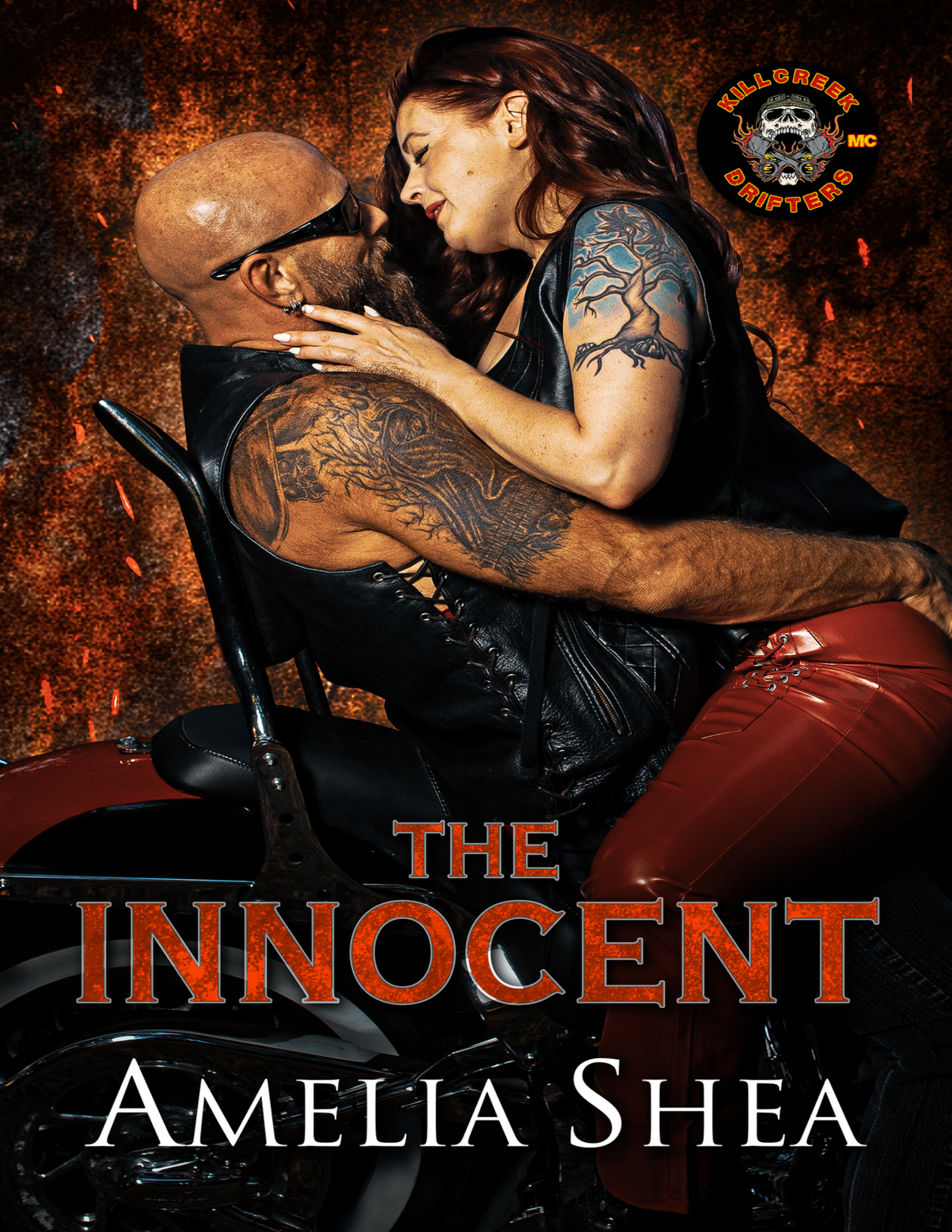


THE INNOCENT

Amelia Shea

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Killcreek Drifters MC Book 3

Amelia Shea

OceanofPDF.com

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PROLOGUE

Six months ago…

I'm late, dammit!

Currently, that was the least of Imogene Peppercorn's problems. The real challenge was the balancing act of holding a large tray of cupcakes in one hand while trying to maintain control of her umbrella in the other. The gale force winds weren't working in her favor with rain pelting her in the face.

This is not how I wanted to start my morning. She was a firm believer in beginning each day on a positive note. It set the tone for the entire day. And if that was the case…*I'm doomed.*

Imogene was only a few feet from the entrance of the prison when her foot landed in a huge puddle, soaking her shoe instantly. She cursed under her breath and quickened her steps. The only saving grace was Ed, the front door security guard. Even through the sheets of rain coming down, she saw him jump up from his chair, round the desk, and rush to the door, opening it wide.

"You picked a hell of a day for baking."

I know.

But honestly, she hadn't *chosen* anything. It was strictly by chance she'd even known there was a reason to celebrate, not discovering it until four in the morning. *Again, not how I wanted to start my day.*

She didn't usually check her email before work, but due to a severe bout of insomnia, she found herself at her computer looking for anything to kill time. When she'd seen the message announcing upcoming releases, she'd clicked on the link. The two names caught her off guard. She hadn't even realized their time served was coming to an end. She'd slumped in her seat, staring at the screen, and an unexpected wave of disappointment hit her like a ton of bricks. It was selfish on her end. Of course, it was a reason to celebrate. They were getting out. This was good news. *For them.*

The Pierce cousins were being released the following day in the early hours of the morning. Imogene had a vested interest in all her students

whom she'd assisted at the prison library and taught in several classes. But Zane and Xander Pierce had been different. *Special.* At least to Imogene.

A lot of inmates who participated had an ulterior motive. *And I get it.* The monotonous daily routine of prison life would drive most people stir-crazy. Taking a class broke up the day, gave them a different view from the concrete walls and bars. But it didn't motivate everyone to actually take it seriously. That's where Zane and Xander were different. They'd scored the highest, participated when prompted, and always answered correctly. *My star students.* She would've reflected more, but time was of the essence this morning.

She'd quickly shut down her computer and raced to her kitchen, surveying the contents of her pantry. It was the second disappointment of the day. She didn't have much to work with. Had she had more time, she would've made something from scratch. Imogene wasn't exactly a baker extraordinaire, but she enjoyed it and was complimented on most desserts she made. But? A box of chocolate cake mix, vanilla icing, and rainbow sprinkles would have to do.

"Whatever it is" —Ed smiled— "smells good."

"Cupcakes."

"My favorite."

Ed took the container of sweets from her hands, and she shook out her umbrella, storing it in the rack of the vestibule. She ripped off her hood. It was the wrong move. The water pooled on her head dripped down, soaking her hair and plastering it against her face. *I'm a mess.* Her raincoat, boots, and umbrella had been no match against this storm.

She retrieved the container from Ed. "Thanks."

He smiled and gestured toward the door, opening it before she had a chance to grab the handle. He, along with most of the staff, had always been friendly with her. Ed, more so. On several occasions, he'd even asked her out. While he was nice and funny, good-looking in a boy next door type of way, Imogene wasn't interested. It had nothing to do with him and everything to do with her chaotic life. Nobody wanted to take that on. *I don't even want it.*

Ed rounded the counter, and she set the container on the wobbly desk near the metal detectors. She shrugged off her raincoat and pocketbook, laying them on the table. This had been her routine three days a week for the last eighteen months. Initially, when she'd started volunteering at the

prison, she'd been assigned to the library. It was a perfect fit. As time went on and there was a need for teachers, she took on more responsibility, teaching some basic classes and a GED program. That was the one she was most proud of. For the first time in the prison's history, all eleven of the students who had started the program graduated with high school diplomas. They'd even held a ceremony. Only nine participated. Two opted out.

She glanced up at the clock and muttered under her breath, "Dammit."

Ed looked up from her purse, which he'd been searching. She forced a smile. Imogene was too polite for her own good. It would've been rude to ask him to hurry up when her tardiness had been her own fault. *Why does it take so long for cupcakes to cool enough for icing?*

"Teacher late for class?" he teased, and this time she genuinely smiled.

He pushed through her bag and quickly patted down her coat before opening the container of cupcakes. He glanced up, arching his brow.

"For the staff?"

"No, my students." She held up her hand. "Norman pre-approved it at five o'clock this morning."

Ed chuckled. "That must've been a fun call. I've heard he's not a morning person."

She flattened her lips. *No, he's not.* Norman, her supervisor and in charge of all the volunteers, had been less than thrilled with the wakeup call. But after rushing through her spiel, she was granted permission to bring in the desserts. Imogene suspected he might've only agreed to get her off the phone so he could go back to bed. Whatever it was, it had worked.

"Is there just enough, or did you make extra?" Ed asked, eyeing the cupcakes.

This specific class only had fourteen students.

"There's plenty. Help yourself. Take one for Eileen too."

His partner at the front desk wasn't due for another hour, but she'd always enjoyed the sweet treats Imogene baked for the staff at meetings. Ed took two from the center of the tray, ruining the aesthetic of the platter. It might have been a strategic move to make sure she wasn't trying to pass along contraband through baked goods. Imogene would never, but she'd heard stories about others, including volunteers, attempting to do it in the past.

He closed the container, and she walked through the metal detectors without issue. She quickly grabbed her stuff and rushed through the halls,

dropping her bag and coat off at her locker. That cost her a few minutes. By the time she made it to the classroom, she was eight minutes late.

She waved to the guard stationed at the door.

“Good morning.”

Lance barely acknowledged her. He never did. While she’d gotten along with most of the corrections officers, he’d never taken a liking to her. On one occasion he’d scolded her for being *too nice* to the inmates. In his eyes, they were all criminals and not worthy of kindness. *Lance is an asshole.*

But still, Imogene tried to look past that and offer an olive branch.

“Sorry, I’m late.” She lifted the tray. “Would you like a cupcake?”

“No,” he snapped and turned his attention down the hall, giving her his back. He tapped his earpiece. “She finally decided to show up.”

