it were me he wronged, but Lola is a better woman than I."

"No one is a better woman than you."

She rolls her eyes at me as Marie from the ice cream parlor stands up. "This is my home, my family. I will not run and hide. That is not to shame those who are leaving. Your children need protecting, and that is always the most important thing. But my children have grown. My nieces, too. I will

not stand here and show them that we bow to bullies. No sir. Not in Raven Falls. You tell me about this man, tell us all, and we'll be ready. We might not be as smart or as rich or have the connections he does, but he knows nothing about this community if he thinks he can come in here and terrorize our children. We are not cowards." She finishes on a yell that sounds like a war cry, making "here, here" ring out around the room.

"Fuck."

I whip my head around to look at Lil. She's getting to her feet, her jeans fastened, her jacket over her arm.

"What's wrong?"

She looks down at me before dipping her head and kissing me. "I'm going to arm them with the only weapon I have. Information."

And then she steps around me and moves down the aisle.

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Chapter Twenty

LIL

NOW IS the time to be brave. If we want this town to stand with us, I have to prepare to get on my knees for them. I brought him here. There is no way to reframe that, but Powers is right. I can't take the blame for everything, or it will push me over the ledge I'm barely clinging to. I can't shake the guilt—lord knows I've tried—so maybe it's time for a different approach. Instead of running, it's time to start fighting back.

As I walk toward where Havoc stands, I tell my story. Not the part about Lil. As far as they know, she died in a boating accident. It's too complicated for me to explain that she was the one who came here, and I followed. They might then have feelings of betrayal and mistrust, and right now we don't have time for that.

Havoc gives my shoulder a squeeze when I reach the front, but instead of stepping away, he stands beside me, lending me his support. Then Powers walks toward me as my voice grows hoarse. He stands on the other side of me and weaves his fingers through mine, fingers that only minutes ago were inside me.

I feel my face flush again—damn this fair skin of mine—and dip my head as I get to the part about running away and ending up here, where I built a life for myself and found a family I love and a town I adore.

By the time I'm done, I have tears in my eyes, and all the club brothers and the old ladies in attendance stand behind me in solidarity, further healing the wound I inflicted when I abandoned them.

“This man needs to be smacked in the face with a very big skillet, no?” Marie announces, making the whole room crack up.

Her husband, John, gets up, shaking his head, amused. “I mean, she’s not wrong, but I’m more of a shotgun man than a skillet-wielding one. What I do know is that my beautiful wife is correct. This is our town. These are our people. And you, Lil, might not have been born here, but you’re one of us. Don’t think we haven’t noticed all the things you do quietly behind the scenes to make our lives easier. We see you, and we appreciate you, and like fuck are we letting this filthy fuckhead get his hands on you.”

I gasp, shocked and warmed by his words, especially when the crowd agrees with him.

“We need a plan,” Mike from the feed store says.

“I’m all ears,” Havoc says cordially. Again, I’m struck by how he’s so different than most presidents, who keep their shit to the clubhouse and actively keep the town’s residents in the dark. And I guess that works for some. But here, looking at these people who owe us nothing, people who have been pulled into a fight that’s not theirs, who are standing up and saying they won’t go quietly, makes me want to hug each and every one of them.

I look up at Havoc, who must feel my eyes on him because he looks down at me. “What?”

“Don’t tell Blade this, but you’re the best president this town ever had.”

His smile starts small before growing wider. He kisses the crown of my head before turning back to the crowd, who are firing out ideas.

“We have the right to refuse service so that we can lock the town down temporarily to strangers. Tourist season is pretty much over anyway, and the last thing we want is them getting caught up in this anyway,” Karl from the diner states. A few people agree, but I can see others are worried about the loss in revenue.

“What about if you show us what this asshole looks like so we can be on the lookout for him?”

“We can do that.” G steps forward. “However, the man is somewhat of a chameleon. He’s been here before, multiple times as far as we can tell, so some of you might have encountered him already. I’ll show you any images I can find with him in, but I suspect this guy could fool his own mother if he wanted to.”

“I’ll know him, no matter what he looks like,” I say without thinking.

“It’s been a while since you’ve seen him. The man’s a master of disguise.”

“It doesn’t matter. I could always sense when he was near. I thought it was a soulmate thing. It turns out you have to have a soul for that shit.”

“I think you were just sensing evil.” Powers winks at me. I shrug. He’s probably right.

“What you can do is be smart. Please don’t write off suspicious behavior. If you have a permit to carry, do so. You all have mine and my officers’ numbers—use them if you need them—and we’ll get to you as fast as we can.”

John folds his arms. “What about security footage?”

“What about it?”

“Some of us have cameras. We even have one of those fancy Ring doorbells. Think you might be able to use those to track this guy’s whereabouts?”

“If he’s in town, maybe. And it will depend on if you have a closed circuit…” G drifts off when he realizes he’s losing people. “I’ll come take a look and connect the ones I can to an app on a cell phone, if that’s okay with everyone.”

“Having the MC on standby in the event of trouble? Hell yeah, we’re game,” Mike calls out.

“Alright, well, we have a lot to go over. Those who want to see me about getting help to relocate, stick around. Anyone who wants to talk to G about security is welcome to stay too. The rest of you might as well go home and get some sleep. We’re going to all need our wits about us,” Havoc calls out as a man in the back stands up,

“What about the police? You said they’re looking and that some of them are in this guy’s pocket. I don’t know what that means.” Karl frowns. “Can we trust our local cops or not?”

Havoc hesitates for a moment before laying it out. “Truthfully? I don’t know.”

* * *

“It went better than I thought it would. People were understanding. I wasn’t expecting that.”

“People have let you down a lot over the years. It’s hardly surprising you don’t always have faith in them.”

“Yeah, but here…”

He rolls us so I’m underneath him. “Yes, here too. Jesus, Lil, you came here in hopes of escaping a monster and ended up facing down more. You were betrayed by a woman whom you’d hoped to find solidarity with and were then almost forgotten about while the club put itself back together.”

“That part probably worked in my favor,” I admit.

“It doesn’t matter. It still left you to figure things out alone, yet again.”

I reach up and hook my fingers through his dog tags, tugging his head down to mine so I can kiss him. “I’m not alone anymore, though,” I murmur against his lips.

“And if I get my way, you won’t ever be again.”

His lips move against mine, slow and teasing, his tongue dipping in to play with mine. I widen my legs and feel him hot and hard where he presses against me. I moan into his mouth, arching up into him before I wrap my leg around his hips.

“You need some sleep.”

“Then you better fuck me quickly.”

He grins and then, without warning, he thrusts into me, bottoming out inside me.

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“Kieren!” I gasp, which rips a groan from him as he does exactly what I asked, fucking me hard and deep, marking me from the inside out.

“No better place than being buried inside you.”

“Please,” I find myself begging, but I don’t know what I’m begging for.

“I’ve got you, baby, I know exactly what you need,” he tells me as he skims his mouth across my collarbone and over the swell of my breast.

He sucks one of my hardened nipples into his mouth before nipping it with his teeth. I cry out his name and feel myself racing toward the ledge of

my sanity. He thrusts into me as far as he can go and yanks me over into the abyss right beside him.

I shake as he slowly fucks me through the aftershocks, his lips moving over mine until I'm boneless. Beyond exhausted, my eyes drift closed as he eases himself from inside me.

I feel him climb off the bed, but I don't move, unable to summon the energy. A dark chuckle is the only warning I get before I'm scooped up and carried into the bathroom and sat on the toilet. I startle in surprise and immediately try to get up, but he puts his palm on my shoulders and pushes me back down again.

"Pee," he orders.

I wait for the feeling of indignation to wash over me. After conforming to all of James's rules, I figured I'd buck anything even close to one from another man. Instead, it fills me with warmth because he's not doing it to push me around but to look after me.

"Neither of us wants you to get a UTI," he tells me as he leans against the counter, his eyes on my naked body.

"Turn around at least."

"Why? I've tasted every inch of your body, been inside it every second you've let me. There is nothing about you that could turn me off."

"You're out of your mind if you think that's true. And before this conversation goes off track, I'm telling you right now that door will be locked when I finally summon up the courage to poop in the same house as you."

He laughs as I finish up and wipe myself. "I've lived in a war zone with a bunch of men. Trust me when I say nothing you do will faze me."

"Yeah, well, it fazes me, weirdo. I don't want to see you poop either."

"I'll keep that in mind." He hands me my toothbrush loaded with toothpaste and lifts me to sit on the counter.

I gasp when my bare ass comes into contact with the cold tile. I brush my teeth as he grabs a washcloth, soaks it, then uses it to clean me up, then himself. I don't take my eyes off him as he throws it in the laundry basket.

"What?" he asks, catching my expression.

I spit my toothpaste into the sink before using the tumbler of water to swish it out. "Why are you always taking care of me?"

He looks bemused at my question. "That's what couples do."

I contemplate his words and try to look back over my life and apply his reasoning, but all I've ever seen is women catering to their men. I thought James was different, and he was, but not in any way that was good.

"You're breaking my heart, Lil." He sighs, leaning forward to kiss the tip of my nose.

"What? Why?"

"Because what I'm doing for you is the bare minimum of what you should expect."

I lean forward and wrap my arms around his neck. "I don't expect anything, but I'm grateful for everything." I kiss him, hooking my fingers through his dog tags so he doesn't pull away, not that it looks like he has any intention of doing that.

Instead, he grabs my hips and pulls me closer so I can wrap my legs around him. He's hard again, and I feel myself reacting to it as he carries me back into the bedroom. My eyes are heavy, but I have an ache inside me that can't seem to be sated.

He lays me on the bed and crawls in behind me. I wiggle against him, pushing back so he'll get the hint. "Behave. You need to rest."

"I'll rest better with you inside me."

He stills behind me before his hand slides over my hips and slips between my thighs. "You want to sleep with me inside you?" he asks softly, checking he hasn't misunderstood.

"Yeah, I miss you when I can't feel you."

His teeth nip my shoulder. "You feel empty without my cock inside you, trickster?"

"Yeah," I mumble as he lifts my leg and pulls me back so I'm leaning on him.

He lines himself up and eases inside me as I let out a contented sigh. "Does that feel better?"

I let out a happy moan and nod as sleep tugs me under.

I wake up later, on the edge of orgasm, and realize Powers must have been slowly fucking me for a while.

"There you are," he whispers as he nips my ear. "Come for me, baby. Come on my cock, and then you can go back to sleep."

I'm helpless to ignore him. I cry out his name as I tighten around him, my breath stalling in my chest as my orgasm washes over me.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck," he growls into my ear before he fills me up.

I feel him soften, but instead of pulling out, he keeps himself inside me. “Sleep, baby girl, I’ve got you.”

I drift off again, content in a way I don’t think I’ve felt before, which is why, when the phone rings later, it jars me out of my sleep. Immediately, panic consumes me.

“It’s okay, it’s mine,” Powers soothes me, but it does nothing to alleviate my fears.

It’s bright out, and a glance at the clock shows we slept later than I thought we would. Powers is right—there is no reason to worry, and yet it’s like I have a sixth sense that’s kicked in. As I wait for him to answer, I already know whatever news he’s about to hear is going to be bad.

The expression dances across his face before he curses. “Fuck!” I move closer, waiting on edge as he looks at me with regret.

“Was anyone hurt?”

I tense, waiting for those answers.

“Okay, good. I’ll fill Lil in, and we’ll head up to the saloon as soon as we’re dressed.” He hangs up and reaches for my hand. “Everyone is fine,” he tells me, which settles some of the panic at least.

“But?”

“But there was a drive-by shooting at ELM this morning.”

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Chapter Twenty-One

POWERS

HAVOC YELLS for us to quiet down as he stands and leans over the table.

We look over to him, each of us as pissed as the next. Church isn't as full as it usually is, but with as many as we've been having lately, Havoc has been more lenient about attendance. The only reason I'm here is that Midas is working today. Otherwise, I'd be at the track.

"Tell me what happened," Havoc says quietly, but each of us can hear the barely contained violence in his voice.

Kruger rubs his hand over his face, looking tired but alert. "I wasn't in. Con's been helping out Ambros at the gym."

Ambros nods. I'm guessing he's watching it now, too.

"Because of that, I've been driving Theo to school, especially since everything went down."

"I still can't believe they're open already." G sighs.

"The damage to the building was superficial. Most of the classes have been moved to the outdoor classrooms. Besides, they break for the summer soon," Circus explains.

Havoc nods and spins, rotating his finger for Kruger to continue.

"I was on my way in, later than I usually would be, when Nathan called to tell me about the drive-by. I pulled up at the same time the cops did, so they got in my fucking way when I was trying to talk to him. We were lucky. Given the nature of the business, I anticipated issues, so I had new windows retrofitted and reinforced doors installed. The brickwork took

most of the damage. Though the windows will need replacing because of all the splintering, they did their job."

"That's some good news at least."

"What did the cops have to say for themselves?" I ask, biting back my sneer. I'm still pissed about how shit went down with Lil.

"Not much. They've put out a BOLO on the car."

"They get a plate?"

"A partial from one of the cameras. And a make and model. I sent it to G—figured he'd likely find it faster than the cops."

"I'm running the data, just waiting for a hit," G confirms.

"How long will this put you out of commission?"

"Not long. A week, max. Like I said, we were prepared for the worst. I have the money to cover the damages. So though I'll claim on the insurance, I won't need to wait for the payout to fix it."

"Alright, good. I take it there were no confirmed sightings of James?"

Kruger's already shaking his head before Havoc has finished asking.

"As much as I'm glad as fuck everyone is okay, it's only going to be a matter of time before he hits again. And I doubt we'll be so lucky again."

"My guess is he'll be pissed. I mean, I could be wrong—this could all be part of the game to him—but I feel like he stepped up with the school and then the shelter. This feels almost like a step back," I tell him. "I can't put my finger on why. I just thought the escalation would be more."

"I'm with Powers," Toot agrees. "He's supposed to be making us sweat, so either he's trying to lull us into a sense of complacency, which I just don't buy, or he has something else coming our way too."

"That's the vibe I was getting. But fuck me, it would be nice to be wrong for a change." Havoc rubs his hand over his head.

G's laptop chirps. The VP types rapidly as we wait for an explanation. "Got a hit on the car. A call came in to the FD."

Mack sighs. "Fire department likely means they burned it out, probably to destroy the evidence."

G looks up from his screen. "Our contact says there's a report of a charred body inside."

"We're not fucking lucky enough for that to be James." I snort.

"No, we're not. But if we can ID him, we might be able to figure out his ties to James, and that might be enough to find where he's hiding out."

Crane leans forward. “He won’t be far, that much I’m sure of. Guys like that like to see the destruction they wrought too much.”

“Unless it puts him at risk. He was sloppy at the end there with Citi. He expected Pig to tie up loose ends. But if he’d known him half as well as we did, he’d know Pig couldn’t do fucking shit right.”

Dice grunts in agreement, while Hoops nods. None of us liked Pig, though none of us suspected him of working for James. So maybe he wasn’t completely incompetent because he sure as hell never let that slip.

I eye Circus. He says nothing, but clenches his jaw and stares down at the wood grain.

“I’ve got everyone on alert. Blade and Inigo are heading in, as are Stitch and Mime from Sons of Purgatory. Hannibal’s had a few issues with a neighboring MC, so his guys won’t be here until next week. Scope has a couple of guys ready if we need them, but he already has some people doing recon over in the UK. I don’t want to leave him too thin on the ground if I can help it. I couldn’t reach Viper, but Zero said they have it covered, whatever the fuck that means.”

A knock at the door has us pausing.

“I swear to god if that’s Con again,” Havoc grumbles as he stomps over to the door and yanks it open.

But of course, it’s not Con standing there because he’s covering at the gym. It’s a pale-looking Tink.

“What’s wrong?” Havoc barks, clearly reading her wary expression the same way I am.

She holds out her laptop and swallows. “I think G should look at this.”

G jumps up and heads over. “What’s wrong, Tink?”

By this point, Havoc is ushering her in and pushing her around to the head of the table. He eases her down into his chair before he takes the laptop from her and passes it to G.

“Tell me what happened, cupcake.”

“I was working. Well, I was procrastinating by checking my emails. And then, all of a sudden, the laptop started acting weird, and…things started to pop up.”

“What things?”

“Fucking prick. I’m going to gut that motherfucker and string him up by his intestines,” G snarls.

“Will someone tell me what the fuck is happening?” Havoc snaps.

G doesn’t look up. He types furiously. “She has a virus. It must have been embedded in one of the emails. Ah, yes, there it is.”

Tink leans over and frowns. “But that’s my agent.”

“The email is off. Look.”

Tink skims over it before she shakes her head. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t realize.”

“Hey, this isn’t your fault,” Havoc tells her.

“Doesn’t change the fact I still let it in.”

“Hey, Tink, why don’t you leave it with me and I’ll bring it back once I have it fixed up,” G tells her.

She looks at him before her eyes drift around the others. “I know you want me to leave so you can discuss it with the guys, and I get it. But I need you to remember that it might not be real to you, but it will be to them. Please make it go away. I don’t want them violated again,” she whispers. I don’t know exactly what she’s talking about, but I have an awful feeling I actually do.

G leans over and looks her dead in the eye. “I’ll take care of it. You have my word.”

“Thank you,” she whispers before getting to her feet.

“You gonna be okay? I can walk you out,” Havoc asks with concern.

“No, I’m okay. I think I’m going to take a nap and pretend none of this happened. I need a few hours of denial.”

“Whatever you need, cupcake. I won’t be long. I’ll come find you when I’m done.”

He dips his head and kisses her before pulling back. We all watch as she walks to the door, pulls it open, and walks through without acknowledging the rest of us, which clues us in to how serious this is. Tink couldn’t make eye contact, and that woman is about as fearless as it gets when it comes to standing her ground against us guys.

“Fill in the blanks for me, G. Tell me what has my old lady so spooked,” Havoc orders, his eyes on the shut door. I get it. I’d much rather be with Lil too.

“Fucking AI will be the death of us all,” G mutters, still typing. “Seems this fucker knows his way around a computer, or he has a guy who does. He’s taken a bunch of photos of our women and used AI to remove their clothing or, in some cases, give them a whole new body—each of them in a more degrading pose or position than the last. And no, I won’t be showing

any of you. I promised Tink, and I'm keeping that promise. After what happened to Citi and Delphi in particular, this is fucking evil."

"What the fuck is the point of all this?" Dice snaps.

Ambros looks ready to smash the room apart, and I don't blame him.

"To humiliate them. He's uploaded them to porn sites, but I'm better at this shit than he is. I've got them removed from each site they were uploaded to, but some of them have been downloaded already."

"There's no way for you to trace them?"

"Some, perhaps. But most people logging into porn sites these days use VPNs, which makes shit infinitely harder. On the plus side, we caught it before it exploded."

Ambros looks like he's going to throw up. "Please tell me there isn't one of Star."

Oh Jesus, I didn't even think of that.

"No. Nothing. But I'll keep checking to make sure."

Ambros nods and swallows.

"There's none of Lil either. Wait, what's this?" G frowns before the images appear on the wall.

"These are the photos of Legs pinned on her next-door neighbor's wall," Midas says. "We assumed it was Kiki who took them, with how everything played out afterward. But a lot of what happened there didn't fit. If James has them, he must have taken them."

"This all happened around the time Lil realized James was back on the scene. Actually, I don't think she told us how she figured it out." G frowns.

"I'll ask her."

"The notes," Kruger muses. "She was getting notes left on her car windshield at the shelter. I think she wrote most of them off, but one or two had her shook. He must have written something that tipped her off."

"But why send these pictures? We've already seen these. I'm not even sure why he'd take them. It makes more sense for it to be Kiki, as she was obsessed with Midas. Maybe he stole them from her." Toot sighs.

I stare at the pictures and frown. "Hold on."

I get to my feet and walk over to the wall, studying the images and completely removing Legs from the equation. "Son of a bitch. They're easter eggs."

"They're what now?" Toot questions.

"Pretend Legs isn't in these pictures. Look at the backgrounds."

The guys study them harder. G is the first to get it. “Ah fuck, Legs was the decoy. He was testing us to see how smart we were.”

“I guess that means we failed because I’m still not seeing it.” Mack groans.

I point to the photos. “The hospital that Lil worked at. The lilacs in the flower shop, the shelter he just burned down, a boat—I’m guessing like the one the OG Lil disappeared from—” I reel off the first few things that caught my eye. Things all linked to either my Lil or the one who came before her.

“What are those smudges?” Dice asks, getting up and walking over. Sure enough, in a few of the photos, there are smudges, as if something has been removed. Or someone.

“Dammit. I think it was Lil. He erased her from the photos so we wouldn’t figure it out too fast.” I run my hands through my hair, agitated.

“Why, though? Why go to these extremes to show us how clever he is?” Probe questions. “None of us give a fuck.”

“The message isn’t for us. It’s for Lil. He’s showing her how much of her life he knows about. He’s taunting her.”

G’s laptop chimes, drawing my attention back to it.

“The body has been pulled from the car, and a positive ID has been made from his driver’s license. His name is Ben Huges. He’s twenty-seven and says he lives in Connecticut. The plates on the car are from Texas and are registered to Bill Burton—an eighty-eight-year-old retired civil engineer.”

“The car was likely stolen anyway. I’m running his face because I’d bet my left nut that his driver’s license is fake. And boom. His real name is Nigel Harris. He’s a former amateur boxer turned muscle-for-hire. He has two convictions. One for armed robbery when he was seventeen and one for assault with a deadly weapon when he was twenty-one. Served some time, not nearly enough. Can’t find anything that links him to James, but my guess is that’s who hired him.”

“How convenient that he winds up dead before he can be questioned,” I drawl, pissed at always being two steps behind this guy.

“I know you’ve pulled the files from the porn sites, G, but you think maybe this shit needs to be fed to the police?” Ambros asks. “As much as I want to handle this guy myself, we’re getting nowhere. The only advantage right now is that we’re not hiding James’s deeds, unlike all those who came

before us. If we start doing that now, even if it is to protect the girls, we wind up giving him exactly what he wants—anonymity."

Havoc taps his jaw in thought. "Can you get it to the cops without getting into shit for pulling the files? I don't want you getting arrested for tampering with evidence," Havoc asks G.

"Let them try to charge me. Lane will have me out in a heartbeat. I have no shame in going to the media, too. Our women are media darlings. If the cops press charges against me for sparing them more pain and humiliation, all while James is still at large, Raven PD will be crucified. And honestly, even if the charges stick, it's a risk I'm willing to take."

I nod my head in respect.

Havoc claps his hands. "We have a plan, then. We'll drop everything we have that doesn't implicate the MC to the cops and prepare shit for the press just in case. You think they'll share what they have with us if they see us trying to work with them?" Havoc asks. None of us has a particularly good relationship with the cops, mostly because of the stigma they have against bikers in general.

"Doesn't matter if they do. While they focus on James, they won't notice the little worm I'll slip in the back door. We'll know what they do, one way or another. If I'm gonna get arrested for shit, I might as well make it worth it." G shrugs.

Havoc groans. "Amity is going to shoot me in my sleep. I know it."

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Chapter Twenty-Two

LIL

THE GUYS ARE KEEPING something from us. I'm used to hearing the words "club business" as an excuse to keep us in the dark, and most of the time it doesn't bother me because it isn't my business. This time feels different, likely because it's about James. And anything to do with that guy affects me.

"You feel it too, huh?" I turn at the sound of Citi's voice. She walks over to me and takes the empty chair to my left. "The tension every time one of the women walks into the room? I'd assume it was just all this shit going down with James in general if it weren't for the fact that Neveah is acting oddly as well."

I shake my head and resume peeling the label on my water bottle. "I knew something was up, but like you, I thought it was just all the stunts he pulled. And yet I can't shake the feeling that I'm missing something. I thought I was losing my mind or, at the very least, just reading into it too much."

"No, I don't think so." She leans her elbows on the table and rests her head in her hands.

"I hate the words *club business*," she complains, making me chuckle.

"I was just sitting here thinking about that. It doesn't usually bother me, but in this case, it feels different."

"It's because we're in danger. We can all sense it, but our guys are in protection mode and won't listen to reason. I cannot understand the need to

keep us in the dark when it has to be safer for us to know what's coming."

"I don't even know what to say. Part of me understands it. There is a kind of freedom that comes from not having to worry about every little thing. This club must deal with a million things that we're all completely oblivious to. I think if we knew all the ins and outs, it would give us nightmares. They keep their mouths closed to protect our sanity, but it also gives us some protection legally. It's not done maliciously or because they don't trust us. It's just the way it's always been for MCs. The problem is that times have changed, and so have our enemies. Women and children aren't kept out of it. What was once untouchable, with some secret honor-amongst-thieves bullshit, is now obsolete. Now the women and children are targets—and easy ones at that—because we don't see the danger coming until it's too late. This club is more progressive than most, but there is still an element of the Dark Ages about it. I wonder how many more people will get hurt before they realize change is coming, whether they like it or not."

"I get what you're saying. I'm just not sure what's going on in their heads. There was an incident with James—or Michael, as he was going by with Legs—well before I was on the scene. I think it was before you even left. Because they didn't share with us, we had no idea what James looked like. It wasn't until I was missing and they called the women into church, where they had the photos up on the board. Legs realized she'd seen him before. That's when some of the pieces started coming together. I just feel that in circumstances like this, we should all come together, a bit like they did in the town hall."

We're both quiet for a moment. The truth is, she's not wrong. But I'm not sure if the club will take that route while opening the club to other MCs, not wanting to muddy the waters as such.

"I don't know what the answer is, Citi. I know sometimes I wish I didn't know as much as I did. But like you, I'd rather see the devil coming than have him sneak up behind me."

"We don't want any of you to get hurt. You get that, right?" We both jump at the sound of Havoc's voice and turn to find him standing just behind us.

"How the heck do you move so quietly?"

He shrugs, his eyes moving between Citi and me.

"How much did you hear?" I ask warily, not wanting him to be pissed that we were discussing things we perhaps shouldn't have, out in the open.

Even if the clubhouse is quiet today.

“Enough.” He sighs and takes the seat at the table next to mine. “You know I never wanted to be president. It wasn’t something I aspired to be, even with my father being one before me. I wanted the club life—the brothers at my back, the solidarity of knowing I had a family for life…and well, we know how that turned out. I thought I was fucked over by a woman I cared about, went to prison for a brother who never deserved it, and I felt abandoned by my club. When Blade offered me the president’s position here, I mostly took it out of spite, knowing it would fuck Khan and Driller up. But then things changed. I realized I’d been looking for everything I wanted in the wrong place. And now I’m here, and I have it all. I’m the luckiest man alive. I could lose it all in a heartbeat, and I’m not sure I could come back from that. I know if I lost cupcake, it would kill me. I’m trying to make moves while keeping my emotions out of it, but it’s proving harder now than it ever has before.”

He rubs his hand over his face, and I feel a pang of sympathy for the man who has to always hold it together, no matter what.

“I knew him best. Maybe I could give you some insights into him. It might not help, but maybe it will help you to know how he thinks,” I offer. Even though I hate talking about him, I want to do everything I can to stop him. He’s terrorized me for long enough.

“Same here. I might not know him as well as Lil, but I know him better than you guys do.”

He looks at us, considering. He leans back and folds his arms over his chest. “Alright, tell me what makes this man tick.”

“Control,” both Citi and I say at the same time before chuckling. I nudge her to go first.

“When he was posing as a therapist, he made himself seem as non-threatening as possible. And he was smart about it. Looking back now, I feel dumb, assuming he wasn’t as scary because of his wheelchair—”

“Wait, what?” I look between them.

“Powers didn’t tell you?” she asks.

“To be fair, the man had a lot to cover,” Havoc reminds her.

“Right, sorry. Michael, I mean James, knew my history. He’d looked me up—he even told me he did so that he could get a better understanding of my story. But I think some of that was to cover his back if he slipped, like when he mentioned my sister or the outfit I was wearing when I was taken.

It is all out there on the internet for the world to see. It's just not stuff I had mentioned to him yet. It already set an odd precedent, I guess, because I went in expecting to be asked questions, not for him to have already painted a picture about me."

"And the wheelchair?"

"Objectively, I can tell you he was a good-looking guy and a fit one. Strong, imposing, tattoos of the Grim Reaper on his forearms when his sleeves were rolled up. In another life, he wouldn't have looked out of place in an MC. I was wary of men, instinctually. I wanted to get past it. That's why I sought him out in the first place. But I can tell you now that if I'd walked into his office and he'd been standing over me, I'd have left again. The wheelchair gave me a sense of safety because I assumed I could outrun him. It gave me confidence, which meant I overlooked the fact that even if he were wheelchair-bound, he wasn't weak. He could have snapped my neck before I ever made it to the door. He staged the scene, and I fell for it. If it weren't for him calling Lil *Lilac*, he might have gotten away with it longer, though I'd already decided that we didn't gel."

I open my mouth, but Havoc beats me to it, leaning closer.

"Why didn't you gel?"

"He was too opinionated. He kept telling me how I should feel, which invalidated how I actually felt. He also came across as judgmental about MCs and Ambros being a fighter. He planted seeds about me and you betraying Tink. And instead of helping me heal, I started questioning myself and what kind of person I'd become."

"He was unpicking your progress, but in a way that you thought it was you, not him," I say softly.

She nods, "Yes, that's exactly it."

"He was always really good at that." I nod.

"Gaslighting 101," Havoc adds.

"The thing is, you don't see it when you're in it. And, like, Citi was naive about a lot of the world, given what happened to her. My upbringing left me somewhat socially stunted, too. We were the perfect victims, even if our roles were different."

I run my finger down the slope of my nose. "He chose this face. And I trusted him because I knew no better. He chose my clothes, my hobbies, my friends. And if I veered off course from the one he set, he would use manipulation to steer me back. And if that didn't work, guilt. I had no clue

what a functional relationship was meant to look like. He told me he loved me, and I loved him back, so perhaps this was how it was supposed to be. I was lucky—everyone told me that. He was such a catch, such a handsome man to fall for a nobody like me. Even that was its own kind of manipulation. It made me feel selfish and ungrateful if I felt even a moment of unhappiness. Looking back, when I was caught up in the ever-spinning chaos around me, I know now that he never treated me like he loved me, like he wanted the best for me, and for me to be happy. I was his favorite toy. No, I was his shining achievement. A doll he shaped and molded, void of personality. I felt like a puppet, waiting for the moment my strings would be cut, and I'd be disregarded. I was worried that he would realize one day I wasn't worthy of him. I didn't understand that he wasn't worthy of me. When I found out he reconstructed my face to look like his missing wife's, it was as if a veil was pulled from my eyes, and I realized just how expendable I was."

"I don't think he would be doing all this for someone he considers expendable," Citi points out.

"But it's not me he's after. Not really. It's the illusion he built. In my head, I thought it was all about his wife, Lilian. How he couldn't let her go, and he was so obsessed with her that he tried to make me in her image. And to an extent, that was true. But when I met her…I don't know. It felt like I had the bones of a story, but the skin didn't fit."

"He knows his real wife is dead now for sure. I told him that, and if he's half as tenacious as we believe him to be, then he'll have verified that information for himself. So why still come for you? It makes me think of Jasper and how he referred to Neveah and me as a set. Are you part of some kind of collection?" Citi's mouth snaps shut when she sees the look on my face. "Sorry, that was insensitive."

"No, it's not that." I look at Havoc. "I think it's bigger than Lilian and me. That's the part I've been struggling with. Those other women, who filed complaints against him, specifically the ones who have gone missing…do you have photos of them?"

Havoc frowns but doesn't dismiss me. "Let me text G. He's upstairs working on something. Tell me what you're thinking."

"I'm not sure. But maybe the reason why we're finding it so hard to follow along is that we're starting in the wrong place."

Citi gasps. “You don’t think Lilian was the first he did this to. She was just the one unfortunate to marry him.”

“Yeah, this kind of behavior rarely comes out of nowhere. There must have been signs before then—complaints, perhaps from medical school or something.”

Havoc’s phone chimes. He looks at the text and nods. “He’s on his way down. Either of you ladies want a drink or something?”

I shake my head no.

“I’m good, Havoc, thanks. I need to grab Star soon, though.”

He looks at his watch. “We’ll see what G has to say, and then I’ll drive you myself to pick her up. Neveah is on a Zoom call with her publishing team, and I’ve been given strict instructions to stay out of the room so I don’t distract them.”

I grin, picturing Tink saying just that.

“I’m here. Okay, tell me what you need,” G says, sitting in the last seat next to Citi, who tenses for a second. I reach over, grab her hand, and squeeze it. She gives me an embarrassed smile, but she relaxes.