Imogene clamped her lips and rolled her eyes. *Eight minutes, Lance.* In her year and a half of volunteering at the prison, she was only late one other time due to a major crash on the highway. Even the warden got caught up in the traffic. This was hardly routine for Imogene. *But again…Lance is an asshole.*

“Send them down.”

It was protocol that she be in the classroom before the inmates arrived. Usually, she gave herself an extra fifteen minutes to prepare. Today that wasn’t an option. Her tardiness was going to cut into her lesson plan, but she’d make it up another day. A celebration was taking priority.

She slipped inside the room, placing the container on her desk and primping her hair. There was no immediate fix for the rain damaged curls frizzing around her face. Curse of the curly-haired girl.

“Good morning.” She smiled, greeting the inmates as they filed in. “Sorry for the delay.”

She lifted on her toes, hoping to see the back of the line. *They* were always the last to arrive. Neither of them had missed a class since their last bouts in solitary confinement, but that had been over a year ago. A pit formed in her stomach when she didn’t see them. Had they gotten in trouble again? While she was selfishly disappointed this was the last time she’d see them, she didn’t want anything to interfere with their freedom.

A wave of relief rushed through her body when they walked in, last in line. Without thinking she smiled, staring at Zane and Xander Pierce as they passed her desk.

“Big day tomorrow!” It came out louder and more enthusiastic than she intended. And it got the attention of the entire room.

Both Zane and Xander glanced over, but neither of them said a word. It was to be expected. While they participated in class, rarely did either of them speak to her outside of their studies. On occasion Xander would share pleasantries, but even that was limited and always came off as guarded. Zane? She got nothing. Though, she had noticed him watching her a few times. Usually when she got caught staring at someone, she immediately looked away. Not Zane.

“I heard you’re being released tomorrow.” Imogene shifted on her feet and clasped her hands, concealing the small tremble. “You guys must be really happy to be going home.”

Xander shared a look with Zane, and his lips twitched. “Yeah.”

He walked down the aisle to the back corner with Zane following. She hadn’t even realized she was staring until he took his seat. His eyes shifted to her, and his scowl hardened. Instinctively, she smiled, and as usual, it wasn’t returned.

Was it smart to harbor a small crush on an inmate? *Absolutely not.* Of course, Imogene would never act on it. There were strict rules in place, and she followed them all. But admittedly, she’d been slightly obsessed from the first time she’d laid eyes on Zane Pierce. It didn’t make much sense. He was the polar opposite of every man she’d ever dated. Imogene hadn’t thought she had a particular type. She liked nice guys, good conversationalists, and men who shared her common interests. Appearance was a bonus but not a prerequisite for men she’d spent time with. Zane checked none of those boxes except for the looks. While not classically handsome, she couldn’t deny her intense attraction to the man covered in tattoos.

When all the men were settled in their seats, she started the class. This was a basic college entrance course for those who had received their GED or graduated high school. If they passed, they’d earn college credits. *Not all.* She glanced to the back of the room where Zane and Xander sat. They wouldn’t complete it because they were leaving. Hopefully, they’d continue their education after they went home.

Imogene kept her eyes on the clock hanging over the door for the duration of class. She wanted to make sure she left enough time for the party. *Okay, party is a stretch.* When there was only ten minutes left, she

stood in the center of the room and clasped her hands. “We’ll pick up on the rest next week. I wanted to wrap up a little early because I have something for all of you.” She walked over to her desk, removed the lid, and grabbed the tray. As soon as she turned, she noticed a few of the men straighten in their chairs, eyeing the platter.

“You brought us snacks?”

“Um, more like a sweet treat.” She looked over at Zane and Xander, smiling. “In honor of your departure, I thought I’d make something to commemorate the day. Kind of like a cheap version of a going away party.” She placed it on her desk. “Come on up and help yourself.”

Desk legs scratched the floor, and the men rushed forward. Imogene stepped to the side, accepting a thank you from some and quickly noticing two were absent from the line. She peeked over her shoulder. The guests of honor hadn’t moved from their seats.

“This is fucking good,” one of the students said with a mouthful of cake.

“Chocolate with vanilla icing. A classic,” another said.

It was a hit. With most of them.

She smiled at those who’d given compliments and subtly glanced over at the Pierce cousins again. Xander was turned to the side, whispering something to Zane, who had his gaze locked on her. This man had the most intense eyes. Dark blue like the center of the ocean. Zane lifted his chin, and Xander shook his head, but she noticed a small smile.

When Xander abruptly stood, Zane leaned back in his chair and folded his arms. Xander walked down the aisle, grabbed a cupcake, and walked back to his desk without a word.

“You got a recipe for this? Give it to the guys in the kitchen so we can eat this good shit every day.”

Imogene chuckled, shrugging. “It’s just from the box. The kind that your mom probably made when you were a kid.”

The man snorted. “My mom never made me shit.”

Dammit! Imogene was usually good at not broadcasting stereotypes or comparing her own childhood with others, especially in the prison. Not everybody had lived the same life or had a similar upbringing. While Imogene’s hadn’t been idyllic, it had been better than most. And she recognized that.

“But hey, glad you made them for us.” He lifted the last bite. “You make these for your kids?”

The room was drowned in silence. There were specific rules in place at the prison. Imogene usually followed them all. This was a particularly hard one. Giving personal information about herself was strongly discouraged. It was a safety measure, which she understood. But this wasn’t something that could be used against her.

“I don’t have children.”

“What about a man?” another inmate asked, wiggling his brows. “Got one of them?”

Heat rose from her chest to her cheeks, and her skin pebbled as a shiver ran down her spine. Even without looking, she sensed Zane’s eyes were on her. Was he waiting on her answer?

She swallowed the knot in her throat. “I do not.”

“Want one?” He winked.

Without thinking, her gaze darted to the back of the room, landing on Zane. She’d never imagined going on a formal dinner date with the inmate, but she had fantasized about him plenty of times in the confines of her bedroom. His arms wrapped around her, his lips on every inch of her body, and his… *What are you doing?* Imogene blinked, and her muscles stiffened. A fantasy in the privacy of her own home was one thing but… *I’m in the middle of my classroom!*

She ducked her head in an effort to conceal her blush and rounded her desk. This wasn’t the first time she’d daydreamed about Zane. But usually she was discrete.

Lance stepped into the doorway. Time was up. A sudden dread washed over her. This would probably be the last time she’d ever see him.

Her infatuation with Zane Pierce had begun the first time she’d laid eyes on him. It had been during her orientation with the other volunteers. They’d been given a complete tour, including areas where they were prohibited. The last leg had been the outside yard. The inmates were being called in. They had to summon Zane several times. He was standing at the fence, staring out. If she had to guess, he was yearning for the freedom beyond the barbed wire. When he’d finally followed orders and walked toward the door, his steps were slow, not rushed. He’d walked at his own pace. He got a few feet from the end of the line, and he looked over. There were several security officers and volunteers, but his eyes immediately

locked on her, a hardened, fierce glare. He could probably intimidate anyone with just a look. It should've had her tearing her gaze away, but instead she was entranced.

And then it was over. The guards ushered them through the door, and she figured, in a prison this size, she wouldn't see him again. Until he walked into the library two days later with his cousin, Xander.

A sharp knock on the wall made Imogene jump and turn toward the door. Lance and his impatient air had shifted the tension in the room. The party was officially over.

"That's it for today." She clasped her hands, scanning the room. "I'll see you all in a few days." She paused, and her smile faltered. She shouldn't have such a strong reaction. Zane was just a student she taught. Nothing more, unless she counted her delusional fantasies.

Imogene cautiously shifted her gaze to the Pierce cousins. "Um, well, I guess I won't see *all* of you."

Xander smirked, glancing over his shoulder at Zane. He had his eyes trained on the front of the room but not in her direction. Chairs scraped the linoleum floor, and she circled behind her desk to make room for the inmates to leave. When Xander and Zane passed, she felt a sudden urge to say something. But what? She could thank them for their participation in her classes and for never being an issue or problem. Imogene could mention how proud she was that they'd earned their GEDs. Praise them for getting the highest scores of the group. She could offer Zane a cupcake to take back to his cell. *Lame.* She bit her lip, racking her brain. On a more personal note, she could thank Zane for protecting her. *Of course, I'm not supposed to know about that.*

They had just breached the hall. *Now or never.*

For as silly as it was, it seemed like the most neutral choice. She grabbed a cupcake and rushed forward, out to the hall. "Zane, Xander?"

The men halted and turned. They stood over six feet, Xander having an inch or two on Zane. But both were massive figures. Broad shoulders, muscular arms, and scarred hands. She'd often wondered how they'd gotten so many injuries. But she never asked, though she did have her suspicions. Considering they were both sentenced for felony aggravated assault, fighting seemed to be in their nature. But they were the polar opposite with her. Neither of the cousins had ever made her uncomfortable or given off a threatening vibe.

“Yeah?” Xander arched his brow.

Blood rushed through her veins, and she swallowed the lump in her throat, mustering up a calm smile. *Pretty sure I’m not pulling that one off.*

Imogene inched closer, stopping a few feet from them. She jutted out her hand toward Zane. “You forgot your cupcake.”

God, saying it out loud sounds sillier than I’d thought.

For as beautiful as his eyes were, the glare hardened them as he lowered his stare to her hand. He made no move to take it. *Told you it was lame.* Her arm shook waiting for some kind of response. When she didn’t get one, she withdrew her hand.

“I guess you’re not a fan of chocolate.” She laughed without an ounce of humor and glanced down. Her awkwardness was wreaking havoc on her uncontrollable blush.

He extended his hand, palm up, and she peeked up through her lashes. His jaw was square, and his gaze hard, but he wiggled his fingers slightly.

She smiled and placed it in his palm, inadvertently grazing his hand with her pinky. Or maybe subconsciously she’d done it on purpose. It was the first physical contact they’d ever had. For such a small interaction, her body responded instantly. Her heart pounded, and her blood heated. Something shifted in his eyes. They hadn’t softened, but the corners crinkled and the lines in his forehead smoothed out.

“Let’s go!” Lance shouted.

For crying out loud, Lance, can’t you give me this moment? Asshole!

Imogene cleared her throat. “Well, um, I wish you both the best. And if you ever need a letter of reference, whether it be for work or character? I’d be happy to give you both one. It would be my pleasure.”

She shifted her eyes between the cousins, careful not to linger too long on Zane.

“Thanks,” Xander said with zero emotion. Zane didn’t say anything. He turned, and they started down the hallway.

The pit in her stomach only grew tighter as she watched him walk away. They hadn’t had a relationship outside of the prison, and there wasn’t an attraction on his end, and yet somehow the idea of never seeing him again struck hard. A harsh brutal blow. *And it hurts.*

“Heard your man is getting released.” The teasing female voice at her back had Imogene spinning around, knocking into Gayle.

She was another volunteer who worked in the home economics department. Gayle was a bit older than her, but they'd grown close. They shared a vested interest in the betterment of the inmates. Plus, she was extremely entertaining. Except when she was taunting Imogene about her secret crush on Zane.

Her cheeks heated, and she swatted Gayle's arm, whispering, "He's not my man."

She chuckled, looking past Imogene and down the corridor. "You do know there's no rule against volunteers hooking up with inmates after they're released, right?"

Yeah, I know because in a weak moment, I looked it up. It was silly. There was no chance that he'd be interested in her. A man like Zane would have a line of women waiting to welcome him home. *And I'm not one of them.*

Imogene sighed, pleading with her eyes. "Please stop."

"What?" Gayle grinned, shrugging. "I've watched you lust after that guy for over a year."

Imogene gasped, darting her eyes around their immediate area. Thankfully, there was no one around. She leaned closer, lowering her voice. "I didn't lust after him. That would be highly inappropriate."

Gayle snickered. "Yeah, you're right. Lust is when you constantly stare at him, watch his every move, and turn a tomato shade of red when he's within fifty feet. That's definitely not *you*."

Imogene had never spoken a word about Zane to anyone. But clearly, she hadn't done a good job of hiding her interest. This wasn't the first time Gayle had teased her about him. But Imogene was going to shut her down.

She straightened her shoulders. "Well, it doesn't matter because he lives out of state, and long-distance relationships never work out."

Gayle's eyes widened, and she waved her hands dramatically. "Woah, woah, I never said anything about a relationship. Scratching that itch and hopping in bed with him, yes. But actually dating him? Abso-fucking-lutely not, Imogene. That's the kind of guy you spend a night with, not a lifetime."

A night with. Imogene had thought about that more times than she could count. She glanced over her shoulder. Zane was standing in a group with Xander and a few others. He wasn't talking, but it was as if he was holding court in the small gathering. Everyone kept their distance, but they definitely respected him. Or feared him.

“Walking red flag, Imogene.”

She kept her eyes on Zane, nodding.

Gayle nudged her shoulder, giggling. “But I’m sure one hell of a good time.”

I’m sure he is.

****

Hyde stood near the bars, staring out while Jekyll remained seated on the bottom bunk. They were waiting to be escorted for their release. They’d spent two years in lockup, and in thirty minutes, they’d be free and headed home to Killcreek.

With the early morning release, they’d been up since four. Hyde stationed himself near the bars for the last hour. Jekyll was equally eager to get out, but it hit a little harder for his cousin. Hyde would have someone waiting for him. The same woman who had stood by his side during his entire incarceration.

“What the fuck is taking so long?” Hyde asked.

His cousin had been on edge for the last twenty-four hours. It was understandable. They’d been down this road before. They’d been slated to be released months ago, but it had been delayed. Now, they were getting out. But neither would be at ease or convinced of their freedom until they heard the final prison gate close behind them.

While Hyde had been focused on the hallway, Jekyll had his eyes on the desk. It was bare except for the cupcake. The icing had hardened throughout the day and overnight. A few inmates who had come by had taken an interest in it. Jekyll had been offered a lot of cash for it. It was a hot commodity. He’d refused, even though he had no intention of eating it. Even Hyde had asked. During his life, he’d given everything to his cousin. But no one was getting that cupcake. *She gave it to me, and it’s mine.*

Imogene fucking Peppercorn.

I wish you both the best. And if you ever need a letter of reference, whether it be for work or character? I’d be happy to give you both one. It would be my pleasure.

Pleasure. Hearing that word come from her pink pouty lips almost had Jekyll cracking a smile. Almost. He’d *pleasured* himself more times than he could count to her mouth, her face, and envisioning her body under him. He’d had to have a damn good imagination to conjure up anything. Her uniform of choice was always long sleeved, high-necked, loose sweaters

and baggy pants. It was customary for all of the volunteers to dress conservatively. But nothing could hide her face. Even without makeup and her auburn hair slicked back into a ponytail most days, her beauty was impossible to hide. The woman had tortured his soul from the first time he'd seen her in the yard. And every day after.

"Fucking finally." Hyde stepped back from the bars.

The alarm sounded, and the door opened. Lance and another officer stood a few feet from the entrance.

"Let's go."

Jekyll stood, grabbing the small envelope of notes. It was the only thing worth taking from his time in prison. Letters from Cleo. Well, there was one more item worth something, but he left it behind. He tore his gaze from the desk and started following Hyde.

"Hey man, you don't want the cupcake?" the other guard asked.

"He hates chocolate," Hyde said, peering down the hall.

It was the truth. Jekyll didn't have much of a sweet tooth to begin with, but when he did indulge, it was never chocolate. He could've licked off the vanilla icing, but he hadn't. He'd kept it intact, exactly the way she'd given it to him and how he'd remember it.

To most people, the cupcake was just a dessert. To him, it was symbolic. No one, not his mother or any woman, had ever made something to celebrate him. But Imogene did. Jekyll had spent over a year trying to keep his distance while figuring her out. *No one is this fucking sweet.* Unless there's an ulterior motive. Everybody wanted something, and they'd use anything to get what they wanted. He'd gone as far as reaching out to the MC and having them dig into her. He needed to know her motivation and what she wanted from him and Hyde.

Months later, he still didn't know, though he maintained his suspicion. There were very few people he trusted. And the prison librarian wasn't one of them.

The guard lifted his chin toward the cupcake. "Mind if I take it?"

Jekyll clenched his jaw, scowling. He slowly walked back to the desk, grabbed the cupcake, and crushed it in his hand. He tossed the remnants into the trash can, wiped his hand on his pants, and walked out.

Yeah, I fucking mind.

They were led through the prison in silence. The release procedure was standard and not his or Hyde's first rodeo. They'd both been repeat

offenders since they were teens. They knew the drill. They changed their clothes and stood at the desk waiting to be processed out. Neither of them had come in with anything of value. They knew better.

Ed signed off on their paperwork and handed them each a manilla folder. Jekyll grabbed his without a word.

"Hold up. One more thing." Ed bent down behind the desk and popped up with two books in his hand.

Hyde shook his head. "We ain't religious. You can keep that."

Ed laughed, shaking his head. "It's not the Bible." He reached out his arms, offered them each a book, and lowered his chin. "It's from Imogene."

What the fuck?

Hyde snorted. "She give everyone a book?"

"No, this is a first." Ed shifted his gaze between them. "You guys must be special."

Jekyll's back straightened, and he fisted his hand. Why the hell would she go out of her way for them? They weren't special. Never had been, never would be.

Hyde shared a look with him then snatched both books from Ed's hand and tucked them under his arm. They walked to the door in silence.

"Best of luck, guys."

Both Jekyll and Hyde ignored Ed.

They walked the long, heavily fenced trail down to the dirt parking lot. They'd been given permission to receive their own pickup rather than be transported to the bus stop.

When the alarm buzzed and the gate opened, Hyde passed him, bumping his shoulder and double timing it to the woman waiting near the SUV.

"Miss me, babe?" Penny winked, and Hyde wrapped his arms around her, lifting her off her feet. Once Jekyll walked out of the gate, he turned his back, giving them a little privacy.

While Hyde's old lady, Penny, wasn't liked by many of the brothers, Jekyll respected her. She may have been a handful and a pain in the ass more times than not, but no one could deny her loyalty to his cousin. She'd faithfully visited Hyde regularly, and on occasion included time with him. Jekyll had no interest in small talk, but he listened.

Jekyll glanced over the prison. It was still early without much movement, but he caught a figure in the second story window. It was in the

administrative wing of the building. It could've been anyone. But when her silhouette came into full view, he sucked in a breath. *I'd know her anywhere*. Then she was gone. He continued to stare, waiting for her to reappear. Seconds later, her head poked out past the wall then disappeared instantly.

Yeah, I see you. For the first time in a long time, he smiled.

"Jek, brother, let's get the fuck outta here."

He turned, heading back to the truck. Hyde rounded the front and got into the driver's side.

"Babe, you haven't driven in over two years."

"Not something you forget, Pen." Hyde waved his hand. "Get in."

"Damn it, Hyde. If you get in an accident before we get home, I'm going to fucking kill you." She sighed. "I have plans for you tonight that don't include a hospital stay."

Hyde smirked. "And I'm looking forward to that, baby."

"I hope you slept good last night 'cause you're not getting any rest tonight." Penny winked.

Oh, fuck no! Jekyll refused to be locked in a car having to hear their flirty banter.

"It's a long fucking ride to Killcreek." He darted his glare between them. "I'm not listening to this shit for hours."

Hyde laughed and got in the car. Penny opened the passenger side door and glanced back at him.

"Usually, I'd call shotgun." She smirked. "But I'm feeling generous today."

Jekyll walked to the car and felt her hand on his back as he got in. She closed the door and leaned on the open window frame, smiling at him and Hyde.

"Welcome home, boys."

Penny got in the backseat, and Hyde turned toward the console, handing her his things, which included the books.