G looks over at her, and I see the moment it clicks. “Shit. Sorry, Citi. I can move.”

“No, please don’t. You didn’t do anything wrong. You just startled me, is all.”

“You sure?”

She nods, but he watches her for a beat more before he concedes. “Alright.” He turns to me. “So this is what I have so far. These are the photos I pulled from employment records, so obviously, there are more out there. But this is a good place to start.” He spins the laptop so I can see.

There are a lot of women on there. Holy shit.

“Can you remove some if I give you certain parameters?”

“Sure.” He pulls the laptop back toward him.

“Can you get rid of all the complaints that were not sexual in nature?”

He types and then nods. “What else?”

“Remove all the people whose location is known.”

He does that and then grits his teeth. “Shit.”

“What?” Havoc asks, leaning over.

“They all look like me, don’t they? I don’t mean in the same way that Lilian and I did. I’m talking hair color, body type, skin color.”

They both nod.

“So he has a type. Did you find out anything about his childhood?”

“I didn’t really look that far back. It didn’t seem relevant to the current issues. Am I looking for anything specific?” G asks, already typing.

“Complaints filed, arrest reports, that kind of thing.”

We all watch as he does his thing. The man is part machine. I’m convinced of it.

“One complaint of SA in med school was dismissed. The victim was discredited because she was intoxicated. There were another two in college. One of the girls dropped out and went home. The other was a known party girl. She OD’d a few months later.” He flips the laptop around again, and I’m faced with a young girl who looks similar to me.

I nod as he pulls it back and then frowns.

“I have some sealed records here. Hold on. Okay, not what I expected. Turns out James Taylor wasn’t born into wealth. He was adopted by the Taylors when he was ten years old. Dad worked in finance; mom worked as a makeup artist and costume designer.”

“I guess that explains how he was always so adept at changing up his appearance.”

G nods but carries on reading. “Before they adopted him, he was James Dawkins. A boy who was in and out of foster care, returning to his mother over and over until a john killed her. James found her body.”

“A john? His birth mom was a prostitute?”

“Looks that way. Not sure why this was sealed, though. Oh.” He grimaces.

“What?”

“There is a report here that suspected the mother was sexually abusing her son.”

“If they suspected that, how come he kept ending up with her?”

“I’m not sure what happened with CPS. I’ll have to do more digging, but it says in this report that semen was found inside the mother, and it was a DNA match to James. The file was sealed to protect him.”

“God, I’m going to be sick.” Citi gets up and heads to the restrooms.

“I’ll go,” Havoc said, following her.

I stare at G, knowing there’s more. “G?”

He turns the laptop so I can see the woman, a carbon copy of me.

“I was never wearing Lilian’s face. We were both wearing hers.” I point to the screen, trying to find her name. “What was she called?”

He leans over and taps something in, and the answer is right there. “Claire Marie Dawkins. But her street name was Lilac.”

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Chapter Twenty-Three

POWERS

"I DON'T EVEN KNOW what to say to that." I grimace.

The others around the table grunt in agreement, having just been filled in on what Lil, Citi, G, and Havoc found out earlier.

Lil snuggles closer as I smooth my hand up and down her back, making her shiver.

"You want to know something crazy? This isn't even the first time I've heard of something like this." G shakes his head.

"Please tell me this isn't a common thing because I'm not sure I can stomach it," Citi says.

Before G can answer, there is a commotion at the door, then Blade and Inigo walk in. I feel Lil tense and shrink into herself, making me frown. I look down at her, but her gaze is locked on Blade.

"Lil?"

She swallows and looks up at me. The fear and anxiety in her expression have me cursing. I lift her and sit her in my lap, holding her tighter as she tucks her head under my chin.

"You have nothing to worry about."

"You don't know that. He was president back then and I—"

"Have nothing to worry about," Havoc reiterates, squeezing her shoulder. "I'm the president now," he reminds her.

Nothing else is said as both approach the table, getting lost in backslaps and smiles along the way.

“Fuck me, it’s good to be back.” Blade groans as he pulls out an empty chair and sits on it. “That ride gets longer and longer.”

“Nah, you’re just getting older and older,” G jokes, which has Blade flipping him off.

Inigo takes a spare seat and does the head nod thing before Blade’s eyes land on me, then drift down to Lil. His expression softens as he watches her tremble in my arms. “Lil?”

She turns her head to look at him. “Hey, Blade,” she whispers, sounding so unlike herself, I want to drag her away from here.

He curses, gets to his feet, and crouches in front of us. “What’s going on in that head of yours?”

“I don’t want you to hate me for lying to you.”

He sighs and cups her jaw. “So much has happened here over the years, it’s difficult to keep track of it all. When Havoc told me your story, or parts of it, I found myself going back over each of our encounters, trying to see the signs that something had changed, that something was different. And you know what I found? Nothing. Up until the night everything went to shit with Bear, I don’t think we really interacted much at all beyond my agreeing for you—or should I say her—to become a club girl. She kept away from me. Now I wonder if it was intentional. But it doesn’t matter now, I suppose. At the end of the day, I’m not sure how I can be mad at you without being pissed at myself and every other brother who was around back then. None of us noticed. And as much as I can stand here and say shit like, you kept to yourself or the club had a lot of shit going on—all of it true—it doesn’t change the fact that something horrible happened to you, and I didn’t check in. I expected you to come to me if you were struggling. But why would you? You didn’t even know me. I’m more mad at myself than anything else right now.”

“I don’t think you should be mad. If you had noticed, with everything that happened, you might not have trusted me enough to have me around, which would have been understandable. But then I wouldn’t have all this. And I wouldn’t have Powers. You turning a blind eye gave me a little breathing room and space to lay down some roots. Don’t feel guilty for that.”

“Turns out I feel guilty about a lot of decisions I made.” He smiles sadly. He’s likely talking about how things went down with Delphi.

Lil must have figured it out, too, because she shakes her head. “This isn’t the same. If you had pushed, I’d have run, and maybe he would have found me sooner.”

He stares at Lil for a long while, as he works through the validity of her words, before eventually sighing. “Maybe. I think I’ll feel guilty for a little while yet, but I’ll work on it.”

“Okay,” she says. She won’t argue with him over it because she’s still dealing with her issues of guilt too.

He gets to his feet and retakes his seat as Lil straightens a little. I tip her jaw up so I can look into her eyes. “You okay?”

She nods, offering me a wobbly but genuine smile.

“It’s good to have you guys back,” Havoc says, leaning forward. “How’s Conan doing?”

Blade grins before putting his fingers between his teeth and whistling loud enough to burst our eardrums. Of course, none of that matters when, minutes later, Conan walks in looking a little leaner than the last time we saw him, but with a smile on his face.

“Well, look what the cat dragged in!” Toot hollers, making everyone cheer. He walks over, snags an empty chair from a nearby table, and drags it over.

“It’s good to see you, man.” Havoc grins.

“It’s good to be seen. Heard you guys have had all sorts of adventures without us.”

Havoc shakes his head. “You don’t know the half of it. Are Sunshine and King coming too?”

“No, they’re visiting Aslanov and Dulce with the kids. Six and Will are going to stop by and visit, too.”

“And by visit, you mean keep them protected while we have shit going down here?” Mack says with a chuckle.

“Exactly. Besides, they don’t need to be here to hear the good news—they already know.” Conan grins as Tink and Amity stroll in,

“Conan,” Tink exclaims when she sees him, rushing over to give him a hug and a kiss on the cheek.

“Hey, Conan, looking good,” Amity says with a wink.

“What, am I invisible?” Blade grumbles.

“Lord, how I wish that were true,” Amity tells him sweetly, making Lil laugh. It’s no secret that there is a bit of tension between her and him after

he caused issues when she and G started dating.

“Now, now, children, play nice,” G drawls, dragging Amity into his lap.

“I can’t help it. Every time I see him, I want to stick toothpicks in his eyelids.” The whole table goes quiet at that. “That’s one of those things I should have kept to myself, huh?” she says to G.

“Maybe a little bit. You don’t want to scare off the locals now, do you?”

She makes a face that clearly says she wouldn’t mind scaring off a few, which makes even Blade chuckle.

“Alright, focus, people. Conan, you said you had good news?” Havoc prompts.

Conan’s face splits into a grin. “Just had an appointment with my oncologist. The chemo worked. I’m cancer-free.”

Everyone is quiet for a minute before the room erupts into cheers. And before we know it, an impromptu party is thrown, swelling in size as each of the brothers and old ladies returns to the clubhouse to share in the festivities.

Before long, Lil has passed out in my lap, despite the chaos around us. I smooth her hair back, making her sigh in her sleep and snuggle deeper, like a cat.

“I don’t know how she can sleep when it’s this busy.” Legs laughs from where she’s sitting beside Midas after having Hero swept away from her by Theo and Con, who claimed Star and then went upstairs to watch Disney movies.

“She feels safe,” Delphi says softly, which quiets the table. Nobody says anything to that, but it’s a sad state of fact that Delphi will likely never feel this safe in the clubhouse. Not after what happened to her.

Kruger tugs her closer and presses a kiss to her shoulder.

“Is she sleeping okay at night?” Ambros asks from beside Citi, his eyes on Lil.

“She sleeps, but she’s been having nightmares since the fire at the shelter. She says she doesn’t remember them when she wakes up, but she wakes up every day exhausted.”

“Her brain probably can’t switch off. It has too much to process and not enough hours in the day to do it,” Toot says, making us look at him.

“What? I’m smarter than I look.”

“Not sure that would be hard.” Midas grins at him, ducking when a beer coaster is launched his way.

Blade shakes his head at their antics. I lean back and watch as Conan and Probe play pool, laughing at something. It's the first time he's seemed like his old self since losing Capone. Speaking of which, I look around for Circus but can't find him anywhere. I make a mental note to check in with the guy. We might not be that close, but I know what it's like to lose a man I thought of as a brother.

"Oh, I forgot to tell you. I did some digging after you asked me about Poacher," Blade tells Havoc.

"Poacher? The guy the other Lil hitched a ride here with?" Crane asks. I jump at the sound of his voice. I thought the fucker had fallen asleep.

"One and the same. I wanted to talk to him, see if he could give me some insight as to how things played out, but he died in a hit-and-run accident a couple of years back."

"Shit." Havoc reaches up to run his hand through his hair, but Tink grabs it and puts it on her boob instead, all without looking up from the book she's reading.

"Better?" she asks.

I dip my head to hide my laugh, but the others don't bother. When I look up, I catch Havoc's dopey grin before he leans down and steals the book.

"Hey!"

He kisses her hard and fast, leaving her stunned, before he hands the book back.

"Much better," he murmurs to her.

"Well, alrighty then. As you were, gentlemen."

"You know it's rude to read when you're in a group of people?" Toot huffs, but his eyes sparkle with mischief.

"It's rude to eat garlic for lunch and not brush your teeth when in civilized company. And yet here we are. Does anyone have a Tic Tac for Toot? It's hard to read when my eyes won't stop watering."

"You're mean."

She sticks her tongue out at him.

"Children," Havoc groans. "I swear some days I feel more like I'm president of a daycare instead of an MC."

"I hear that." Blade lifts his bottle. Havoc clinks his against it.

When a cell phone rings, everyone rummages to see whose it is. Delphi calls out, "It's mine." She frowns at the screen, her eyes drifting to

Kruger's. Sensing the change in mood, everyone goes quiet. "It's Greer," Delphi tells him.

Lil stirs. She looks up at me before turning to see what's happening.

"Answer it," Kruger tells her gently.

"What's going on?" Lil asks me quietly.

"I have no idea."

"Hey, Greer, is everything okay?"

Kruger signals for her to put the call on speakerphone.

"Hey, Delphi. I'm sorry to call out of the blue like this, but I find myself in a bit of an odd situation. Is there any chance I can talk to you and Kruger about something?"

"Um, sure. You want us to meet you at the diner tomorrow for lunch or something?"

"Actually, I'm just pulling up to the gates now."

"You're here at the clubhouse?"

"Yes," she says softly.

"Greer, are you okay?" Delphi asks, picking up something in her tone that I missed. Both Mack and Toot straighten up fast, a serious expression on each of their faces.

"I will be. It's just been a long day."

"Okay, do you want to just come up to the—"

"No. No, thank you. I'd rather you both came down, if that's okay."

Instantly, suspicions invade, but Havoc nods, indicating for her to agree.

"Alright, we'll be there in a few minutes."

"Actually, if Lil is there, do you think it would be possible for her to come down too? I know it's an unusual request, but I have something for her."

I shake my head adamantly. This has to be a setup. But Havoc nods to Delphi, who looks torn. In the end, she swallows and agrees. "I'll find her, and we'll be right down."

"Thanks, Delphi." Greer's relief is palpable before she disconnects.

"This is a setup."

"Greer wouldn't do that," Mack snaps at me.

"You sure about that? What about if she had a gun to her head?"

Mack swallows but doesn't argue.

"Toot, get your sniper. I want you up on the roof. If James is with her, I want you to get him in your crosshairs and wait until I give you the order to

take this motherfucker out. Lil, you don’t have to come—”

“I’m coming.”

I growl. “That is exactly what he wants, Lil.”

“He’s not here. He hasn’t finished torturing me yet.”

I snap my mouth closed, biting off the slew of curse words I want to say. Instead, I look at Havoc and let him see the rage building inside me. If she gets hurt, I’ll kill him.

“Fine, but I’m coming with you.”

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Chapter Twenty-Four

LIL

I CAN FEEL him vibrating with anger, and for some fucked-up reason it settles my nerves. I walk between Delphi and Kruger on one side of me, and Havoc and Powers on the other. Powers's grip on my hand is so tight it's almost painful, and yet I don't want him to let go, so I say nothing.

I feel eyes on my back and know it's Mack and Midas, both of whom refused to stay behind. Thankfully, Blade, Conan, and the others put up less of a fight about staying back and guarding the women and the children. When we get to the warehouse where the bikes are kept, Midas and Mack hang back, leaving the rest of us to face what's coming.

When we walk through, I'm not sure what to expect. But it's just Greer, in one of her god-awful suits, looking pale and tired as she leans against a Ford Bronco that looks like it has more rust than paint.

"Greer," Havoc greets her coolly.

She offers him a wave. "Hey, Havoc." She acknowledges Powers with a nod. I'm not sure if they've officially met or if she even knows his name. "Hey guys," she says to the rest of us. She steps forward, holding an envelope with her slightly shaking hand.

"Are you okay, Greer?" I can't help myself. She looks wrecked.

She nods before shaking her head negatively. "I got a call out today. I had never met the woman before. She was not on my caseload. But my name was found on an envelope along with my number beside the body of a woman who committed suicide. Or at least that's how it's looking. It's not

official yet. She is currently down at the morgue waiting for a post-mortem.” She shakes her head, realizing she’s going off topic.

“That’s horrible, Greer. I’m really sorry you had to see that, but I’m not sure what it’s got to do with me,” Delphi tells her gently.

“No, I know. Truth is, I’m not sure either. I’m going on gut instinct at the moment. Something is telling me to do as this woman asks.”

“Asks? You said she was dead,” Kruger points out.

“There was a note in the envelope. The woman said this was the only way to keep her daughter safe. That she had to come here, to the MC, because you were the only people that could protect her.”

She swipes a tear. This whole thing has really shaken her up. “She said she had to take her own life to ensure her daughter was free. As long as she was alive, he would use her as a weapon to control her, and she was tired of being the bullet that hurt people. She said to ask you to tell her daughter that she loved her more than the whole world and she always will.”

Greer is shaking so hard now, I’m worried her legs are going to give out. Suddenly, she catches sight of something over my shoulder. I turn and see Mack heading our way. He doesn’t stop until he reaches her and pulls her against his chest. She lets him hold her for a minute, grasping the front of his cut as if she could soak up his strength. After a few minutes, she pulls back and swipes her face. “I’m so sorry.”

“Greer—” Mack starts.

She shakes her head. “No. Not now. Look, my boss wanted her brought in, said we’d have no problem placing her, and he knew just the family. When he finds out I brought her here—let’s just say, it won’t be good.”

She takes a deep shuddering breath before she holds the envelope out to me. “This was in the little girl’s bag.” She turns back to Kruger and Delphi. “You’re still registered as foster parents.”

Kruger curses. “You want us to take this kid in?”