"The prison giving out parting gifts now?" Penny asked.

Jekyll kept his eyes trained on the view out of the windshield.

"Courtesy of the librarian." There was no missing the humor in Hyde's tone, but Jekyll didn't react.

"Oh, Ms. Peppercorn?" Penny giggled, and he heard pages flip. The last thing he wanted to focus on or think about was Imogene. He wouldn't be

seeing her again. Their worlds would never collide. He clenched his jaw. That statement bothered him more than he was willing to admit.

"Well, if you guys were ever wondering which one of you was her favorite student, we know now."

Jekyll furrowed his brows, looked over at Hyde, and then angled his head to see Penny.

"What are you talking about?" Hyde asked.

She held up the books. "Only one of them got a personal note." The corner of her mouth curled. "Zane."

He reached back, aggressively grabbing the book and turning in his seat. God, what the fuck was it about Imogene that got him so territorial? He flipped over the cover, and on a fluorescent pink piece of sticky notepad was a handwritten message. To him.

To Zane,

We have a shared love for the mysteries. But I noticed you never checked out this one. It's my favorite. I hope you enjoy it.

All the best, Imogene

"What does it say?" Hyde asked.

He expected Penny to pipe in, but she remained silent.

Jekyll read it again. And again. He couldn't remember the last time anyone had given him a gift. He tightened his hold over the book and settled into his seat, lifting his chin toward the exit.

"We gonna fucking sit here all day, or we gonna go home?"

The car was drowned in complete silence. He glanced over at Hyde, who was openly smirking but didn't say a word. He turned in his seat, started the engine, and took off toward the exit.

Jekyll looked out the side window and glanced one last time to the second story of the prison.

It was empty.

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CHAPTER ONE

How does it take thirty minutes to go six blocks down the road?

City living.

Imogene was still adjusting. Four months hadn't been enough time to figure out shortcuts. But she'd given a lot of thought on how to improve the traffic patterns. The infrastructure was all wrong. Had the city planning commission done a survey on the area ten years earlier, she would've arrived on time. But that was neither here nor there. Now, she needed to focus on finding a place to park. Street parking was out of the question. She'd be circling for hours if she took a gamble on that.

A lot had changed in the last few months. A new job, a new city to call home, and essentially a new life. Imogene was on a path to put her past behind her. Move forward, look ahead. *Kind of.* There were some things she couldn't escape, some she didn't want to forget, and closure she never got.

"Stop! Focus on finding a spot," she muttered, eyeing the parking lot on the left.

Perfect.

Imogene pulled into the lot behind one of the shops on Main Street. Yes, the sign said "Customers Only," but she'd make a point of stopping in after her breakfast date. *If he's still there.* She jumped out of the car and practically jogged through the lot, rounding the building.

She'd mapped it out before leaving the motel. The coffee shop was only half a block down and across the street. But as luck would have it, the light was green. She pressed on the post button. Once. Twice. *Oh, come on!*

"They don't work." Imogene glanced back at the man passing her. "Jaywalking gets you there quicker."

He was halfway through the crosswalk when she decided to follow his lead. One step off the curb and the blasting horn had her stumbling backward. The car whipped around the corner. The driver was obviously a multi-tasker, able to cut the corner with precision and flip her the bird. A few others passed her as she stood on the corner staring at the crosswalk

sign, refusing to go until it switched. It cost her another minute, but at least she was still breathing and hadn't pissed off any more drivers.

She darted across the street, weaving through the crowds on the sidewalk. By the time she reached the cafe, she was out of breath, but she spotted him instantly. It shifted her mood, and she raised her hand, waving with a smile.

As per usual, he greeted her with a simple chin lift. It was all she'd get. Though related, hugs and signs of affection didn't play a role in their relationship. He'd established strong boundaries from the very beginning. *And I respect that.*

Imogene was about to pass the door when she saw the waitress through the window carrying a tray and struggling. She turned right, grabbed the handle, and slowly guided it open.

"I got it," she said, and the young girl looked back, smiling.

"Thank you."

"You're welcome." She waited for the girl to pass then walked down to the last table in the row outside. She took a seat across from him and turned slightly, hooking her pocketbook over the back of the chair.

"Sorry I'm late." She let out a heavy breath. "Still not used to the traffic. I left thirty minutes ago thinking I'd get here early. I was going to call and let you know that I was running late, but I don't have one of those mounted phone holders yet, and I try to never talk while driving." She snickered. "As *you* know, it's illegal."

While true, she was trying to make light of her obeying laws and referencing his job. It didn't land the way she'd hoped. Most of her interactions with him were on the arctic side. This one was no different. Imogene hadn't quite figured out how to develop her friendship with him. And he wasn't giving her any pointers.

He lifted his mug, taking a sip of his coffee. Erik was a man of few words. *Well, he is with me.* Their relationship was a work in progress.

She shifted in her chair and grabbed a menu when she saw the waitress headed their way.

"What can I get you?"

Imogene quickly scanned the menu.

"A coffee, please, and um…" She was starving but focusing more on the prices than the actual food items. Eating out had become a luxury she

rarely indulged in. Her finances had taken a hard hit in the last few months, and strict budgeting had become a way of life.

"I'll have two eggs, scrambled, and rye toast."

"Do you want bacon, sausage, or ham with that?"

Imogene's gaze drifted to the small print. *An extra three dollars?* She folded the menu, handing it to the girl.

"No, thank you."

The waitress smiled, glancing over to Erik. "Refill?"

He placed his hand over the top of his cup and shook his head. Then they were alone. Imogene tucked her hands under her thighs and raised her shoulders to her ears.

"What did you order?"

His stare hardened. "A breakfast burrito and hashbrowns, which I ate fifteen minutes ago. And this" —he lifted his mug— "is the third cup of coffee I've had while waiting for you."

Oh shit! She'd pissed him off, which was not conducive in this situation since she wanted to ask for a favor.

Imogene leaned forward, offering an apologetic smile. "Again, I'm so sorry, Erik. I really thought I gave myself enough time. I'm not used to city traffic."

"Then maybe city living isn't for you."

She flattened her lips. "I think I just need some more time to find my way."

His eyes narrowed, and she was thankful for the mini-interruption when the waitress delivered her coffee. She grabbed the sugar and creamer, fighting against her rising anxiety. This wasn't how she wanted their meeting to start.

"Imogene?"

She peered up through her lashes.

Erik cocked his head and pulled back his sleeve. "I have about fifteen minutes left, so if there's something you wanted to discuss, I suggest you get started soon."

He knows I want something. Of course he did. He was a detective. It was his job to know things and read people. But still, she tried to play it off.

"What makes you think I want something? Maybe I just want to catch up. I mean" —she shrugged— "we are family."

"*Distant* relatives."

She knitted her brows. “Cousins.”

“Second,” he countered.

True. Erik’s father and her mom’s dad were brothers. Not close due to an argument stemming back to their early twenties. That strife made reunions scarce, according to her grandparents. Imogene never knew the catalyst behind it, and from Erik’s demeanor, he wouldn’t be sharing.

“How’s work? Catch a lot of criminals?”

“Imogene.” He sighed, and for a brief second she expected him to roll his eyes. He didn’t. Instead, he looked down at his watch again. “Thirteen minutes.”

As he so rudely pointed out, time was ticking. It was now or never. That wasn’t an exaggeration. In the four months she’d been in town, he’d only agreed to meet with her three times. Though she’d asked triple that. Imogene understood. He was busy with his job. He didn’t owe her anything. In fact, up until a few years ago, they’d never even spoken.

It had been complete chance that she’d found his contact information while going through her grandparents things after they’d passed away. It was a business card. Detective Erik Murdoch. It took a few voicemails for him to finally reach out. The initial call had been formal. Much like she’d expected from a stranger. But it didn’t matter much to her. With barely any living relatives, she was just happy to connect with him. They’d only spoken a handful of times. Imogene was always the one to initiate it. He didn’t share much about his life. It was always superficial whereas she shared more, which led to him helping her a few months ago.

It was actually Erik who drew her into moving to Lawry. In desperate need of a new start, what better place than close to her only known living relative? He seemed less than thrilled when she’d told him. He hadn’t exactly warmed up to her, but he had helped her. She was pretty sure his recommendation was what landed her the position at the public library. Given that, she was hoping he would do another favor. It was a big ask. He’d made his thoughts known, and told her exactly what he’d thought of her father and his impending case years ago.

She straightened her shoulders and cleared her throat, cupping her mug between her hands.

“I was wondering if you’d look at my father’s case.”

He furrowed his brows, and his scowl deepened. “What?”

Erik's shock came as no surprise. Her father had been tried and convicted of murder over four years ago. In that time, he'd maintained his innocence, and Imogene believed in him. She'd personally worked hours upon hours on his behalf, trying to prove he wasn't guilty. *I know him; he didn't do this.* She'd become his biggest advocate. He was wrongly accused. Finally, after years, all her effort paid off, and he'd been granted a new trial.

Then four months ago, everything changed.

This was a delicate topic and not one Erik seemed interested in. But she wouldn't know if he'd help if she didn't ask.

"Well, I have all the files. Everything, and I've been through them a bunch of times. But I was hoping maybe you could take a look. I have to be missing something, right?"

Imogene shifted in her seat, trying to maintain eye contact, but he was making it difficult. He was staring at her as if she'd lost her mind.

"What do you say?" She was hopeful. It lasted a fraction of a second.

"Why would I do that?"

She raised her brows. "Because I'm asking."

He scoffed. "You're asking me to waste my time on a closed case?"

A forced closed case. Her dad had never gotten his second trial.

"Technically, it's not closed," she blurted.

"Your father is dead. It doesn't get more closed than that."

As if she needed the reminder. He hadn't said anything that wasn't true. But the coldness in his tone struck her like an ice-cold water bucket dumped over her head. Her father's death was still fresh. Four months wasn't a long time. She bowed her head, locking her eyes on her mug.