“Yes. I do. I know I’m asking a lot. I know I might lose my job, and a woman has already lost her life because she couldn’t see another way out. But I have a really bad feeling this girl is in more danger than anyone realizes.”

“Why us though? I don’t understand,” Delphi says.

“I do,” I say as I read the letter, swallowing at the dried tear stains. “The little girl, Rebecca, is James’s niece.” I choke on his name. I avoid saying it when I can. “Actually, I’m not sure if she’s his niece or adopted daughter—

her words are a little jumbled here…” I keep reading and feel the lump in my throat grow.

“She was an addict. He took her to court and had her stripped of her parental rights, and he adopted Rebecca. What the court didn’t know is that he was the one who got the mother hooked on drugs and that James is Rebecca’s uncle as well as her biological father.”

“Oh, Jesus,” Powers curses.

Greer covers her mouth with her hands. “That poor baby.”

“Lauren—that’s the mother—had been clean for a year. When the news about James came out, he told her to stay with Rebecca until he came for her. This was her one chance to get her daughter away from him.”

“She’s right. James wouldn’t look for her here, and he can’t exactly fight for her, given the charges against him,” I say, as I keep reading.

Powers leans closer. “Did you know her?”

“I met Lauren once. She didn’t live nearby. She was painfully shy, meek, and—dare I say it—forgettable. I hadn’t thought about her once in all this time. I never knew she had a kid, and I sure as hell didn’t know James had custody of her.”

“Citi met her,” Havoc says, drawing my eyes to him. His expression is tight, his hands fisted at his side. “She’s the one who said her brother, whom she called Michael, was a therapist, and encouraged Citi to see him. She’s the reason Citi was taken in the first place.”

I reach up and grab his arm without thinking. He doesn’t flinch away. He just looks at me and waits for me to say my piece.

“She’s not the reason Citi was taken—James is.” When he opens his mouth to protest, I squeeze his arm again. “I get it. I do. You love Citi like a sister and Star as if she were your own, not forgetting you lost a friend in all this.” I swallow hard, thoughts of Capone’s absence making my heart ache.

“No, I want you to think about Citi and Star. Imagine Citi was his sister and James had been raping her for god knows how long. He not only does that to her, but he takes the kid away from her, too. People worship him like a god and look at her like she’s scum. Nobody is coming to save her. Nobody is coming to save that little girl. But Havoc, she knows what her brother does to little girls. She knows what that girl’s fate would be. She’s all that’s standing between a little girl and a monster. In her eyes, Citi had a whole MC behind her. Her daughter only had her. She didn’t drag Citi to see James. She left her his card. My guess is she probably thought Citi

would take one look at her and figure if James couldn't help his own sister, then he wouldn't be much help to Citi either. Citi, of course, wouldn't know the signs to look out for. She was seeing the world through her own trauma-shaped lens, but so was Lauren."

Havoc stares at me without a word, and I'll admit it's becoming a little unnerving.

"Shoot," Greer says, breaking the tension as she hurries around to the rear passenger side of the car. She tugs the door open. "It's alright, sweetheart. I'm here."

"Oh my god, she's here?" Delphi gasps as Greer unbuckles the child and helps her out of the car. We watch as she slips her hand into Greer's and ducks her head a little before Greer closes the door. I take in her hunched frame, her blonde hair falling over her shoulders and covering her face.

"Becca, these are…" Greer hesitates for a moment before looking at Mack. "My friends."

Rebecca looks up and takes us all in, her eyes moving down the line of us before they land on Kruger. She lets go of Greer's hand and shocks the shit out of all of us by walking right up to him. He gets down into a crouch so they are eye level. I can see how tense he is. His scars often scare children and adults alike.

She pulls up her sleeve and shows him a small scar on her arm. "I fell off the slide. It hurt a lot. Lauren said I was so brave because I only cried a little bit." She reaches up and touches the scar under his eye, making Delphi gasp. But Kruger holds perfectly still. "These hurt bad, huh?"

"They did, but they don't hurt anymore."

"Were you brave?" she whispers.

"I tried to be, but I'm pretty sure I cried like a baby."

"That's okay. Being brave is hard. Miss Greer says I have to be brave now, but I'm really scared," she admits, breaking my heart.

I lean into Powers, who wraps his arms around me

"It's okay. I can be brave for you if you like."

Her eyes water like she's valiantly trying to hold back her tears, but one slips free anyway. "Okay," she whispers, reaching for his hand.

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Delphi gets down next to them and offers a wobbling smile. I grab hold of Powers's cut as I watch my friends fall in love with her.

"Hi, my name's Delphi. The big guy's name is Kruger. You think you'd maybe like to come stay with us?"

Rebecca looks from Delphi to Kruger, then back to Greer, who nods, her own eyes glassy. Rebecca looks back at Delphi before she reaches for a strand of her hair that's a similar color to hers, frowning at it. "Will you be my new mommy?"

"Jesus, this kid is gonna kill me," Havoc grumbles.

Kruger looks over at Greer, a fierce expression on his face, as Delphi tugs the little girl into her arms. "Make it happen."

Greer opens her mouth but snaps it shut when Mack tugs her back to him. "I'll get the ball rolling," she says simply. I feel for her because I know nothing is ever that simple. The guys in the MC are used to making things happen. They forget that in the real world things run far differently, and Greer doesn't have half as much power as I'm sure she wishes she did when it comes to the children under her care.

Delphi pulls back and smooths Rebecca's hair from her face. "I'll be whatever you need me to be," she answers before looking up at Greer. "Is it okay if we take her up to the saloon? The rest of the kids are up there, and I want to introduce her to Theo."

"Of course. I'll give you a ring later so we can iron out the details. But as far as I'm concerned, Rebecca is your foster child."

"Thanks, Greer."

Delphi stands up as Kruger sweeps Rebecca into his arms. She rests her head on his shoulder like it's the most natural thing in the world. He nods at Greer before his eyes move to Havoc, where they seem to be having a silent conversation. Eventually, Havoc sighs and gives him a nod. Kruger takes Delphi's hand, and we all watch as they head inside the warehouse.

Greer lets out a shaky breath. "Thank you."

I turn to look at her and realize she's talking to Havoc.

"You put me on the spot. You pulled that shit knowing they'd fall in love with her," he accuses her.

“Damn fucking right I did,” she says fiercely, shocking not just me but Mack too, by the sound of things. “Something isn’t right in the office. The new boss is a dick. Everything Theo’s old caseworker did got swept under the rug now that he’s gone and…” she trails off, likely realizing she shouldn’t be telling us.

“I got into this to protect kids, and that’s what I’m trying to do. So if that means I make big strong men like you uncomfortable, so be it. Because at the end of the day, Havoc, I know you’ll lay your life down for that girl already.”

“I don’t like being played, Greer. You’d do well to remember that.”

“I’ll remember…until a little girl’s life is on the line. Then I’ll develop amnesia a million times over.” She steps closer to Havoc. Mack grabs her arm, but she shakes him off. “She was the one who dialed 911. She tried to breathe for her,” she chokes out, and I feel tears track down my face at the haunting picture she’s painting.

“She knew who I was as soon as I arrived because Lauren promised her I’d keep her safe. And goddam it, I refuse to break a dead woman’s promise when she gave her life so that Rebecca could keep hers.” Greer spins on her heel and rushes over to the car.

I pull free from Powers’s arms and jog after her, reaching for her before she can open her door. “Hey, Greer, it’s okay.”

She whirls around, but when she sees it’s me, she crumbles. I step forward and wrap my arms around her. I might not know her well, but right now I feel her pain as if it were my own. I don’t know how she does what she does. A job like hers can tear a person to shreds. It takes a special kind of person to willingly put themselves through that, day in and day out.

“She knew Lauren was her mother. She told me it was a secret. That she had to call her ‘aunt’ or something bad would happen to her.” She swallows as she pulls back, her face red and splotchy. “She doesn’t understand what it all means yet, but she will. One day, she’ll figure out what her dad did to her mom, and she’ll carry that with her always. I can’t protect her from that.”

“You brought her to the right place. I don’t know Delphi well, but even I know she was born for this. Kruger is one of my best friends, and that man will treat Rebecca like a princess, and Theo will dote on her like a big brother. We might not be able to hide the truth from her, but she’ll never have to carry it alone.”

She takes a shuddering breath as my words sink in. “Thank you, Lil.”

“You’re welcome. Anytime you need reminding that you’re doing the best you can, come find me. I have no problem knocking some sense into you.”

She laughs, shaking her head. “I’d better get going. There is already gonna be hell to pay. I’d better go face the music.”

“Are you going to be okay?”

“Something you should know about me is that I’m really good at falling on my face, but I always get back up again.”

There is a flash of something in her expression, something that makes my stomach curl in its familiarity, but it’s gone before I can analyze it. I move back, wondering if I imagined it as she climbs into her car and pulls away.

I walk back over to Powers, Havoc, and Mack, who watch the car until it disappears. “How well do you know Greer?” I ask Mack, his attention moving to me.

“We went to high school together. You know that. We were close, the three of us—Greer, Toot, and me. Something happened in the senior year that had us all falling apart, and then she left. We didn’t see or hear from her for about five years, and then I ran into her in town, literally. Now we’re polite, cordial even, but that’s about it. Why?”

“Did something happen to her?”

“What do you mean, did something happen to her?” he snaps.

Powers growls at him. “Watch your fucking tone.”

Mack holds up his hands and sighs. “Sorry, Lil. Greer is a touchy subject. As I said, we lost touch. If something happened, it was while she was gone.”

“And you don’t care enough about her anymore to find out?”

“Sometimes, Lil, it’s better to let sleeping dogs lie.”

“Even sleeping dogs get fleas. Pretending nothing happened doesn’t make it true. But you’re right. Perhaps you guys weren’t that tight to begin with. Because if you were, I’d wonder what happened to the girl who clearly loved you both and now doesn’t seem to even love herself.”

“What the fuck are you talking about?”

“I swear to god, Mack,” Powers warns him, but I wave him off.

“It’s fine. I hit a soft spot I’m not sure he realized he had. She dress like that in high school, Mack?”

“Of course not. She was a teenager.”

“Pretty, right? Banging body? I bet all the guys lusted after her, because I have eyes and I can see the beauty she’s become.”

He looks uncomfortable now, and I can see him dipping back into his memories.

“Pretty women don’t hide unless they need to. And that outfit she had on, and every one I’ve seen her in before, screams camouflage. She’s hiding in plain sight, and it’s obviously working because none of you have noticed that underneath it all, one thing shines brighter than the rest.”

“What?” Havoc is the one to ask, looking at me curiously.

“Fear.”

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Chapter Twenty-Five

POWERS

"SMOKE, Mime, and Stitch are at the gate," Con yells across the room to Havoc, who shakes his head.

"Tell him to let them up."

"Will do, Pres."

"He's like an overgrown puppy," Havoc sighs, making me grin.

"At least he's loyal," Dice states, making Havoc nod in agreement.

"Amen to that," Hoops adds, taking a sip of his beer.

"What do you four make of the prospects?"

Ambros and I look at each other, as do Hoops and Dice. Hoops and Dice patched in before us, so they never ran with the current prospects. We didn't either, but we were closer to their level for longer, and there is solidarity in being the lowest man on the totem pole.

"Con will make a great brother, even though he'll drive most of us insane," Dice states, making me chuckle.

"I don't understand what everyone's problem with him is. The women love him."

"And that's the problem," Ambros mutters.

I look around the table and frown. "There is no way the guys are insecure about an overgrown puppy? The women love him like a kid brother. They know they can go to him with anything, and they'll get zero judgment from him, and he'll break his back to help them. I've never met a more eager prospect in my life, and I'm including myself in that."

“Eager, like a puppy. Until someone crosses one of the women or children, and then he’ll rip their faces off like a rabid dog,” Havoc points out.

“Like I said, he’ll make a great brother.”

Havoc grins but doesn’t disappear. “And the rest?”

“Too soon to tell with most of them. But I will say, none of them have caused any issues. And the women, while not as close to them as they are to Con, have nothing negative to say about them.” Ambros shrugs.

“Unlike Hicks and Pig. Gotta say, being a prospect sucks, but I can see why you have them. Those guys never would have made it to the end.” Hoops grimaces.

Three unfamiliar faces appear in the doorway. Havoc stands and walks over, offering his hand to the man wearing the president’s patch first, before he nods to the others. “Gotta admit, I wasn’t expecting the president himself.”

“What can I say? Life’s been a little on the quiet side for us lately,” Smoke says, looking us over.

“Wish I could say the same.” Havoc sighs, indicating for them to join us. “Smoke, Mime, and Stitch. This is Dice, Hoops, Powers, and Ambros.”

“Good to meetcha. I saw you fight a few years back. You were fucking brutal,” Smoke tells Ambros.

“I don’t half-ass anything,” Ambros admits, making me laugh.

Smoke cocks his head at me. “You, I’ve never met, but I’ve seen your face. I’m sure of it.”

“It’s bomb guy,” Stich says, eyeing me.

“Bomb guy?” Dice rolls his eyes. “Way to make the man sound like a terrorist.”

Mime grins.

“We saw you on the news after shit went down at the high school. They were hailing you both as a hero and a hindrance, depending on who the media were interviewing.” Smoke chuckles

“Yeah, the cops are not our favorite people, and the feeling is mutual.”

“I hear that,” Smoke mutters.

“You guys want a drink?”

“Beer for me,” Stitch says. Mime nods, prompting Stitch to speak up again. “Make that two.”

“Water for me,” Smoke says. I give him a look, but he just shrugs. “I’m eight years sober.”

“Nice. Can’t imagine how hard it is to be a teetotaler in an MC.”

He cracks a smile. “If it’s easy, it ain’t worth having,” he states before his eyes drift over my shoulder. “Unless it’s women, of course.”

I turn to see a couple of the club girls giggling as they look over.

Havoc laughs. “Help yourselves, boys. Mi casa es su casa. I’ll have a prospect bring your drinks over.”

Smoke rubs his hands together. “Don’t mind if I do.”

I get up when I see Lil and Legs walk in from the back. Lil has Hero in her arms, while Legs is carrying a couple of boxes. I walk over and take the boxes from her with a scowl. “Why didn’t you guys shout for me?” That’s when it registers how light the boxes are.

“Pretty sure I can handle a few boxes of baby clothes, Powers, but thanks,” Legs chuckles, shaking her head. “You okay with Hero while I run these over to the storage shed?” she asks Lil.

“Absolutely. He smells so good, I’m not sure I’ll ever want to give him back.”

“You wouldn’t be saying that if you smelled him at five am this morning,” she calls over her shoulder as she walks away.

I move closer and kiss Lil’s temple, careful not to wake the kid who looks like he’s found his happy place, sprawled across my woman’s chest. “That’s my happy place too, little man,” I mutter, making Lil roll her eyes.

Her eyes move to the door when Blade walks in with another two unfamiliar men, wearing Carnage cuts. Spotting us, he walks over, his eyes on Lil and Hero as the men follow him.

“Thank god he looks like his mama,” Blade says.

Lil grins. “I’m telling Midas you said that.” She looks at the Carnage guys and smiles gently. There is familiarity between them that I don’t like, so I step closer and slide my hand around her hip.

“Linc, Jeeves, it’s good to see you both,” Lil says quietly.

“Lil, looking beautiful as always.” Jeeves winks at her, making me growl. He looks at me with a shit-eating grin.

Blade sighs. “Don’t fuck with Powers. Lil’s his old lady now. Don’t give the man a reason to remove your teeth—you’re ugly enough as it is.”

Jeeves holds his hands up in surrender. “My apologies. Things have changed since the last time we were here.”

“Yeah, they have,” I snap back. Lil presses the back of her hand to her forehead. I frown. “What’s wrong?”

“All these testosterone fumes are getting to me.”

“Is that right?” I ask, softly in that voice she knows means trouble.

She looks at me with wide eyes as I carefully take Hero from her arms and hand him to Blade, who doesn’t hesitate to lay him over his shoulder.

“Legs will be right back for him. Excuse us for a minute, though. I need to talk to my old lady.”

Blade’s lips twitch as she splutters. “Have at it. I’m gonna go introduce the guys to the others they haven’t met yet.”

“Appreciated,” I mumble, practically dragging Legs across the room and up the stairs to where the bedrooms are.

“What are you doing? I don’t have a room up here anymore, remember?”

“We don’t need a room for what I’m going to do to you,” I warn her, dragging her to the end of the corridor before pushing the door open that leads to the fire escape. “We need an audience,” I murmur into her ear as the door closes behind us, locking us out.