"Fuck," he muttered under his breath, but she heard him. "I can't help you."

She wasn't above pleading her own case and throwing in a little reminder.

"But you helped me before," she pleaded. "With the money?"

He sat back in the chair, hooked his ankle over his knee, and clasped his hands. "Yes, I did, and I'm still working on it. That was different."

Imogene had fronted the money for her father's defense in both trials. After her father died, she was expecting the money set aside for his second trial to be returned. Rightfully, it was hers. When she'd voiced her concern, Erik stepped in, and the law firm issued her a refund, but it was missing a lot of cash. Over one hundred thousand dollars. She'd initially transferred

the money from her inheritance from her grandparents, and the sale of her condo, to her father to fund his case. She was told it would be put in an account. But after Erik's investigation, it turned out there were two separate accounts for her father. And now? Over a hundred thousand dollars remained unaccounted for. It was as if it vanished with no explanation.

"How is that different?"

"It was for you, not him." He narrowed his gaze. "And in case you've forgotten, I already looked over his case years ago. My conclusion was the same as the courts. Guilty."

So predictable. It was a fair assessment for an outsider.

"But he was granted a new trial, and…"

Erik held up his hand, silencing her.

"And I'm confident had he lived to see a second trial, it would've had the same outcome." He dropped his foot to the ground and adjusted his jacket. "Your father was a convicted murderer who was killed in prison by an inmate. Most people would call that justice."

Imogene hadn't been given many details from the prison regarding his death. Her father had been alone in his cell when he was jumped by another inmate and stabbed. He wasn't found immediately, and ultimately bled to death. The spokesperson said they couldn't give her anything more until they concluded their investigation. She was still waiting to hear back four months later.

Imogene sucked in a breath, trying to rein in her emotions. This wasn't the first time she'd heard it. Wouldn't be the last. But it stung a little deeper coming from him. They were family. Yes, distant and newfound, as he relentlessly pointed out. But family just the same. And for Imogene, he was her only living relative.

"Why are you still pursuing this?" There was no missing the disappointment in his tone. Erik shook his head and sighed. "It's over."

She bit her lip and mumbled, "Not for me."

"You're chasing innocence that doesn't exist." He stood and reached into his pocket, pulling out his wallet.

She flattened her lips and stared down at the table. Erik, while slightly cold in his delivery, was speaking on behalf of the masses. Her father's guilt was the consensus of most people. But not all. She had something none of the others had. Her father's word. *He didn't do it.*

"What if he was innocent?"

“He wasn’t. I knew it, the courts, jury, the victim’s family knew it.” His scowl deepened. “The only one who refuses to see the truth is *you*.”

Imogene straightened her back. “There was enough doubt to get him a second trial.”

“A technicality got him a second chance. Not evidence.” Erik scoffed. “I admire your loyalty, but you’re giving it to the wrong person.”

Erik dropped a fifty on the table and tucked his wallet into his chest pocket. This did nothing to bring them closer. If anything, he’d probably refuse to ever meet up with her again.

“That should cover it. Enjoy your breakfast.”

She eyed the cash. *This isn’t fair.* After all, she’d basically forced him to meet her, then she was late and asked for a favor. If anything, she owed him a free meal. She grabbed the fifty and spun in her seat, holding out the bill.

“Let me at least treat you. My way of apologizing.”

Imogene would be forsaking her own dinner for the next two days, but it was the least she could do.

“You don’t have to apologize to me.” He sighed, and something shifted in his demeanor. “I got this one. You can get the bill next time.”

She widened her eyes and couldn’t contain her smile. Did that mean there would be a next time? It seemed small and insignificant, but for her it was everything. Loneliness had a way of enveloping the soul. Her own had been tightening its grip in the last month or two.

“Sounds great.” She paused, hoping not to come off too eager. She failed. “Do you want to get that on the calendar now?”

His steeled features cracked slightly, and she saw a small semblance of a smile. Then it was gone.

“Call me next month.”

A month? Her shoulders sagged, but she mustered up a smile. “Perfect.”

She expected him to walk away. Instead, he stared at her, scanning her face, then trailed down her body. It would’ve been creepy, but there was zero interest. In fact, it was more inspecting than anything else.

“Are you still working at the library?”

She perked up. “Yes, and I love it. It’s only part-time right now, but I’m hoping they can move me to full-time eventually.”

“And the pay is good?”

Uh, no. Librarians worked solely off a passion for books, not a generous income. But she did love her job. Imogene was willing to sacrifice

life’s luxuries for a job she enjoyed. Of course, not everyone understood that. She had the distinct feeling Erik wouldn’t. But she was optimistic that her other job prospect would help significantly with her pitiful bank account.

She was tempted to share, but mentioning her interview for a second job would have him continuously doubting her finances. She would leave that part out. As he pointed out himself, they weren’t necessarily close. No need to share all the details about her life. Not many were great at the moment.

“Yup, I’m getting by just fine.”

He slowly nodded and folded his arms, looking down at her feet. “You have a hole in your sneaker.”

Her cheeks pinkened, and she tucked her feet under her chair. “I just have these for when I have to run errands. I have a nice pair for work.”

Define nice?

He drew in a breath and cupped his mouth. “Do you need money?”

She instantly shook her head. “No!” She swallowed the knot in her throat. It was the last thing she wanted him to think. “I have plenty. I’m really good at saving.”

Can’t save something you don’t have.

He glanced down at the ground where her feet were hidden under the chair.

“If that changes, you’ll tell me.” It wasn’t a question. It was an order, and she simply replied with a nod.

He lowered his chin and walked down the street. The meeting wasn’t a win but not a complete loss. She’d be left to do her own research on the case, but at least she had something to look forward to in a few weeks.

Imogene spent the next fifteen minutes eating her breakfast. Dining alone was nothing new for her. She’d been doing it for a long time. Some people talked about it being liberating to eat independently. Imogene found it immensely boring.

She paid her check, and when the waitress brought her change, Imogene left a generous tip and shoved the remaining five dollars in her pocket.

She strolled down the street, checking out all of the shops and restaurants. She’d been in Lawry for months but hadn’t explored this side of town yet. It was nicer than her section. She initially looked at an apartment not far from here, but the rent was outrageous.

Unlike earlier, she didn't attempt to cross until the signal changed. She stepped onto the curb and peeked up at the building on the corner. It was a boutique. The clothes were displayed in the window with perfect jewelry accents. Years ago, it would've been somewhere she'd shopped. It was amazing how much life could change in a few years. Imogene hadn't been exactly rich, but she'd made good money, had her grandparents' inheritance, and owned a condo that she loved.

Now, it was all gone.

Judging by the clothes alone, she knew this place was beyond anything she could afford. But…rules were rules. She'd parked in designated "Customer Parking."

Do the right thing.

She walked inside and drew in the scent. It was a soft, sweet, flowery mix. The retail space wasn't large by any means, which made it all the more welcoming. She wasn't much of a browser, but she took her time walking through. The setup was carefully curated to showcase the beautiful clothes. It was as if each piece had been hand selected. She circled around a carousel of scarves and knitted hats. There was a lime green bucket hat that caught her eye. She'd always been a fan of headwear. Newsboys, ballcaps, beanies, but the bucket hat was her favorite. She pulled it from the bin and shook out her hair before putting it on. It was soft, shielding her eyes perfectly. She turned to the mirror behind her and smiled. It was the perfect fit.

She took it off and flipped over the price tag. She sucked in a breath and widened her eyes. What the…

Ninety-two dollars for a knitted bucket hat? The quality and material were definitely more expensive than the average fabric, and it was obviously hand crafted. *But…oh my God!* She swallowed the knot in her throat. She was halfway to the bin when she heard footsteps from behind.

"You have to get that!"

Imogene spun around and froze. The man was probably in his seventies, professionally dressed in a suit, and funnily enough, a hat. He was like a throwback character in a 1960s movie. He moved closer, smiling and pointing to the hat in her hand.

"It was made for you, honey." He waved his finger, gesturing to her face. "The red hair, the bright eyes." He snapped his fingers and pointed again. "Green is your color."

A heat rushed across her face, and her heart pounded at double speed. It had been a long time since she'd gotten any type of compliment. Even if it came from a man old enough to be her grandfather, it was welcome. *Thank you, sir.*

"Aw well, I appreciate that." She loosened her hold on the hat and gingerly placed it in the bin. "But it's um, a little out of my price range." She snorted. "I mean, who pays ninety-two dollars for a bucket hat?"

His jaw squared, and she got the sense she'd somehow insulted the hat. Or the store?

"I'm sure it's worth it though," she blurted.

The corner of his mouth curled, and a boisterous laugh bounced off the walls. "My girl knows great quality, so I can assure you it's worth every penny."

Oh great! It was no wonder he seemed insulted.

"Your daughter owns the store?"

His gaze softened. "Something like that."

Imogene stepped back and waved her hand. "Well, tell her it's beautiful, and I'll definitely be back."

Yeah, if I hit the lottery.

"You just got here. Don't want to look around some more?" He extended his arm, reminding her of a gameshow host. *Strange.*

She knitted her brows. "Do you work here?"

He grinned, and his eyes shifted past her.

"Sal doesn't work here, but he does enjoy harassing the customers."

Imogene spun around. The woman walked toward them, shaking her head. She was older than Imogene, probably in her early forties, and elegantly dressed with a welcoming smile.

"Charm, Elle. I enjoy *charming* the customers."

She rolled her eyes playfully and stopped a few feet from Imogene. "I'm Elodie, the owner. Welcome."

"Thank you."

Elodie scanned the store. "Is there anything I can help you find?"

Oh God, this is a nightmare. She could possibly find a pair of earrings, but even that was questionable considering the prices of most of the items.

"She already found the perfect hat," Sal said, grabbing it from the bin and handing it to Elodie.

"Great choice."