She grips the railing as I move up behind her. Looking down over the edge at the backyard, you can see half of the table and chairs set up out here, and the outdoor kitchen that Sunshine had installed. Nobody is cooking there yet, but with Midas’s guys due in tomorrow, it’s only a matter of time before an impromptu party breaks out. That’s just bikers for you—making the best of a bad situation.

“You can’t be serious?”

I laugh as my hands move to her hips. “When are you going to learn? I’m always fucking serious when it comes to you.”

“You said you’d punish me if I talked shit about myself, but I didn’t.”

“No, you didn’t, but you mocked your man who’s feeling a little territorial. Tell me, trickster, did you sleep with either of them?”

“What? No, of course not. They’re not Ravens.”

“They look at you like they know what you taste like.”

“Some club girls might be happy to take on visiting club brothers. But in case you didn’t notice, I have trust issues. There was some flirting, a kiss or two, but that was it.”

I don’t say anything as I reach around and pop open the button on her jeans and lower the zipper. I press my lips to her ear. “You trust me?”

She hesitates for a beat before she nods.

“Gonna need the words, Lil.”

“I trust you, Kieren.”

Hearing my name on her lips does something to me every fucking time. A rumble moves through my body, a sound that can only be described as pure male satisfaction. “Hands on the railing,” I order. A few of the brothers stroll outside, drinks in hand, as they gather around the tables.

I hear her short intake of air before she does as I ask. Not giving her a chance to question shit, I peel her jeans and underwear down to her thighs, the material so tight it pins her legs in place.

“Powers,” she murmurs, a thread of worry in her voice. I slide my hands over every inch of her exposed skin, making her shiver.

“I’ve got you. Eyes on the brothers, Lil.” Reaching around her, I slowly unfasten the strip of tiny buttons holding her shirt together and let it fall open. I slip my hand inside and find bare skin. “Naughty girl not wearing a bra. It’s like you were wanting me to do this.” I pinch one of her hard nipples, making her gasp.

She’s not loud, not by any stretch of the imagination. But Toot looks up from where he’s sitting, and his eyes land on Lil. They lock on me for a moment before they fall back to Lil. He licks his lips and leans back, his hands slipping under the table.

I free my rock-hard cock and pull her hips back so she’s bent at a more accessible angle. “Look at Toot. He knows exactly what we’re doing.”

“Fuck!” she curses softly. I slide two fingers inside her to gauge how ready she is, and find her dripping.

“You like the thought of him watching us, don’t you?” I thrust my fingers in and out of her. With how wet she is, the noise can only be described as obscene.

“Fuck, trickster. I wanted to drag this out, but I need to be inside you.”

“Yes, fuck me please!” she moans, grinding down onto my hand.

I slip my fingers free and stick them into my mouth, the taste of her exploding on my tongue. I cover my cock with her juices and stroke myself for a moment before I line myself up and push my way inside her.

We both groan at the sensation. “Nothing will ever beat the feeling of gliding home inside you,” I tell her as I slide her hair from her shoulder and drag my lips up her neck to the hollow behind her ear. She judders at the touch of my lips against that sensitive spot, making me grin.

“Can you see his hand moving? You think he’s fucking his fist, pretending it’s you?”

She curses at my words, or maybe it’s because I thrust into her deep enough for her to taste me.

“He knows how good it feels inside your slick heat. He’s wishing he was me right now because he knows he’ll never get to feel your tight pussy wrapped around him again.”

I fuck her harder, my hands gripping her hips tightly as she pushes back into me, meeting me thrust for thrust.

“His hand is moving faster now. I think he’s close,” I murmur to her.

I reach around and slide my hand between her legs so I can stroke her slippery clit. With her legs trapped by the fabric of her jeans, she has no choice but to stay as she is and take everything I give her like a good girl.

“I hope he remembers how you smell, how you taste, how you feel, because that’s all he’ll have from now on—dirty memories and a palm full of cum. You’re mine now, Lil, and nobody else gets to have you but me.”

She throws her head back and comes with a whimper. If I kiss her, I’ll taste blood from where she’s bitten her lip to silence her screams. Her pussy grips my dick so hard, I barely manage to bite back my own scream as I pour myself inside her, filling her to the brim.

I rest my head between her shoulder blades as I catch my breath. She turns her head to look at me, her face flushed, her eyes alight with arousal. “I have no idea what lesson I was supposed to learn this time. Perhaps you should show me again?”

I throw my head back and laugh, drawing more attention from below. A few cat calls sound out, but neither of us truly cares. I ease Lil’s jeans back over her hips and fasten the button.

“Trust me, trickster, anytime you need a reminder, I’m more than happy to oblige.”

She turns her body to face me, throwing her arms around my neck. Her bare chest pressing against me is enough for my cock to perk up at the thought of round two. When I spot Toot over her shoulder giving me a thumbs-up, I decide that fucker has had enough of watching my woman fall apart. This next round will be just for us.

I push her back against the wall, out of view from those below, and take her mouth in a kiss so hot I’m surprised our lips don’t catch fire.

“How’d you feel about wall sex?” I murmur with a grin, making her chuckle.

“Huge fan.”

“Well, what the lady wants…” My lips skim down her jaw as I grab both of her wrists in one of my hands and pin them to the wall about her head.

“…The lady gets.”

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Chapter Twenty-Six

LIL

I HOLD the letter Lauren left me, reread the words of a woman I only briefly met, and feel the same sorrow I did the first time. What a waste of a life. I feel jaded in this area myself, but I only had myself to worry about. She had a helpless child being used as a pawn in a dangerous game she never wanted to play.

The dried tear stains practically pulse with pain as I run my fingers over them. Some people will think she took the coward's way out, leaving other people to fix her problems. But I don't see it that way at all. Taking a life is never easy, even when it's your own. The despair she must have felt, the hopelessness, and all without a single guarantee that it would even work.

"You okay?"

I yelp when Powers speaks from the doorway. Lucy lifts her head from where it was resting on my ankle, looks at her dad, and goes back to sleep, knowing he poses no threat to me.

"You scared me."

"I called your name three times. I thought you heard me."

"Sorry. I was miles away."

"Tink said you got a call from the cops?"

"The chief himself called. I about peed my pants," I admit as he moves to sit on the bed beside me.

"What did he want?"

“To tell me that he has suspended Smith and Jacks, pending a review. He also said I was cleared of any wrongdoing regarding James and that the FBI agents had returned to their offices.”

“Took them fucking long enough. And what exactly were they clearing you of? You didn’t fucking do anything wrong,” he huffs.

“Well, I did impersonate someone, which is technically a crime. Especially as I killed said person, which is also a crime.”

He rolls his eyes, unperturbed by my words. “They don’t know that, though. What they do know is that the guy they’re taking money from is the guy they’re supposed to be putting behind bars.”

I shrug. As long as they stay away from me, I don’t care what they do.

“How did the phone call lead to you reading Lauren’s letter again?”

Sighing, I look up at him. “I don’t really know how to explain it. I feel so incredibly sad for her.”

“I get that, but Rebecca’s settling in well with Kruger and Delphi. It’s what Lauren wanted, right?”

I look at him. “What she wanted was to love her child without persecution or restriction.”

He sighs and slides his hand around my shoulders, pulling me closer until I rest my head on his arm.

“I’m trying to figure out what to do with the letter. I can’t throw it away. That feels like a violation somehow. Maybe I should give it to Kruger and Delphi. I’m not sure what they’re going to tell Rebecca, but perhaps she’ll want to see this when she’s older. Is it something she should see? I don’t know.”

“Trust them to know what’s best for her. I agree they should have it. I don’t like coming home and seeing you read it. That’s selfish, I know, but my only concern is you, not with a woman who, after a lifetime of unrest, is finally at peace.”

I sign and fold the letter back up. “I guess you’re right.” I lift the flap of the envelope to slide the letter back in when I notice something written on the inside. I open the envelope wider and frown. “Powers?”

“Hmm?”

“Look at this. Lauren wrote a series of numbers on the inside of the envelope. I didn’t notice them before. I mean, who pays attention to the inside of an envelope?” I babble as he takes it from me and looks them over. “That looks like a bank account number, right?”

“Yeah, and a routing number.”

“But what’s this?” I point to the two-digit number underneath before it dawns on us at the same time.

“Safe deposit box.”

Powers jumps off the bed and helps me up. “I need to get this to G.”

“I’m coming with you,” I tell him, putting the letter in the nightstand drawer.

He doesn’t argue. He gives Lucy a stroke before taking my hand and leading me downstairs.

“I need to grab my phone, too. I want to call Delphi and Greer.”

“It might not be anything, and Greer—”

“Might have the key and not know it. But I’ll start with Delphi first. This letter was in Rebecca’s backpack after all, so maybe there’s a key in there too.”

“Good point.”

I slip on my flip-flops and grab my phone from the counter before heading to the door, which Powers holds open for me. I hit the contact for Delphi and tap my fingers against my thigh as I wait for her to pick up. I’m just about to hang up when the call connects.

“Lil? Is everything okay?”

“Yes, I think so. I’m sorry to bother you at work.” I explain what I found. “So I was wondering if you found anything in Rebecca’s backpack or if you might be able to ask her if she knows anything about a key.”

“Let me go ask, and I’ll call you back.”

“Thanks, Delphi.”

“No worries.”

I hang up and look up at Powers. “She’s going to call me back.”

“Alright, let’s find G and see what he says.”

“I’m nervous. Why am I nervous? The cops are already after this guy. What difference could any of this make?”

“I don’t know, but Lauren obviously thought it was important enough to make sure you got it.”

I nod. We head into the saloon and find it almost empty.

“Anyone seen G?” Powers calls out.

“He’s with Amity. She’s shooting on location today, and G had a bad feeling, so he rode up to join her along with Viddy as backup.” Crane yells back.

“Who the fuck is Viddy?” Powers frowns.

“Someone who owed Chaos demons a favor, apparently. She’s been digging into the doc to see what she can find, and this woman has contacts that you wouldn’t believe.”

“Shit.” He runs his fingers through his hair as I take in who is here. Crane, Probe, Mack, Toot, Dice, and Hoops. Conan and Blade are playing pool. Tick is behind the bar, but everyone else must be at work.

“What about Havoc?”

“Talk of the devil, and he shall appear,” Toot says, looking behind me. I turn and see him walk in with Tink.

“Hannibal’s guys are fifteen minutes out,” he says, before looking at Powers and me. “What’s wrong?”

I explain everything I found, but before I can finish, my cell phone rings. Seeing it’s Delphi, I answer it. “Hey, Delphi, you find anything?”

“I asked Becca, and I kid you not, she opened up the back of her doll where the batteries go, and pulled out a key.”

“Shit. Okay, I’ll pass it on. Thanks.”

“No problem.”

I hang up and nod at Havoc. “Becca has the key.”

He licks his lower lip as he thinks. “Dice, Toot, Mack, and Hoops, I want you to ride to The Book Nook and grab the key. Mack and Toot, ride ahead and take it to G. He never leaves home without his laptop. Him and Viddy can figure it out while on set. Stay and act as backup, and call me the second they have shit figured out. Hoops and Dice, I want one of you to stay behind and keep an eye on The Book Nook, but I’d feel better having Delphi and Rebecca here, so I want one of you to bring them back in the truck.”

You got it,” Mack says, walking over. I hand him the envelope with the numbers on it. He takes it from me with a nod.

“You got a bad feeling too, Pres?” Toot asks, looking at Havoc.

“Yeah, maybe I’m paranoid and G’s rubbing off on me, but I’m not gonna risk it. The Carnage and Purgatory boys are patrolling the town without their cuts. I doubt James will know them, so they’ll blend in easily. And if shit does go down, then we have boots on the ground ready to pull people out if necessary.

“Probe, Crane? Circus is working a job up at Crenshaw. He has his construction crew with him, but I don’t trust them to have his back the way

we will.”

“Plus, he won’t be pissed if it’s us, because we do what we want anyway.” Probe shrugs. Circus has been struggling because all he wants is to grieve in silence, but at the moment, nobody is safe alone.

They head off as Havoc scans the room, spotting Con carrying in a crate of soda. “Con?”

Con looks over at his name being yelled. “Yes, Pres?”

“I need you to fetch Theo early. I don’t care what excuse you use. I want him back here.”

Legs walks in with Hero in her arms, a worried expression on her face.

“You okay?” I ask as Havoc keeps barking out orders.

“I can’t get hold of Midas. Hero has been up most of the night with an ear infection, so it’s not like him not to answer when he knows our boy is sick.”

Now Havoc isn’t the only one with a bad feeling. I look over at Powers, who zeros in on me like a homing beacon.

“What’s wrong?”

“Legs can’t get a hold of Midas.”

Powers doesn’t tell her she’s overreacting. He pulls out his cell phone, and when it just rings, he ends the call and tries another number. Shaking his head, he calls someone else. The others must clue in that something’s wrong, but before they can ask questions, he barks into his phone.

“Kruger, can you patch into the cameras at the racetrack? I can’t reach anyone there, and Legs is worried.”

He puts the call on speaker. “Shit, gimme two seconds. Hold on.” I vaguely hear Kruger muttering something to Nathan before cursing spills out over the phone. Powers takes it off speaker and steps back.

Legs grips my arm, and I let her. Her nails are going to leave bloody half-moon scars.

“I’m on my way.” He disconnects and speaks to Havoc, but his eyes are locked on Legs. “There’s been an explosion. Emergency services are on their way. No news about casualties just yet.”

“Oh my god,” Legs whimpers as she sways. I reach for Hero just as Tina and Rose rush over and grab her. I give them grateful looks as I cuddle Hero close.

Powers cups Legs’s face. “That man would crawl through fire to get home to you. Do not give up on him now. I’m going to head down and find

him, I swear it."

"Okay, Powers."

"Good girl." He kisses her forehead before turning to me with an apology in his eyes.

I swallow down my fear. This is who he is. I grab his cut with my free hand and yank him down for a quick kiss before whispering against his lips. "Go, but be safe."

"You're not going alone," Havoc insists. "This fucker is—"

Havoc's phone rings just as Tink's does. I swallow, feeling the pressure tighten around my ribs.

"God, not again," Tink cries out.

"We're on our way," Havoc snaps, his eyes wild. "Someone tried to grab Star. Ambros and Citi are an hour away at Citi's therapy appointment."

I grit my teeth. Ambros insists on going with her because of what happened with James, but if anything happens to Star…

"Go, I'll hold down the fort here," Blade tells Havoc, who swallows and nods, his eyes going to Powers.

"Make sure Kruger meets you there, and take a fucking prospect."

"On it." Powers leans over and kisses me hard once more. "Grab Lucy. I'll feel safer if she's with you."

"Okay. Please be careful."

"I'm coming home, I promise. I love you."

I swallow hard, choking on all the things left unsaid. "I love you too."

He takes off. Havoc and Neveah follow right behind him.

Conan walks over, scoops up Legs like she weighs nothing, and carries her to the sofa. I walk over to them and place Hero in her lap, knowing he's the only one who's going to ground her.

"He's coming home."

"You don't know that he—"

I cup her face. "He's coming home," I tell her softly. She swallows and nods. "Say it."

"He's coming home," she whispers.

I lean over and hug her, my heart in my eyes as I look at Conan, sending up a silent prayer that he's okay because I'm not sure Legs will cope without him.

"Tina, Rose, round up any other bunny that's here," Blade orders before turning to me. "Get Lucy and get back here fast. I want all of you to head to

the clinic at the first sign of trouble. After everything that went down with Khan, Havoc has it reinforced. There are panic buttons in each of the rooms. Hit one, and the building will go into lockdown. I'm talking about metal shutters covering the doors and windows. Nobody can force their way in, because you can only deactivate it from the inside, like a classic panic room."

"You think trouble's coming here?"

"I'm not taking any chances."

The phone at the bar rings, so Blade hurries over to answer it. "Alright, I'm on my way." He looks over at us. "Delphi and Star are here. As are Hannibal's guys," he says with relief. "I'm gonna head down to meet them and fire off a text for Smoke and his guys to head back. I'll send Star and Delphi up. Grab Lucy and be quick."

I nod and head out as Conan says, "I've got them, Blade, but where the fuck is Inigo?"

"He's covering for Ambros at the gym. Give him a call and tell him to watch for trouble." Blade heads off as Conan pulls out his cell.

I bite my lip and wait, praying the man is okay. When the call connects, Conan sighs with relief. I don't hear what he says as I jog down to the apartment. I shove the door open and call for Lucy, who must hear the panic in my voice because she comes bounding down the stairs and heads right for me.

"Good girl. Come on, baby, let's go."

I yank the door closed behind us as I run back up to the saloon, almost losing my flip-flops on the way. I just make it inside when a loud explosion has me stumbling. My eyes connect with Conan's for a second before he jumps into action. "Everyone to the clinic now," he roars, grabbing Hero from Legs and picking up a scared Rebecca with the other arm.

I follow after them, Lucy running beside me. When I hear someone cry out behind me, I turn and see that Glory has fallen over. But before I can turn back, I hear Blade yelling, "We've got her. Go."

I keep going, and when I get to the clinic, I hurry inside with the others. Conan hands off Hero to Legs and Rebecca to Delphi. I usher them into the back treatment room and turn to Rose and Tina as someone runs in with Glory thrown over his shoulder.

"Thanks, man," Conan tells him before he hits the panic button. The shutters slide down, and I take a shaky breath, praying that everyone else

makes it to safety, too.

“You can put her down here,” Conan tells the biker wearing a Raven’s Soul cut with the patch on the back, saying he’s a prospect from Hannibal’s club.

“You got it,” he replies, almost jovially.

I freeze solid, ice forming in my lungs, before he turns around and I come face-to-face with the evil eyes that have haunted me. Before I can so much as scream, he pulls his gun and shoots Conan twice before turning the gun on Lucy, who launches herself at him.

“No!” I scream, but it’s too late. He fires another two rounds into Lucy, who drops to the ground like a stone.

Tina and Rose are screaming before he shoots a bullet into Rose’s head. She collapses, her scream cutting off as he sends his next bullet into Tina’s stomach. I turn and run, knowing he won’t stop until he’s killed everyone here. I run to the treatment room, tip the table over, and scream at them to hide as I grab a scalpel from the drawer. I whirl around to face him as he enters.

The kids are screaming, and Delphi and Legs are crying as they try to shield the kids with their bodies.

“Did you miss me, Lilac?” When I don’t answer, James looks at me, his eyes roving over my body in a disapproving manner. “Looks like I need to fuck the insolence out of you, wife.”

I grit my teeth and snarl, my fist tightening around the scalpel. “I’m not your wife. I’m not your anything.”

“See, that’s where you’re wrong. And when I’ve finished wiping out everyone who helped you evade me, you’ll remember all the reasons why staying with me is the only option.” He swings the gun toward Delphi but freezes when a little voice cries out.

“Daddy, no!”

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Chapter Twenty-Seven

POWERS

I GRAB SCOOTER, jump on my bike, and head straight to the racetrack. Traffic is insane, so it feels like it takes forever to get there. When we pull up next to the ambulance and a couple of cop cars, I jump off and ignore the shouts for me to stop. I can see smoke but no fire, at least not from this vantage point, but I don't let my guard down. I turn to the prospect following me. "Keep your eyes peeled. I don't trust that someone isn't lying in wait to jump us."

"I've got your back, Powers. No worries."

I nod and keep going, heading for Midas's office first, which is at the back of the lot. The closer I get, the more smoke I can see. I reach out to touch the door handle, half expecting it to burn my hand, but it's cool to the touch. Shoving the door open, I search the room and curse when I find it empty. I jog to the next room and keep going until we get to the viewing port. I look down onto the track and see a car and a couple of garages on fire.

I squint, trying to see through the smoke, and catch a glimpse of a Ravens Soul cut. "There! We need to get down to the track."

We run out of the room just as firefighters run in. "It looks like the explosion came from the track. I think the smoke is coming through the vents," I tell them.

A couple of the firefighters split off to follow us, but the others remain —their job is to verify my claims, and I don't blame them for that. It's

purely a guess on my part.

It’s chaos when we make it downstairs. I can hear crying and moaning. Some people are injured and are being helped by others. I run over to where I last saw Midas and spot him leaning into the passenger seat of a mangled car. I reach him and yank on his cut. He whirls around but relaxes a fraction when he sees me. I take in his soot-covered face and the large gash above his eye. But his eyes themselves look clear and responsive, so I doubt he has a head injury.

“What the fuck happened?”

“One of the cars exploded as it pulled into the garage. We’d just had the safety car out, so the pit lane was full of people wanting to change tires.”

“Whose car exploded?”

“The safety car.”

“What the fuck?”

“I don’t know, but I’ve got a driver trapped behind the wheel. Some debris fell onto the hood and is crushing him. I’ve got a couple of dead mechanics and a dozen more injured. Help where you can, yeah?”

“I’m on it. The fire department is here, as are the paramedics.”

“Thank fuck. I lost my phone somewhere, but people were having trouble getting calls out anyway.”

I frown, looking around, feeling the pieces shift and move in my head. “Shit, shit, shit.” I jerk out my cell phone and dial Kruger.

“I’m ten minutes out,” he answers.

“No, don’t bother. Midas is fine. All the emergency services are here. There’s nothing else you can do.”

I’ve stepped away. Midas swaps places with the prospect, telling him to keep the driver talking, and walks toward me.

“Look, the safety car exploded. Right when it could have caused the most damage,” I tell Kruger.

“You’re thinking it’s not an accident.”

“No. I’m thinking it was planned and that someone likely had a camera in here and knew exactly when to blow it.”

Kruger sighs. “That tracks. We were waiting for the next hit. Midas must be pissed.”

I look at the man who is so far beyond pissed it’s not even funny. “He lost people today,” I say quietly.

Kruger curses. “Fuck this asshole. What is the point in all of this? Huh? I mean, he’s never gonna get to Lil this way, not unless he’s hoping we’ll all blame her and kick her out, leaving her vulnerable.”

“That will never happen. If I have to chain her to the bed, so be it. She’s safe at the clubhouse.” A wave of nausea washes over me as more puzzle pieces move and shift. “Kruger. There was an issue at Star’s school. Some guy tried to collect her. Havoc and Tink were heading there as I was leaving.”

“You want me to meet them? He knows better than to not take a man with him.”

Is that what I’m feeling? Worry for the club president?

“Hold on, Kruger, I’m calling him now. I’ll patch you in.”

“Put it on speaker,” Midas orders. I do as he asks and wait for Havoc to pick up.

Instead of Havoc, Tink answers. “Hey, Powers, is Midas okay?”

“I’m fine, Tink. My guys, not so much.”

“I’m sorry, Midas, but I’m glad you’re okay. Did you let Legs know? She was so worried.”

“I lost my phone, but I’ll call her now.”

“Tink, is Star okay?” I interrupt, before I remember to link Kruger in.

“She’s fine. It was the weirdest thing, though. The school had no idea what we were talking about when we got here.”

And that’s when the feeling consumes me completely. “Divide and conquer,” I murmur, my eyes snapping to Midas as it dawns on him, too. “Tink put me on speaker.”

“What’s going on?” Havoc asks.

“It’s a fucking trap. He’s heading to the compound.”

“He won’t get far. Hannibal’s men are there, not to mention Blade and Conan.”

“None of whom is bombproof,” I remind him.

“Fuck, we’re on our way.”

“I am too,” Kruger calls out before disconnecting.

I look at Midas. “I gotta go.”

“I’m coming too. My woman and kid are there, Powers. I can’t lose them,” he tells me. As much as he loves this place, he’d watch it burn to ash before he chose it over his family.

“Let’s go!”

I jog to Scooter. “There may be trouble back at the clubhouse. Stay here and help out. I’ll send men as soon as I know what’s happening.”

“Go. I’ve got his.”

Midas slaps him on the shoulder as we run around, back into the building, ignoring the yells for us to stop yet again. I jump on my bike and wait for Midas to ride around from the lot on his, and then we take off toward the clubhouse like bats out of hell.

Using the Bluetooth speaker, I call Lil. She doesn’t answer, so I call Legs next, knowing they’ll be together. I may be overreacting, but this way I can reassure her that Midas is okay, too. Only she doesn’t pick up either.

With a growl, I call Blade, who thankfully does pick up. “Is he okay?”

“Midas is fine. Lil and the girls?”

“Locked down at the clinic with Conan, that dog of yours, and a prospect from Hannibal’s chapter.”

I let out a relieved sigh. “Thank fuck. I thought his aim might be to separate us and attack the clubhouse when Lil would be vulnerable.”

“Oh, I’m sure that was his plan. Fucker rigged the front gate to explode. But he obviously didn’t count on Hannibal’s guys arriving just in the nick of time. All the women and kids were taken to the clinic the second it happened. Only injury was one of the bunnies spraining her ankle on one of her stripper heels.”

“Okay, good. Midas and I are on our way back now. So are Kruger, Havoc, and Tink. Can you tell Legs that Midas is alright? I couldn’t reach her or Lil.”

“Not surprised with those steel shutters. I’ll see what I can do, but I’d rather they stay in their safe house until we find this fucker.”

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I reluctantly agree, knowing he’s right, and hang up so I can focus on riding. I pull up just as Havoc and Tink do, with Midas right behind us. Shaking my head, I take in the blown-out gate and crumbling wall.

“I’m gonna kill this motherfucker with my bare hands,” Havoc snarls, keeping Tink tucked under his arm. I move in front of her as Midas takes up the rear, protecting our first lady from potential threats. I spot Ferris and Snoopy as I pull my gun and scan the area.

“This asshole make himself known yet?”

“Still looking,” Ferris replies.

“Let’s get Nevaeh up to the clinic with the others,” Havoc calls out just as I hear footsteps behind me. I turn as Midas does, but lower my gun when I see it’s Kruger, Theo, and Con. Theo looks spooked, but he’s sandwiched between Kruger and Con in much the same way we have done with Tink.

“Theo, with Tink,” Kruger orders as he and Con step up to expand our protective circle.

Theo towers over Tink now, so when he steps in front of her, I’m not surprised. The kid has a protective streak that could give Con a run for his money.

“Where’s Blade and Conan?”

“Blade was here, but he went with some of the others to track this motherfucker down. Conan’s with the women,” Snoopy tells Havoc, who nods.

“Alright, well, find him. Any casualties?”

The guy shakes his head, and Havoc sighs in relief. If I hadn’t stolen Scooter from the gate on the way to Midas, it might be a very different story.

We move slowly but methodically, checking every space we pass in case this fucker is hiding out, waiting to make his move. As we make our way up the slope, I hear voices and indicate for us to move to the alleyway between the apartments for cover. We hold our collective breaths, guns at the ready, until I recognize Blade’s voice.

Havoc signals for everyone to stand down. “Blade, it’s Havoc. We’re coming out,” he announces, so we don’t get shot in the damn heads. Havoc steps out first, then signals for the rest to follow.

“You guys see anything?” Blade asks, his eyes darting around, Smoke and Mime beside him doing the same.

“Nothing. Fucker must be hiding.”

“I don’t know. I got G to tap into the camera feed, and so far, he can’t find him. A couple of cameras are down, thanks to the explosion, but the rest are working.” Blade grunts.

“Either he slipped in when the explosion happened, and he’s lying in wait somewhere, or he used the explosion as a distraction,” Mime says.

“Well, this fucker has proved he can get in and out regardless of cameras. He only gets caught if he wants to get caught,” Havoc growls.

“And as for distractions, I thought this was the distraction. Get everyone away from the clubhouse so it’s easier to grab Lil. She definitely made it inside the clinic, right?” I ask Blade. No matter what he says, I still feel like I’m about to crawl out of my skin.

“I confirmed with G myself. Lil, Delphi, Legs, and the kids went in first with Conan Rose and Tina. Hannibal’s prospect went in next, carrying Glory on my order,” Blade says, running his fingers through his hair.

“This prospect—he on the level? After Pig’s ties to James, I’m not taking any chances,” Havoc states.

“He came around for years as a hangaround. Sound guy. We tried to convince him to join for a while, but he was grieving the family he lost in a car accident. He was the only survivor, having lost his wife, son, and baby daughter. He wouldn’t put anyone through that,” Snoopy says, folding his arms, daring us to argue.

“Turns out the main reason he wouldn’t join was that he hated Khan and Driller. He had no problem prospecting under Hannibal,” Ferris adds.

“What’s his name again?”

“Tilt. But he was hanging around when you were there and went by Ash at the time.”

I nod, remembering the guy who sat at the bar in the clubhouse on party night, more interested in the beer than the club women. He had those haunted kinda eyes that had me assuming he’d served time overseas. It was a look I saw in my team as well as myself. The echo of something burned into your retinas that you couldn’t unsee, no matter the atrocities that came afterward. There was always something that etched itself into your soul—a penance you must carry for strapping on a loaded gun, perhaps.

“Yeah, I remember him, and I don’t see him having anything to do with James either, especially if he has nothing left to lose. James wouldn’t have an angle to work with him.”

“You’re forgetting Hannibal would never send him here if he didn’t trust him one hundred percent. He cared for Lil, too, in his own messed-up way, of course,” Tink states.

Ferris and Snoopy grin at that as Blade and Havoc seem to have a silent conversation nobody else can understand.

“Everyone into the warehouse. Now,” Havoc orders, making Tink frown. None of us argue, hearing the urgency in his voice. Nobody asks questions until we’re inside.

“What’s wrong?” Tink asks.

Havoc covers her mouth with his hand. “I’m wondering if we’re playing into his hands because we’re acting like Lil’s his target.”

“Lil is his target,” I state.

“Yeah, she’s his endgame. But if he can’t get to her, then he sure as shit didn’t go through all this for nothing. He’ll want to leave a big impression, one that Lil will struggle with the aftermath of.”

“That would be the women and children, most of whom are safe, though,” Tink says softly.

“I’m not taking any chances, Tink. You and Theo get into the corner, now. It’s dark back there. No one will see you unless they’re actively looking. I want you to stay out of sight. Con, you guard them with your fucking life.”

“You don’t want us to go to the clinic?” Theo questions.

“If they open it, they’ll be vulnerable,” Havoc says.

Theo heads toward the darkest corner, Con following behind him, but Tink grabs Havoc’s arm. “What if you’re wrong? What if Theo and I aren’t the next best thing? What if he aims to bring the MC to its knees? The only way to do that is to take out the current and former presidents.”

I’m not the only one who curses. That never dawned on any of us.

“Maybe you two should hide too, keep Tink and Theo safe while the rest of us keep searching. Why take the fucking risk?” Midas says when Havoc starts to argue.

Before anyone else can comment, the sound of gagging catches our attention.

“Fuck!” Con curses, before wrapping his arm around Theo and turning away.

“What’s wrong?” Havoc barks, practically throwing Tink into my arms to guard as he rushes forward with a snarling Midas on his ass.

“Got a body here, Pres,” Con says as Theo takes a few deep breaths.

“Who?” Blade snarls, and Snoopy and Ferris move closer to him. Smoke and Stitch move closer to Tink and me, guns drawn, ready.

“Dunno, Pres. He’s not wearing a cut, sorry,” Con says, moving Theo farther away.

“Let me check,” Midas orders, shoving his way past Havoc. He crouches, disappearing from view for a few minutes before he stands back up. His eyes move to Havoc, and he shakes his head. “Bullet between the eyes. He’s cool to touch, but no rigor. I don’t recognize him…” His voice trails off as he looks over to Blade, or more specifically, the guys beside him.

Ferris and Snoopy tense, knowing what he’s implying. I let go of Tink, who hurries over to Havoc, and move behind her so I can see what we’re dealing with. Smoke and Mime guard her back while Ferris and Snoopy flank me. I feel them bracing themselves for the inevitable.

I stare at the guy, confused, for a minute before I look at Blade. “I thought you said the prospect—Tilt, or Ash, or whatever the fuck his name is—was in the clinic with the women?”

“I did. He is.”

“Then explain how he’s lying here dead?”

“I don’t understand. I handed Glory to him myself. If that wasn’t Tilt, then…”

The look of horror that crosses his face must mirror mine, but I don’t have a second to study it. I take off toward the clinic, running as hard as I can. While we’ve been out here chasing a ghost, Lil’s been locked in the clinic with a madman.

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Chapter Twenty-Eight

LIL

"REBECCA?"

James cocks his head as if unsure that he's actually seeing her. Delphi, edging in front of her, urges Rebecca to stay back. Even as tears run down her face, she stands strong and defiant. She knows if she dies now, it will destroy Kruger and Theo, and the little girl cowering behind her will be haunted for the rest of her days.