This was progressively getting worse. Imogene shifted on her feet, darting her eyes between them. If she bought the hat, it would put her budget back by at least three days. *How do I get out of this?*

"You okay, honey?" He gently grasped her elbow. "You look flushed."

I'm gonna be flushed outta money if I buy the hat, sir.

As much as she wanted to do the right thing, she had to be responsible.

"I'm so sorry. I can't buy it." The strain in her tone was desperate.

Elodie inched closer, offering a soft smile. "Okay, you don't have to."

The pity. It was hard to swallow.

"It's just, um…" —she drove her hand through her hair— "Can I be honest with you?"

Elodie lifted her brows and shared a look with Sal, then immediately nodded. "Sure."

Imogene licked her lips and brushed the stray hairs from her face. "This is embarrassing. I was having lunch with my cousin across the street. When I got here I was already running late." She swallowed the lump in her throat. "And the only spot I could find was in your parking lot. I saw the 'Customers Only' sign, and I swear I was going to do the right thing and purchase something." Oh God, say it. "But I'm a little tight on cash, and I can't afford anything in here right now." Imogene held up her hand. "But I have an interview for a second job tomorrow, and hopefully I'll get it, and in a few months I can come back and buy something."

The store was dead silent until Elodie snickered with a grin. "That has to be the most honest explanation I've heard in months."

Sal chuckled. "Years for me."

At least they weren't upset with her. Imogene inched away, hoping to leave on a high note and make a clean getaway.

"I'll be back, I promise." She rushed to the door but didn't make it in time.

"Hold up, honey," Sal said.

When she turned around, he waved her to the counter. Imogene had no other choice. She slowly walked to the register at the back of the store. Surely they couldn't force her to buy anything. *Right?* All signs were pointing to the opposite. Elodie was behind the counter wrapping the hat in tissue paper. She grabbed a glossy paper bag and placed it inside. She leaned over the counter, handing it to Imogene.

She held up her hands, refusing. "But I…"

Elodie smirked, lifting her chin to the older man. “A gift from Sal.”

What? Imogene jerked her head to find him smiling. She immediately shook her head.

“I can’t accept this.”

“Sure you can.” He grabbed the bag, forcing her to take it. “It’s rude to turn down a gift.”

“But…”

“You get to spend your money the way you want.” He winked. “And I get to spend mine the way I see fit. It would be a damn shame for any other woman to get *your* perfect hat.”

Was this happening? Who gave a stranger an expensive gift?

“My card is in the bag. We have an online store, and we do giveaways and sales all the time, if you ever want to check it out. And when you’re ready to come in and shop, we look forward to seeing you.” Elodie angled her head. “I usually end that spiel with a name, but I don’t know yours.”

She chuckled, gripping the bag. “Um, Imogene.”

Elodie’s eyes softened. “Beautiful name. It suits you.”

Heat rushed to her cheeks. Two compliments in one day. This was a record.

“I should get going. But I will be back.” She turned to Sal. “Thank you.”

“My pleasure, Imogene.” Sal winked. “That’s a name I’m going to remember.”

She waved, walked out of the door, and headed toward the lot, clutching her bag with her brand new hat. Sometimes life handed people small moments as a reminder that as bad as life seems at the time, good things are around the corner.

Thanks, Sal.

*

Imogene wiggled the key into the lock of her extended stay motel room. It was on the outskirts of the city and the cheapest she could find on her budget. It wouldn’t have been her first choice, but those were limited. They had been for a long time. The place was so dated, they hadn’t even upgraded to keypads and cards. She nudged her shoulder into the door and gave one hard push. It always stuck.

She widened the door and flicked on the light. *Home sweet…ughhhh!* No one’s home should smell like hers. A combination of mildew, stale

cigarettes, and vinegar. She'd been living there for three and a half months, lit candles and incense on a daily basis, and bleached the room floor to ceiling. *Twice!* And still…it stunk.

Imogene kicked the door closed, dropping her pocketbook on the small table and taking off her jacket. She hung it on the hook near the door. It was always a balancing act. It had been knocked out too many times to count when the neighboring room held a rowdy party. That happened often.

She walked across the room to the corner near the bathroom. She glanced down and sighed. While she was grateful for a roof over her head, she would've preferred one that didn't leak. The drops falling into the bucket had become an everyday occurrence. She'd become immune to the constant dripping except during heavy rainfall.

It could be worse.

Couldn't it?

She sat on the bed, glancing around the room. She'd put some personal touches to make it feel more homey. *Well, I tried.* She had her work cut out for her in a place that should've probably been condemned ten years ago. After relocating, Imogene thought for sure she'd be able to find something decent on her income.

Define decent.

It may have been a more livable space if she didn't have a corner of the room dedicated to the boxes of files piled high and three rows deep in the small room. She'd put her furniture and most of her things in storage until she could find a permanent place to live. But she'd opted to keep the files with her.

She pushed up from the bed and made her way to the boxes, sliding her hand over the top. Everything about her father's case. She couldn't fault Erik for scoffing at the fact she'd kept the files after his death. What was the point, right? Even if she found the smoking gun to prove his innocence, it wouldn't change anything. Her dad would still be gone. It wasn't the first time that rational thought had run through her mind. In fact, it was all she'd thought about in the last month. She could easily drop them off at the dump and wipe her hands clean of it. But…*I can't let it go.*

Imogene lifted the lid of the box and gasped when she saw the paperwork on top. This was not part of her father's case. She immediately closed it and looked around the room.

Hello…you're alone!

Imogene would've made the worst criminal. She was far too nervous and guileless to break the law. She was a horrible liar and hadn't a clue how to hide her guilt. Theft, breach of confidentiality, fraud. Charges like those could land her in prison for years, paying restitution for decades and a criminal record for the rest of her life. Imogene would never.

Except this one time.

She squeezed her eyes shut as the blood raced through her veins, and her skin prickled.

I can't believe I did it.

Against her better judgement and completely out of character, Imogene had done something illegal. An act that could've had dire consequences if she'd been caught. She lifted the top off the box, and picked up the papers, scanning the first sheet. A photocopy of an inmate's paperwork. Only those who worked in the prison were privy to this information. She'd had access to the file room but not authorization to see those contents. Volunteers were not granted clearance to view personal information.

In other words, she'd stolen the file. Why? Even she didn't have an answer. Or at least not a good one. Imogene had no intention of using it for nefarious purposes. She'd just wanted to know more about Zane. Obviously, she knew this was not the way to do it. However, in a brief moment of weakness, she just hadn't cared.

Her eyes skimmed over the long list of previous arrests. They dated back almost two decades. This term hadn't been his first time in prison. But it had been his longest sentence.

Zane Pierce. Alias: Jekyll. Criminal association: Killcreek Drifters MC.

She bit her bottom lip, obsessively focused on his mugshot. Shaved head, dark blue eyes, and a beard reaching past his neck. His stare was bitterly harsh. There was no softness in this man. And still… Imogene smiled as the butterflies swarmed her belly and heat shot down between her legs.

"I wonder what he's doing right now," she mumbled.

****

"I'm gonna get you the money." The man heaved, hunched over on all fours with blood dripping from his nose, trying to breathe. "Just need a little more time."

Is nobody fucking original anymore? Jekyll took the last drag from his cigarette and flicked it across the room. It landed a foot away from the man.

He pushed off the wall, circling the guy. His VP, Cross, had led the meeting with a dealer who'd taken product, sold it to buyers, and hadn't compensated the Killcreek Drifters MC. That was a problem. Jekyll always found it odd that anyone thought they could get away with ripping off the club and suffer no consequences. *Fucking fools.* Most associates knew better, but every once in a while, someone came up with a grand scheme to steal from the club. *Again, fucking idiots.*

"We're not leaving without our ten grand." Cross stood a few feet away, folded his arms, and stared down at the guy.

The man held up his hand. "I just need…"

Jekyll had lost his patience an hour ago. He was beyond listening to the whimpering pleas of a grown man who'd tried to steal from the club. He lifted his leg and landed the heel of his boot on the man's back. A loud thump echoed through the room followed by a muffled wailing.

Jekyll eyed him and shook his head. "Tempted to cover his debt so I can just fucking kill him now."

Oak laughed. "I'll throw some cash in. Anything to not have to listen to this pussy whine anymore."

Cross's lips twitched, and he bent down but jerked his head back when heavy boots sounded. Cross straightened as Cue and Cypher walked in the room.

"You find anything?" Cross asked.

The two brothers were given orders to flip the entire house. It wasn't uncommon for money to be hidden. Of course, considering the beating this guy had just endured, he probably would've given it up by now.

"Not cash, but—" Cue smirked, lifting his hand, holding a bag of product. From the packaging alone, Jekyll knew it wasn't theirs. "I'd say this is worth about ten grand."

"N-no, no." The man tried to get up, but Jekyll pressed his foot deeper into his back. "That's not mine."

Cross snorted. "You're right. It's *ours* now."

"Fuck." The man whimpered.

"Get the fuck up." Jekyll gripped his neck, lifting him, then slamming his limp body against the wall. Somehow the man managed to stay upright. "Gonna give you a few minutes to grab some of your shit. You're fucking welcome."

He sniffled the blood from his nose into his throat and then choked on it.

Ah, fuck, that's gross.

He cleared his throat and wiped his nose, smearing the blood across his face. "Am I leaving my house?"

You dumbfuck.

Jekyll shared a look with Wraith and smiled. "I fucking would if I were you. It's gonna get hot in here real soon."

It was a signature mark from Killcreek. They were notorious for it, and in ten minutes, this guy was going to feel it. Jekyll knocked the man into the wall and walked through the room, down the hallway, and to the back of the house.

He walked out the back door, searching for the hose. He found a water spicket on the side of the house. He turned the knob and bent down, scrubbing the blood off his hands. Fighting had always been second nature to him. It was an outlet, and he'd been doing it his whole life. In fact, it was the reason he'd solidified his place among the club. When he was sixteen, him and Hyde had been working for a local dealer. He found out his boss was selling mixed drugs, and Jekyll was taking the brunt of the backlash and loss of sales. Jekyll confronted him, but he had the backing of the Underground and thought he was invincible. When Jekyll set up a meeting, he'd been met with an army.

It did nothing to deter Jekyll from beating the shit out of the dealer. He'd been up against the toughest men. Not all were wins, but he'd never backed down. Surprisingly, no one had stepped in when he'd pulverized the dealer, leaving him only half alive. The next day, he was summoned by Inez, and a few days later, he and Hyde were indoctrinated into the Killcreek Drifters MC. Most new members went through prospecting, but it was the early stages of forming the club. Jekyll and Hyde had their fair share of hazing, but not nearly as bad as what he put new prospects through.

He switched off the knob and straightened, wiping his hands on his jeans.

"We're out," Cypher said, walking down the stairs and heading toward him. "You good?"

Jekyll gave a curt nod, turning toward the brother. "Yeah."

He started toward the side of the house.

"Jek. Need a minute."

Jekyll stopped, eyeing the brother who glanced around the empty yard. He'd been close with all the members, but some tended to be tighter than others. Years ago, that hadn't been the case for him and Cypher. It had changed when they'd rescued Cleo, brought her back to the clubhouse, and were sworn to secrecy with Knox. It bonded the men in a way outside of the club.

"Didn't want to bring this up at the house since you asked to keep it between us." Cypher dragged his hand down his mouth. "Been watching your librarian like you asked." His lips twitched. "Imogene."

Jekyll always had a physical reaction when he heard her name. When he balled his fists, the cuts on his knuckles burned, but he steeled his reaction. He trained his mind to not think of her. But every once in a while she crept in.

He lifted his chin for Cypher to go on.

"You know I got that associate in the prison making sure to keep tabs on her."

His back straightened, and he gave a curt nod. He'd already established protection for her on the inside. But he'd privately asked for Cypher to reach out to a guard on their payroll. It was an extra layer of security for her. But Jekyll gave Cypher strict instructions. He didn't want any updates unless something happened. He clenched his jaw, stepping closer to his brother.

"Something happen?"

"She left." Cypher stared back at him.

What? He furrowed his brows.

"Figured you'd want to know, if by chance you were paying for her protection on the inside." He arched his brow. "The guard assumed you did 'cause he said no one's messed with her."

Jekyll steeled his features. He hadn't paid anyone to keep her safe while she'd remained at the prison. He didn't have to. One simple threat spread far and wide. *If you come for mine, I'm going to come for yours.* It was enough to strike fear in most inmates. It was all about personal survival behind the metal bars. But everyone had someone on the outside. Vulnerable and unprotected. With Jekyll's reputation, very few would dare to take a chance. And for those that did, they were made an example of.

But Jekyll had taken an extra measure and made a deal with one of the most dangerous inmates, Morty. In exchange for shielding Imogene on the

inside, he'd watch over the inmate's mother if she needed something. So far she'd only called twice. Once to threaten her landscaper for not edging the property and charging her. And the other to have a talk with a neighbor who wasn't abiding by the noise ordinance. Both problems had been resolved instantly.

Cypher moved closer, lowering his voice.

"She's not volunteering anymore as of a couple months ago."

Good. The last place she needed to be was surrounded by dangerous criminals. But her sudden departure had him on edge.

"He know why?"

Cypher shook his head. "No. He didn't have much direct contact with her. Just said she finished out the class and never came back. He asked around, but all he got was that she quit. He hadn't heard of any incidents involving her."

"Alright." He stepped back but halted when Cypher lifted his hand.

"Did some digging when I got the info. You follow her dad's case? His retrial?"

Jekyll shook his head. He'd tried to put distance between himself and the thought of her. He'd trusted Cypher to bring anything of concern to him. On one or two occasions, he asked without being prompted. This woman had managed to do the impossible. She'd gotten under his skin. But Jekyll had clear boundaries for himself when it came to Imogene.

Once he'd gotten back from prison, he'd been debriefed on everything they'd found on her. Personally, there wasn't much except for her father. He'd been convicted of murder and sentenced to life without parole. Then he'd been granted a new trial.

"He's dead. Got stabbed to death while in lockup."

It wasn't unheard of. In fact, it was more common than most people realized.

"When?"

"About four months ago."

Jekyll may not have followed the case, but he had looked into it once he was released. Cypher had done the majority of the research. A lot of court paperwork and files. Anything they could get their hands on. While there were a few discrepancies, his guilt was laid out in detail.

"When did she leave?"

"About the same time."

What the fuck?

Jekyll clenched his jaw. “And your guy is just telling you now?”

Cypher sighed. “They went on lockdown after a riot. All volunteers were put on leave. He didn’t think much of it at the time. Then when they were all reinstated, he noticed a new person take over the library. Said he thought Imogene was focusing more on the classes, but come to find out, she’d left, giving notice a few days before the lockdown.”

Jekyll grasped his mouth, trailing his hand down his long beard.

“Where is she now?”

“Thought you might wanna know, so I did a quick check.” Cypher paused. “Your girl is in the wind.”

My girl. Imogene had never and would never be his. She’d be someone else’s. A man who came home every night, bought her bullshit flowers, and shared his day with her. Not a man who could warm her bed and be gone by morning, a guy who couldn’t share his life with her. And certainly not an ex-con biker who was washing blood from his hands in the back of a drug house.

Every single one of those thoughts pissed him off. But none greater than imagining her with another man. It had been a while since he’d allowed the thoughts to occupy his mind. It was harder when he was in prison and saw her on a daily basis talking to other inmates. Jealousy had never played a part in his life, especially when it came to women. Jekyll never got attached to any of them. Even dating back years in his past, he refused to get close to a female. He grew up with a woman who wanted everything from him and gave nothing, not even kindness, in return. His own mother set the bar especially low for what he thought of women.

But she’s not like my mom. In fact, Imogene wasn’t like any woman he’d ever met. Initially, when she’d first started working in the prison library, he’d watched her a lot. She’d been nothing but sweet and welcoming to every inmate. Jekyll watched, trying to figure out what angle she was working and what would be her gain. *I never could find it.*

“In the wind?”

What the fuck did that mean? Cypher was the club’s tech guy. He could find just about anyone. Certainly a librarian wouldn’t be so hard to find, especially with no previous ties to any illegal groups. The mere thought of Imogene being connected to anything outside the law was comical. But he wasn’t laughing. *Where the fuck is she?*

“The prison’s gotta have information.”

“Nothing updated.” Cypher grasped the back of his neck. “But I can find her if you want, Jek. Just give me some time, and I’ll get a location on her.”

Did he want to know? What was the point? Jekyll had no plans to ever see her again. As much as she’d become an infatuation for him while he’d been inside, he was out now. Their paths would never cross again. Why the fuck would he want to know where she was? It was better for her if he didn’t.

Fuck!

“Find her.”

Cypher lowered his chin.

Jekyll sharpened his glare. “And this stays between us.”

“Yeah, brother.”

There were no secrets among the club. However, this had nothing to do with the MC. This was personal.

As he rounded the building, the prospects were loading the back of the van while another was dousing the perimeter of the small house with gasoline.

Gent stalked forward, grinning. “Would you like to do the honors?”

Jekyll reached into his chest pocket, pulling out his lighter. All members had one. It was part of patching in. They’d also come to be known for their justice in the form of flames.

He walked to the porch, and the dealer stumbled out with his hands full. Jekyll’s lips twitched, but his glare hardened when the guy looked over.

After he passed, Cue and Oak walked out, tossing the gasoline canister on the porch. The area was pretty desolate, and it would take at least thirty minutes for the volunteer fire department to show up. *If* a neighbor called it in. And that was a big if. Most people around the area kept to themselves and didn’t look out for one another.

Jekyll waited for Cue and Oak to pass then reached for the wadded newspaper, set the end aflame, and tossed it through the open front door.

Just another day as a brother in the Killcreek Drifters MC.

*

Jekyll slowed down as he passed the clubhouse and the entire back property opened up into a little village of houses. When he’d heard about the idea while inside, he couldn’t picture a secret neighborhood beyond the

clubhouse. Each brother was offered a house and Jekyll didn't hesitate taking one. Technically, his was the first completed when he came home. It was surreal most days having a place of his own. It was a first for him.

He battened down his yawn. He had one agenda. Shower, beer, and relax in peace. That was quickly dashed when he saw his house in the distance and a familiar brunette sitting on the steps.

He stopped his bike in front of Cue's house, eyeing the woman.

"Jesus fucking Christ."

Cue pulled up next to him and laughed, shaking his head. "You could avoid this shit if you just furnished your house, man."

He angled his head, scowling at his brother. Cue pulled into his driveway and shut down his bike then made his way to Jekyll.

"I'll take the product inside." Cue glanced over his shoulder, looking at Jekyll's house with a small smile playing on his lips. "And remember, she means well."

I fucking know that.

"This is Cleo. Gotta be nice or you deal with Wraith," Cue taunted.

Jekyll was always nice, well nice for him, when it came to Cleo. She probably saw the softest side of him, which wasn't much, but she got it. It had nothing to do with the threat of Wraith. She got the most human he was capable of because she deserved it.

Cue retrieved the pick-up from his saddlebags, and Jekyll rode a few houses down, pulling into his driveway. Cleo immediately stood, waving. Had it been any other woman, he would've dismissed her and not been polite about it. Since getting out of prison, his home had become his sanctuary. No one was allowed inside except members.

Cleo was the exception. She rushed down the stairs, meeting him on the walkway. From his peripheral vision, he saw a cardboard box on the porch.

"Hi Jekyll."

He lowered his chin.

She hooked her thumb over her shoulder, gesturing to the box.

"You said you don't have any dishes. So when I was at the thrift store, I picked some up."

He cocked his brow. "Said I didn't have them. Never said I wanted them. I use paper plates."