"Come here now, Rebecca!" he snaps, his composure cracking now that a wrench has been thrown into his plans.

"No, Daddy, you're being scary," Rebecca yells.

His jaw clenches in response, his angry gaze locking on Delphi's. I take a deep, steady breath. If I'm going to do something, it needs to be now.

The only two people I'm willing to sacrifice are him and me. Anyone else is unacceptable.

Hero starts wailing, but Legs keeps him on the floor behind her, willing to take a hundred bullets if needed to protect him.

"You hand Rebecca over to me now, or this bullet is going in your head," James snarls at Delphi.

She refuses to back down and glares at him right back. "Go fuck yourself."

I see his finger tighten on the trigger before I scream his name. His eyes widen when he sees I'm holding a scalpel against my throat.

"If you hurt anyone else, I'll kill myself. Then you can never have me."

“Lil no,” Legs gasps, but I don’t take my eyes from James’s manic ones.

“You’re bluffing,” he tells me, taking a step closer to me.

“I never bluff. I don’t want to live if everyone I care about dies. They don’t deserve to die because of me, and I refuse to be the one left behind. If they go, I go. I won’t let you take anything else from me, James.”

I can feel my hand shaking, and he can see it. His lips curl into a cocky smirk. He’s so confident that my fear of him will hold me back that he turns to Delphi and raises the gun again. This time he’ll do it if I don’t do something drastic.

Legs screams as I dig the scalpel into my skin and start to drag it across my throat.

At Legs’s scream, James spins around, horror bleaching his face bone-white as I feel blood run down my neck. “Goodbye, James,” I tell him softly. This is it. One way or another, I’m dying here today, or he is.

“No! NO!” he yells, Delphi forgotten as he runs to me, wrapping his hand around mine, stopping me from pulling the blade any farther. “I won’t let you go, not now, not ever,” he curses, yanking the bloody scalpel away and tossing it to the ground before he pulls me against his chest.

I move my hand from behind my back and reach up as if to hug him, tipping my head back in time for him to press his lips to mine. Tears run down our faces as I plunge the syringe into his neck and push the plunger. He freezes, eyes wide.

“You don’t get to decide that. Not anymore,” I whisper against his lips.

He stumbles back, and his eyes land on the syringe in my hand. “What?” he slurs as I stagger toward him. I reach for the gun in his hand and slip it into mine. He collapses to his knees.

“Hannibal ran this clinic before he left. The man is an oddity and, as such, liked…odd things. Take this, for instance,” I tap the syringe and smirk. “This is curare. It’s a substance extracted from the leaves and vines of *Chondrodendron tomentosum*, which Hannibal brought back from a run he did somewhere in South America. Have you ever heard of curare, James?”

He collapses to the ground, staring up at the ceiling, fear and confusion in his eyes as I lean over him.

“Indigenous people in South American rainforests use it as a poison on the tips of their arrows and darts when hunting because it paralyzes their prey.” I crouch as his breathing grows shallow. “Taken orally, it can act as a

muscle relaxant, but if it enters your bloodstream?" I shake my head and grin. "Death by asphyxiation. And I can't think of anyone who deserves it more than you.

"So as you lie there, unable to move, feeling weak and helpless, remember this—You. Did. Not. Win. You'll die here today, a pathetic excuse for a man. I'll go on to live a long and happy life with the man I love, and I'll never think of you again."

I get to my feet and walk away, refusing to be the last thing he sees before he dies. He doesn't deserve comfort.

The room sways. Legs rushes over to me and yanks open drawers to grab a dressing, which she presses against my throat. "You stupid, stupid woman," she cries.

"Go check on Conan. He's hurt badly," I warn her as I gather up armfuls of supplies and follow.

"Stay with the kids, Delphi," I call out, not even looking at her. My eyes land on Glory, lying on the bed, eyes open, neck clearly broken. I swallow down my vomit as I drop down beside a pale Tina who is lying on the floor, her hands covering her stomach as she bleeds out.

"Hey, you're gonna be okay," I tell her, pressing a dressing over her wound. The smell is horrendous—the bullet likely tore through her intestines. Her skin is gray and waxy, her eyes glassy, and her lips have a blue tint.

"Hang in there for me, Tina. Help is coming," I tell her, even though it's a lie. I grip her hand tightly and lean over her, pressing a kiss to her. James might not have deserved comfort in death, but Tina does. She's too far gone to make it to the hospital in time, even if help does arrive.

She opens her mouth to whisper something to me, but her words never make it past her lips. Her eyes stare at nothing, her mouth open as her final gasp passes her lips.

"Fuck!" I curse.

"Lil, I need help over here," Legs yells. The worry in her voice forces me to move, grabbing the supplies and running over to where she is crouched over Conan.

The room pitches and sways, and I collapse next to them, my knees hitting the ground with a thump that rattles my bones, but I barely feel the pain. In the back of my head, I worry I'm losing too much blood, but I can't focus on both Conan and me. Right now, he needs me.

His eyes widen when he catches sight of me, but I glare at him. “You clearly haven’t seen yourself,” I snap as I rip open his shirt and see a gunshot wound to the right side of his chest and a ragged one to the left of his stomach, which must be the exit point for the bullet that went into his back.

I press a field dressing to the wound at his side. It doesn’t have the same smell as Tina’s did, which I’m taking as a blessing. But the one in his chest is bleeding profusely. I slap another dressing to his chest and press against it, making him cry out. I apply pressure, my head foggy, my neck throbbing, but I refuse to let his man die.

“Legs, we need help. You need to take this place out of lockdown and call for help,” I tell her, trying to keep my voice steady.

“Shit, I should have thought of that.” She gets to her feet.

“And check on Lucy. She’s been shot too.”

“I’m on it,” she calls out, running to take care of that while I focus on Conan.

His color is rapidly fading, and as I eye the white gauze that’s now soaked red, my fingertips graze the scars left from his chemo port.

“It’s okay, Lil,” Conan says, wrapping his large hand around my wrist. Blood seeps through my fingers as I look into his eyes and see a resigned sort of peace in them.

“No, fuck that. You didn’t beat cancer just to die on me now, asshole.”

He chuckles, blood coating his lips as he does. “You got mean.”

“No, I got mad. I’m not losing anyone else, Conan. I won’t allow it. If you die, so help me god, I’ll follow you to hell and yank your soul right back out again.”

“You think I’m going to hell?” He grins, his teeth pink now. My vision fades for a moment, and all I see is white. I don’t let go of the gauze, though. I don’t let up on the pressure. I pour all I have into this man, hoping I can hold him here long enough for someone to save him.

His eyes slip closed as he smiles. “Conan, stay awake. Hey, Conan!” I curse when I realize his chest isn’t moving. “Come on, Conan, don’t you do this to me. Legs! I need you.”

I start doing chest compressions as Legs rushes over and drops down beside me.

“What can I do?”

“Breathe for him,” I whisper, my head spinning.

She nods, her shaky hands tipping his head back as she uses her fingers to clear his airway and presses her mouth on his. I watch her do two breaths before I resume compressions. “One, two, three,” I count.

I hear a commotion near the door. “Lil!”

At the sound of Powers’s voice, I know everything’s going to be okay. I look over and see him through my bleary eyes. Others file in behind him, but all I see is him.

He takes one look at me and pales. “Baby?”

“I’m okay,” I say. Or I try to, but the words won’t come out. I shake my head and keep pushing on Conan’s chest until I feel hands pulling me away. I try to fight them. If I stop, Conan will die.

“I’ve got him, Lil. I’ve got him.” I hear Blade say, and I know he does. He loves him too. I let go, leaving him in the hands that won’t let him go, and fall into Powers’s arms as he scoops me up.

“Lil? Lil. Stay awake, baby.”

I smile, remembering I said the same thing to Conan. Only he didn’t stay awake, did he? And neither did Tina.

“He killed them. Tina. Rose. Conan. Lucy. He killed them all, but he won’t kill anyone else.”

“Shh, it’s okay, I’ve got you now. Where the fuck is the ambulance?” he roars, his voice cracking with fear.

I reach up blindly and grab his cut. “I couldn’t let him hurt them. I don’t want to leave you, but I couldn’t let him hurt them. It had to be me.” I know he doesn’t understand, but my head is too foggy to explain, so I tell him the only thing left that matters.

“I love you. I’m sorry I’m leaving you again. I wanna stay so bad,” I cry, my head pounding. I can’t keep my eyes open any longer, but I need him to hear me now, in case this is the last chance I get. “You were the best thing that happened to me,” I whisper as I feel something sliding over my head. I can’t open my eyes, but when I feel Powers slip the metal tags into my hand, I know what it is.

He presses his lips to my forehead. “You can’t leave now. You finally found your way home.”

I taste his tears against my lips and feel my own slide over my cheeks.

“I want forever.” I need him to know if I could stay if I would.

“Then live,” he chokes out.

The darkness swallows me whole before I can reply.

* * *

I crack my eyes open and wince. “Bright,” I whisper, trying to sit up so I can reach the lamp.

“Lil?” I look over and see Kruger sitting at the foot of my bed. I frown, my mind taking a while to catch up.

I’m not home. I’m in the hospital—and that’s when everything rushes in like a tsunami of horror unfolding in my mind. I fist my hands. One of them is encased in the first of another. I look over at Powers asleep with his head on the side of the bed, his hand wrapped tightly around mine, refusing to let me go, even in his sleep.

I swallow my tears before I look back at Kruger, who moves closer, taking the seat on the other side of me. He reaches for my free hand.

“Conan?” I whisper, scared to ask.

“He’s gonna be fine. He lost a lot of blood, but miraculously, the bullets hit nothing vital. You kept him alive until we got there to take over. Hell, you ended up being closer to death than he was. What were you thinking?”

“I was thinking I was done. No more losing people, no more running and hiding, no more other girls paying the price for me evading him.” I swallow, the rest coming out as a whisper. “I was thinking there was no way I was going to let him take Delphi away from Theo and you.”

He gets to his feet and leans over me, his lips pressing against my forehead. “Thank you. I’ve thought of a million different ways to say that to you, but none of them come close to being enough. What you did…I’ll never be able to repay you for that. Right now, because of you, my boy is wrapped in my woman’s arm, and Becca is fast asleep with her head in his lap.”

“Anyone—”

“No. Absolutely the fuck not. If you’re about to tell me that anyone would have done the same, then you need a reality check. Only you would cut your own fucking throat to save someone else.”

“And we’ll be having fucking words about that.” I hear from beside me.

I whip my head around to face Powers. “Lucy?”

“She’s gonna be okay too.”

And at that, I burst into tears.

He curses before he climbs onto the bed and pulls me into his arms. “I got you, baby. I’ve got you. I swear I’m never letting you out of my sight

again.”

I sob into his cut as I hear Kruger murmur that he’ll leave us to it.

“You’ve gotta stop crying. You’re killing me,” he whispers as he tips my head back and dries the tears from my cheeks with the pads of his thumbs.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t expect to get another chance with you.”

“You don’t think I’d let you go that easily, do you?”

“You’re not mad at me?”

“Oh, I’m fucking furious. But you’ll have a lifetime to make it up to me, starting with marrying me the second you get out of here. You want a big party afterward, or proper service later, then I’m down, but I’m not going a second longer without you being mine.”

I open my mouth in shock. “You want to marry me?” I knew I was in deep. I can’t seem to get my head around him feeling the same way.

“The only thing I want more than your lips wrapped around my cock is my ring wrapped around your finger.”

A startled laugh bursts out of me, making me grab my throat as the dressing pulls a little.

“Shit, sorry.”

“No, it’s good to laugh. I’m sad about Tina, Rose, and Glory, but I can’t help but feel happy that it’s over. That James is dead, and I’m finally free. He is dead, right?”

“Oh yeah. I don’t know what the fuck was in that syringe. But Delphi gave the cops a story saying James brought it with him. And when he tried to use it on you, you managed to get it from him while he was cutting you, and stabbed him with it. She’ll be in soon to make sure you have your stories straight.”

“Okay, good. I wasn’t sure how I was going to explain what I gave him without incriminating Hannibal.”

“Of course it came from Hannibal,” he huffs out a laugh. “Remind me to send that man a crate of beer.”

I cuddle into him as he lies back, my head on the crook of his shoulder, my hand on his chest. “What happens now?”

“Now we wait for you to get discharged, and then we get married.”

“And then?”

“And then we can do whatever the fuck we want. No more running, no more sacrificing yourself. You get to enjoy every second of your freedom.”

“And you’ll be with me?”

“Every step of the way.”

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Epilogue

1

LIL

I BITE into the burger and moan in delight. Powers scowls at me before adjusting himself. I grin unrepentantly until Greer clears her throat.

"Sorry." I chuckle when she blushes and adjusts her glasses.

"You two need to get a fucking room," Kruger grumbles.

"Since when has that stopped them?" Delphi laughs, her eyes on Theo and Rebecca, who are eating ice cream at the table in the corner.

I shrug. She has a point. If being a club girl has taught me anything, it's to leave your inhibitions at the door.

Greer shakes her head, but not in a way that makes me think she's judging me. She's not used to talking so openly about this kind of stuff. And if talking makes her blush, then she sure as shit never let someone fuck her where others might see.

I stare at her as she focuses on the forms on the table and wonder, not for the first time, what her story is. I know shit went down between her, Toot, and Mack when she was in high school. I know Toot said stupid shit that I'm sure he wishes he could take back, but something tells me there's more to it than that. Or perhaps that was just a part of her story, and the rest was an even bigger shitshow.

She's about as closed off as someone can get while being sweet and nice. When she lifts her head, she slides the papers over to Delphi. "Just

need you both to sign here, and that's the last of it. You were lucky you got Judge Johnson. He still asks me about Theo. That kid made a huge impression on him."

"That kid makes an impression on everyone," Kruger admits.

"How's he doing after everything?" she asks. I look over at Kruger and see him tense. Greer doesn't know all the details, but she knows enough. It was unavoidable, given that she ended up being both Theo and Rebecca's caseworker.

"He's doing okay. That therapist you recommended helped a lot. He liked his old one, but I think he connects more with this one."

"All the kids I send her way love her. I'm glad it worked out. Rebecca's obviously adjusting well, but younger kids tend to bounce back faster than older ones. They don't process things in the same way."

"She still has her weekly session too, but the doctor doesn't think she needs to go so regularly unless her nightmares start back up again," Delphi admits.

"I'm really happy for you guys. I wish all my kids ended up with parents like you two," she says softly.

"Don't say shit like that. Delphi will try taking them all."

"Stop making it sound like I collect children like Pokémon. On a side note, though, we're more than willing to foster any kids that need respite. I can't guarantee I won't get attached, but despite what my husband says, I know I can't keep them all."

Greer looks at Delphi like she hung the moon. "Thanks, Delphi, that's actually really good to know." I hear a crack in her voice, but nobody else seems to have noticed.

Delphi reaches over and squeezes her hand. "I've gotta go. I have a delivery due at The Book Nook this afternoon. It was good seeing you again, Greer. Come by the nook sometime. Pastries on me."

"I will, thanks."

Delphi kisses Kruger as I lean over and steal the discarded pickle off Powers's plate.

"I'll be back in a second. I'm just going to put my to-go order in," Greer says to me before dipping out and heading to the counter.

"Okay, I'm going. Later, guys," Delphi calls out before she hurries over to the kids.

“Congrats, Kruger. Greer’s right, Rebecca and Theo are lucky to have parents like you. Take it from someone who knows.”

He reaches over and hugs me, making Powers growl. “You have your own damn woman. Go hug her.”

Kruger just laughs before he gets to his feet. “I’m taking the kids to the movies. You want to come?”

“I’m due back at the track in less than an hour,” Powers answers.

I shake my head. “I’m meeting Circus over at the shelter. He wants to talk about the renovations.”

Both go quiet at the mention of the Circus. I think everyone hoped that when he offered to work at the women’s shelter, it would keep him busy and help him channel some of his anger into something useful, but the man is becoming increasingly withdrawn.

“I’ll invite him over for pizza later. I can be persuasive when I need to be.”

“She’s not lying,” Powers winks.

Kruger laughs again and starts to walk away. “Catch you both later.”

Powers leans on the table, his eyes on my lips. “I need to fuck my wife before I head back to work.”

“I never get tired of hearing you call me that,” I admit, leaning closer.

He slips his finger underneath the chain hanging around my neck and tugs me closer, his dog tags now closed in his fist as he takes my lips in a scorching kiss.

I’d kiss him forever if it weren’t for the fact that my cell phone rings. I sigh and pull back. Checking the screen, I frown at who it is.

“It’s Lane.”

“Why’s your lawyer calling?”

I shrug before taking the call. “Hey, Lane. What’s up?”

After everything went down with James, the MC moved quickly to protect me. They pulled Lane in from the get-go, and the man stood between me and the Feds like a fucking gladiator ready to cleave their heads from their shoulders. Thankfully, when the contents of the security deposit box were revealed, law enforcement backed off. I don’t know how Lauren got her hands on what she did, but if he’d been alive, it would have been enough to ensure James never saw the light of day again.

Thanks to an innocuous-looking hard drive, G was able to find no end of nefarious shit—from what James did to his sister, to what he did to me.

There were also detailed accounts of what he did to the missing girls and where their remains would be found. It read almost like a diary, and I couldn't help but wonder if it was a trophy that a serial killer kept. Make no mistake, that's what he was. He abused and killed many people over the years and didn't show a single ounce of remorse. I was sorry the people left behind never got justice for their daughters, sisters, or wives, but I hoped they could find peace now that he was dead.

I couldn't let him live. He had too much money and too many connections. It was only a matter of time before he'd find some loophole and walk free, plunging my life into chaos again.

Lane's words snap me out of my thoughts. "Wait, what? I don't understand. I wasn't really his wife."

"Doesn't matter. He named you, Lilith Taylor, his beneficiary. Regardless of the reasons why, all his money and assets are yours."

"But I don't want it."

"You might not want it," he starts, his voice softening as he talks. "But think of all the good you could do with it. It's the ultimate fuck you to use all his money to help women, don't you think?"

"I guess. But what about Rebecca? Didn't he leave anything to her?"

"You're working on the assumption he cared. He didn't. Not in the way regular folks do. Rebecca was nothing more than a pawn. Just because he treated her well doesn't mean he loved her."

I sigh. He's right, but it's still a bitter pill to swallow.

"Of course, nothing is stopping you from setting up a trust for her. It's entirely up to you, Lil. I've gotta go. I'm due in court in an hour, but I'll email over everything you need to sign, and then I'll get the money transferred into your account. If you want me to arrange the sale of the properties and vehicles, I can do that, too. Everything else will be liquidated."

When I don't answer, he says my name softly. "Lil?"

"Sorry, I'm here. It's just a lot. I wasn't expecting any of this."

"And yet I can't think of someone who deserves it more. I'll talk to you soon." He hangs up, leaving me staring at my phone.

"What is it?" Powers asks, crowding in close.

"James left me everything."

He licks his bottom lip but doesn't say anything.

"I feel dirty taking it."

“So don’t take it.”

“Just like that?”

“We don’t need it, Lil. We were deliriously happy five minutes ago before you found out about the money, and we will be afterward. What did Lane say?”

“That I could do a lot of good with the money. I don’t need to keep it, but I can use it to help others. That kind of money could do a lot of good.”

“It could help a lot of the women who are seeking sanctuary at the shelter to start over. You could start a new life fund or some shit.”

“Such a poet,” I tease.

“We both know you don’t love me for my pretty words, just my pretty—”

“Greer, welcome back!” I say a little too loudly as I cover Powers’s mouth with my hand. He chuckles before licking my palm.

“Hey, sorry. Am I interrupting? I can wait somewhere else.”

“Don’t be silly. Sit. Powers was just going to order me some pie.”

“I was?”

“You were.”

He looks between Greer and me before he nods. “Right, I forgot. I’ll be back.”

He gets up and heads to the counter. I turn and look at Greer, who is fiddling with the hem of her ill-fitting suit jacket. Her skin is plainer than usual, and she has dark circles under her eyes.

“Is everything alright, Greer? You look tired.”

She pastes on a fake as fuck smile and nods. “I’m fine. Just really busy with work.”

I study her until she squirms. “If you ever want to talk, I’m an excellent listener. And I know how to keep a secret.”

She sighs, her shoulders slumping. “My boss is being difficult. I’ve made a few decisions that he doesn’t agree with, so he has purposely made sure I’m getting the extra…difficult cases.”

“What a shithead. This is because of you bringing Rebecca to Delphi and Kruger, isn’t it?”

“Partly, but it started before that. I guess we just clash, is all.” She attempts to shrug it off, but it falls flat.”

“How bad is it, Greer?” I ask her softly as her eyes fill with tears.

“Bad enough that I’d quit in a heartbeat. But I refuse to be another adult who lets these kids down.”

So, bad then. Greer worked hard to get to where she is. The bell above the door chimes, and in walk Toot and Mack. Greer swallows hard, and that fake smile is back on her lips once more.

“It will be fine, though. Everything will work itself out one way or another. No need to worry. I’ll be okay.” Her words run together as she hurries to get them out

Something she says sticks with me. “Greer, are you in danger?”

Before she can answer, Lucy walks over with a to-go bag of food. “Here you go, Greer,” she says softly.

I swallow when I look at her. Citi told me about this woman. This is the one who, in another life, would have been Capone’s girl. But fate had other ideas.

She looks at me and smiles, and it’s just as fake as Greer’s. “Hey, Lil, how are you?”

Before I can answer, Powers is back, sliding a slice of pie in front of me.

“Your pie, my lady.” I roll my eyes at him as he tips an imaginary hat.

The bell above the door goes again. I turn to see a man walk through. I don’t recognize him, so I focus back on Powers, who pulls me into his lap.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Greer tense. I look at her curiously as I hear a man shouting. “You fucking bitch!”

I whip my head around, along with everyone else. The man who just walked in is yelling, spittle flying from his mouth. “You took my fucking kids from me!” he roars.

I turn to Greer, who is as white as a sheet. “Mr. Harris—”

But she doesn’t get anything else out before the gunfire erupts, and I’m thrown to the floor. Powers covers me with his body, his hands cradling my head before it can bounce off the unforgiving floor.

The next few minutes are filled with gunfire and screams, the smell of smoke and copper in the air before the gunfire cuts off, and someone yells, “Call a fucking ambulance.”

I wiggle to get free, but Powers holds me tight. “I’m fine, Keiren, I promise, but people are hurt. I can help. Please let me.” I might not be a nurse, but my training kicks in regardless. I couldn’t live with myself if I could help but cowered with fear instead.

“Fuck, fine, but you stay right beside me.” He eases off me and helps me up. I freeze for a second, taking in the carnage.

“Lil, over here,” Mack calls out, his head poking up from the edge of the table. I move around to him and drop to my knees when I see Greer in his arms, blood covering her face.

“Shit, was she hit?”

“No, Lucy shoved her out of the way, but she hit her head on the corner of the table and went down hard. She won’t wake up, Lil. Why isn’t she walking up?”

I ignore his panic and focus on Greer. I don’t see any obvious injuries other than the mark on her temple.

“Throw me your keys, Powers,” I yell. He hands them to me without question. I lift Greer’s eyelids and shine the mini flashlight on the keychain in her eyes. “Pupils are reactive.”

“That’s good, right?” Toot calls out.

“Yes. That’s good. She hit her head, so I’m not overly worried about her losing consciousness just yet. Mack, keep her still and warm until the paramedics get here. If anything changes, you call me over, okay?”

“Okay.”

“Toot, you hurt?” I look over at him and see him on the ground with Lucy’s head in his lap. Her eyes are open, staring sightlessly at the ceiling.

“No, no no.” I scramble over, which is when I see the pool of blood beneath her and the red slowly spreading around her name tag pinned to her chest. I press my fingers to her neck, looking for a pulse, but I already know I won’t find one. She was likely dead before she hit the ground.

“She pushed Greer out of the way. She saved her life. Why’d she do that?” he asks, though it’s impossible to miss the relief in his voice.

I ease her eyes closed. “Anyone can be a hero, Toot, even small-town waitresses with a pretty smile and sad eyes.”

The doors open, and cops rush in, guns drawn.

“Suspect is down,” Kruger yells. I look over and see he’s fine, and so are the kids who are under the table.

“Is anyone else hurt?” I ask Powers, but he shakes his head. “Only the shooter. Stay down while the cops figure out if they want to arrest us all or not.”

I don’t argue with him. I let my gaze drop back to Lucy before they move to Toot, then Mack, who are solely focused on Greer. Something tells

me things are about to change between the three of them. Only time will tell if what they're feeling will simmer over or blow up completely. Either way, they have a second chance to make things right, and it's all thanks to Lucy.

I squeeze her hand and swallow around the lump in my throat. "Thank you. I hope wherever you go, you find peace and happiness."

Powers leans down and kisses my head, offering me his calm in the middle of this storm, reminding me that no matter what we face, we'll do it side by side.

Together, we can make it through anything.

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Epilogue

2

LUCY

I BLINK, my brain trying to figure out why all I can see is white. “What the heck?”

I scramble to my feet and look around, but it’s as if I’ve stepped into a wall of fog.

“Hello?” I call out before my gaze falls on what I’m wearing. Gone is my diner uniform, and in its place is the red dress I bought to wear for my date with Capone. The one I wore to his funeral instead. “But I burned this,” I mutter, confused.

Light breaks through the fog, getting brighter and brighter the closer it gets. Thunder rumbles closer, and I try to remember if a storm was forecast earlier, but everything in my head is hazy.

“Did I get drunk?” I mumble as the light begins to take shape. By the time I realize it’s a headlight, it’s too close for me to move out of the way. I brace myself for impact. When nothing happens, I open my eyes and see the most beautiful eyes staring back at me. A gasp slips out before I can stop it.

“Hey, Lucy, you ready for that date?”

I stare at the man at ease on his bike and swallow as he holds his hand out to me.

“Capone?”

He grins. “It’s about time you got here.”

I swallow again, my mouth suddenly dry as the puzzle pieces start to slot together. “You died.”

“I know. I’m sorry. God knows the only thing that could have kept me from you was death.”

“I’m dead too, aren’t I?” I whisper.

His expression is sad as he nods. “Yeah, sweetheart, you are. But Greer is alive because of you, and so are all the future children she’s destined to help.”

I nod. It feels right. Weird, but right. “So what now?”

“Now you take my hand, climb on the back of my bike, and I’ll take you on that date I promised.”

I bite my lip before I reach out a shaky hand and slip it into his. He helps me on, and I don’t hesitate to wrap my arms tightly around him, just like all those months I dreamed of doing.

“And after our date?” I ask, excited but afraid of what comes next.

“We have an eternity to figure it out, baby.”

“You and me?”

He nods, looking over his shoulder, throwing me one of those sexy grins of his. “Just like it was always supposed to be.”

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Bonus Scene

THEO

“Ha, in your face, Con.”

“You’re cheating. You have to be,” Con grumbles, making me snort.

“No one likes a sad loser.”

He flips me off, but I see his lips twitch as he fights back a grin. Before I can say anything, there’s a knock on the door, and Kruger pokes his head in.

“Hey, can I steal Theo away for a sec?”

“Sure,” Con shrugs, looking over at Hero, who is fast asleep in the crib, and Star, who flaked out about thirty minutes ago after watching *Moana* for the millionth time.

I get up and toss the controller to Con before following Kruger down to another room. “What’s up?” I ask, looking around the room, which has a bed, a dresser, and a huge-ass TV on the wall.

“I need to talk to you about something.” He points to the bed for me to sit.

“Sounds serious. Everything okay with Mom?”

His face softens whenever I call her that, the edges of his scars pulling tight. “She’s good, kid. Look, there is no easy way to say this but—”

I freeze, the air rushing out of my lungs. “You don’t want me anymore?”

Kruger looks stunned for a second before he jumps up and grabs me in a bear hug. “What the fuck? Why would you even say shit like that? You know you’d break your mother’s heart if you ever said that to her,” he growls, pulling back, his hand around the back of my neck so I have no choice but to look up at his face. “You’re ours. Nothing will ever change that. ’Fraid you’re stuck with us now, kid.”

I let out a shaky sigh. “Sorry, sometimes panic is my default setting. You were being weird, and I couldn’t help but think the worst.”

“I’m fucking this up.” Kruger sighs. “Sit. Let me explain.”

I take a seat on the end of the bed, and Kruger sits beside me, his forearms on his legs as he leans over. “Gotta call from Greer.”

I tense again but keep my mouth shut. He already said they aren’t sending me back.

“She was called to a house where there was a female suicide victim. She left behind a little girl. Rebecca.”

I fist my hands thinking about that poor kid, knowing the fucked-up turn her life just took.

“She called 911. Tried to breathe for her,” he shakes his head. “I’ll skip all the rest for now, but you need to know that James Taylor is her biological uncle and father.”

I grimace, shaking my head. “Fuck.”

“That about sums it up.”

“Greer brought her here for her safety. It’s what the mom wanted.”

“She’s here now?”

Kruger nods. “She’s waiting with Delphi while I talk to you. Delphi and me—we’re still registered as foster parents. We should have talked to you first, I know, but—”

“No, fuck that. I mean, I get what you’re saying, and I appreciate it, but this kid needs us, right?”

“Right. She needs a mom and a dad, but she also really needs a big brother right about now while she navigates the whole parent thing.”

“Then what are we waiting for?” I get to my feet, making him chuckle.

He stands up and tags me around the neck once more, drawing me in for another hug. “You’re a good kid, Theo. I’m proud as fuck to call you my son.” I feel myself choking up, so I don’t try to speak. I hold him a little tighter than before. When he lets me go, he looks me in the eye. “You ready?

“Let’s do this.”

I follow him out the door and down the hallway to the fire escape. We make our way back out to where the tables and chairs are. I see Delphi first, who looks over when she sees us approach, and gifts me one of her wide smiles.

“Theo, I’d like you to meet Rebecca. Rebecca, this is Theo.”

I look over and see her then, all big eyes and wild hair. She gets down from her seat and walks over to me slowly, studying me in a way that makes her seem so much older than she is.

She stops right in front of me before she tips her head back. “Hi.”

I smile at her. “How’s it going, girlypop?”

She giggles, hiding her face for a second before she steps closer. “Are you my brother? I never had one of those before.”

I swallow the damn lump in my throat. “That’s because I’m the best, and only the best would do for you.”

She inches closer again, and I watch her eyes drop to my hand. I don’t move, wanting it to be her choice. Eventually, she slips her little hand in mine and looks up at me as if to ask if it’s okay. I close my hand around hers and give it a squeeze, my eyes moving to Delphi as she wipes tears from her face.

“I’m gonna let you know now, Becca, I’ll be taking this big brother thing very seriously.”

She nods as if she understands exactly what I’m saying. And who knows, maybe she does. The kid seems far smarter than I was at that age.

She blows a strand of hair off her face.

“Want me to braid it for you?”

“You can braid?”

“Sure. You want one or two?

“Six.”

I grin. “Six it is.”

“I’ll go find you some hair ties,” Kruger mumbles before heading off. I move to one of the tables and scoop her up, making her laugh as I sit her on the table so I can kneel on the chair behind her.

“How come you can braid?”

I take a deep breath as I part her hair with my fingers. “I used to braid my mom’s hair.”

She’s quiet for a little while, and I don’t know what to say to fill the silence.

“Is your mom dead?” she asks quietly.

“Yeah, she is.”

“Mine too.”

“We’re lucky, though, because we got Delphi and she’s the best.”

“You promise?”

I look over at Delphi, the woman who loved me more within an hour of meeting me than my real mom did in the whole time she had me. “Yeah, girlypop, I promise.”

“I miss my other mom, Theo.”

I move around the table so she can see my face. “I miss mine too, and sometimes I get real sad thinking about her. That’s okay too. You can be happy and sad. You can have a new family and still love your old one. Your mama wanted you here with Delphi and Kruger. She knew you’d be safe and happy with them.”

“And with you.”

“Yeah, kid. And with me.”

She reaches out and throws her arms around me. I freeze for a second, not sure what to do before I wrap my arms around her little body and fall hopelessly in love with the kid.

Kruger walks back out, a brush in one hand, a stack of hair ties in the other. He sees us hugging and gives me a knowing smile.

“How about we take this stuff with us? We can grab pizza on the way.”

Rebecca tips her head up and looks at me with a frown. “Where are we going?”

“We’re going home, kid. Welcome to the family.”

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Remember, If you enjoyed it, please leave a review.

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About the Author

Candice is a romance writer who lives in the UK with her long-suffering partner and her three slightly unhinged children. As an avid reader herself, you will often find her curled up with a book from one of her favorite authors, drinking her body weight in coffee.



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