"I know." She shrugged. "But if you have real dishes, you won't have to waste money buying them."

“No.” He grasped his hips. “Instead, I’ll have to fucking wash them.”

She bit her bottom lip then widened her eyes and smiled. “But look at it this way, you’ll have them for when you entertain guests.”

“Cleo?” He furrowed his brows. “Who the hell am I gonna entertain?”

Her cheeks pinkened. “Maybe you’ll meet someone.”

Jekyll snorted, continuing past her to the porch. “And I got my room in the clubhouse for that. No one comes in my house.”

He unlocked the door, opened it, and walked inside. He expected to hear her following him, but it was silent. When he turned around in his living room, she was still in the doorway, holding the box of dishes.

“You just gonna stand there?”

She hiked her brows. “You just said no one comes in your house.”

He glanced up at the ceiling, silently counting to ten. Patience. He had to give her that. “Cleo, you’ve been inside before.”

“Yeah, but I thought maybe this was a new rule.”

He slowly turned, narrowing his gaze. “You been hanging out with Gent?”

“Not more than usual.” She cocked her head. “Why?”

“’Cause you’ve become a real fucking smart ass since I been away.”

She smiled, and he shook his head, rolling his eyes. “Get your ass inside the house.”

Cleo walked in and made a beeline for the dining room table. It wasn’t more than a used four-person round table with not much life left in it. It didn’t matter. He’d only gotten it to fill the space. Jekyll had splurged on a TV, couches, and a bedroom set, but that was it. It was more space than he was accustomed to. Aside from his room at the clubhouse, he’d never had place all to himself.

“I also got sponges, dish soap, and a drying rack. Oh, and some hand towels.”

He walked over to the fridge, pulled out a beer, and twisted the top off, tossing it in the garbage. Cleo pulled out everything, laying it out on the table. He had no intention of using any of it, and it would be put back in the box and shoved into a closet the minute she left. But he wouldn’t throw it out. He was an asshole, but he appreciated the intention, especially coming from her and knowing it was pure.

There weren’t many women he respected, only two. And Cleo was one of them.

“Oh, and I have one more thing.”

Jesus fucking Christ.

“Cleo.” He growled.

She held up her hand. “This is small, I promise. I know you don’t want décor or knickknacks, and I respect that because this is your house. But I saw it, thought of you, and I couldn’t resist.” She pulled a small motorcycle statue from the box. “Looks just like your bike, right?”

He inched closer. There was a small resemblance.

“Well.” She tucked her hands in her pockets. “As Inez would say, I’m going to get the fuck out.”

Jekyll cracked a smile. “Quoting Inez now? Wraith must love that shit.”

Her soft giggle echoed through the room. “I keep trying to get her to have lunch with me, but so far no luck.”

“She shuts you down?”

“No, she doesn’t say anything. She just hangs up on me every time I ask.” Cleo shrugged. “I think she’s hoping I’ll stop calling.”

She’s definitely hoping for that, Cleo.

“You gonna stop?”

The corner of her mouth curled, and she shrugged. Cleo wouldn’t stop, and for some unknown reason, he loved that.

“Bye, Jek.” She waved and walked out the door.

He circled the dining room and stood in the center of the living room. He did this every once in a while. Just stood in the house in silence. It gave him peace.

This was *his*.

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CHAPTER TWO

"You've got this. You've got this." Imogene chanted.

I need this.

Nerves were getting the best of her as she prepared for her job interview. In a perfect world, she'd work at the library full time. Since that wasn't an option, she'd applied at a few companies. Her interview today seemed like a good fit. She just needed to nail it.

Imogene straightened out her blouse, shaking the wrinkles from the arms. An hour in the hot steam of the shower had only mildly helped.

The sharp knock on the door had her jumping slightly and spinning around. It could only be one of two people. Living in the extended stay motel was an interesting experience. It didn't lack in the diverse group of residents. Some shadier than others. Imogene had done her best to be friendly, but most people weren't interested in small talk, with the exception of her neighbors. Ricky and Angie lived a couple doors down. They'd introduced themselves when she'd first moved in. Artists. And then there was Bernice, a grandmotherly type whom she shared a wall with.

She opened the door and smiled when she saw the younger couple.

"Hi."

Angie leaned on the doorframe. "Hey girl, how's it going?"

"Good, how are you guys?"

"We're great." Angie shared a look with Ricky, smiling. "Just wanted to invite you out tomorrow night. A bunch of us are hitting a club downtown, and we want you to come."

Really? "That's so nice of you to think of me."

Angie giggled. "Yeah, well, we noticed you don't go out much, and since you're new to our little city, we figured we'd show you around. This club is the shit. You'll love it."

"Um, sure. That sounds like fun."

Does it? Going out to a nightclub. She'd been so far out of the loop with social gatherings, she wasn't even quite sure what to expect. Her father's case had consumed her life for the last few years. It left little time

for anything personal. *I can't even remember the last time I did something fun.*

"We gotta make a stop before, but my buddy, Lou, will meet you out front of The Bowery. Sound good?"

They weren't all going together? They must've read her concern. Ricky moved closer.

"Known Lou for years. He's a cool guy."

Hmmm. They were meeting in a public place. If she got a bad vibe from him, she could always leave.

"Okay. But um, how will I know Lou if I've never met him?"

Angie waved her hand. "Oh, he's seen you before when he stopped by here. He'll find you. Ten o'clock."

"Okay."

Imogene gave a short wave, and she rushed into the room, grabbing her bag. She'd learned her lesson with traffic and gave herself an extra fifteen minutes from the expected travel time. But nobody could've predicted the fender bender two cars ahead of her on Main Street.

By the time she finally made it to the office, she was ten minutes late and feeling the sharp pain of blisters forming on the back of her foot. This was not how she'd wanted the interview to start. She checked in and took a seat near the window.

"I should've given myself more time," she muttered, glancing around the reception area. She was the only one waiting. Hopefully, that was a good sign. Maybe she was the only person applying.

Aside from the library, it had been a while since she'd been on a formal job interview. Seven years? Maybe eight. She wasn't counting her volunteer work or tutoring.

"Imogene?"

She jerked her head to the woman standing in the doorway. This must be Judy. They'd spoken when she'd set up her interview. She didn't look happy. Imogene popped up from her seat and rushed forward, extending her hand.

"It's so nice to meet you, and I'm so sorry I'm late. I'm usually very punctual."

Judy snorted. "Nobody's punctual in the city. Come on back."

Imogene followed her down the dreary hallway. There was zero color or accents to make it appear inviting. It only amped up her anxiety.

Imogene took a seat as Judy rounded her desk. She leaned forward, offering her resume.

Judy knitted her brows and cocked her head. “You sent the resume via email.”

“I just thought you might want a hard copy too for your files.”

Judy chuckled, and grabbed the paper. “Efficient. I like that. It makes up for your tardiness.”

Shoot.

Imogene forced a smile and settled into the chair. She took a deep breath, preparing her sales pitch of her skills.

“Well.” Judy dropped the resume on the desk and folded her hands. “You’re definitely qualified.”

This was a good sign.

“As I explained on the phone, you’ll be dealing with former inmates. Getting out of prison can be difficult. Thrust into a new world. We help with resources and services. We’re a private company, and Lawry is our home base. But you’d be traveling to clients throughout the state. The position is remote, and you’d be expected to check in at the office once a week. Mondays at eleven.” Judy arched her brow. “On time.”

Imogene immediately nodded.

“We have a log in system that you’re required to use. It’s a way to track you should you run into any issues. There’s no learning curve or forgiveness for that rule. You break it, you’re fired. If we can’t ensure your safety, you become a liability.”

“Has that ever happened before?”

“Four times.” Her gaze hardened slightly. “Let’s not make it five.”

“I won’t. And it sounds perfect. Just what I’m looking for.”

Judy glanced down at her resume. “You certainly have the experience. Volunteering at the prison definitely gives you an edge above the rest of the candidates. Why’d you leave?”

Life had changed.

“It’s a long story.” She sighed. “But you can check my references. I didn’t have any issues there.”

“And you’re new to Lawry?”

“Yes.” She shifted to the edge of her seat. “I’ve been here for a few months. I’m in the process of looking for an apartment. So I’m definitely here to stay.”

“Where are you living now?”

“The Kroger motel on Mill Lane.”

Judy’s lips twisted. The disgust was easy to read. “I hope they’ve done renovations since the last time I was there.”

Imogene flattened her lips, forcing a smile. If she had to guess, they hadn’t. It was rundown, and she had to do a complete cleaning of the room before she was comfortable to fall asleep. Thirty-six hours. Imogene could’ve opted for a nicer place, but she wasn’t sure how long it would take before finding an apartment. She didn’t want to exhaust her funds on a temporary fancy hotel. Looking back, it had been a smart decision.

“It’s only temporary. Like I said, I’m apartment hunting.”

“How’s that working out?”

“Well” —she blew out a breath, ruffling her long bangs— “Not as well as I had hoped.”

“City living can be expensive.”

Imogene snorted, “Yeah, plus everything I’ve looked at is so small. It wouldn’t fit all my belongings on top of my files. I have everything in a storage unit for now, but I’d really like to get in somewhere soon. I was hoping to find an inexpensive complex and rent two apartments, side by side, if I can’t find something big enough. One for my everyday living space and the other as an office. But as you pointed out, it’s very expensive.”

Judy lifted her chin. “Files on?”

A sudden dread washed over her. Why had she mentioned the files?

“My father’s case.”

Judy settled in her seat, eyeing Imogene. “Tell me about that.”

Imogene shifted in her chair. This topic always brought a tense element to the conversation. “He was wrongly accused and convicted. He had been granted a new trial, but, um” —she swallowed the knot in her throat— “He was killed in prison.”

“What was the charge?”

I’m going to lose this job before I get it.

“Murder,” Imogene muttered.

She expected a shocked reaction, but Judy remained neutral.

“Wrongly accused and convicted, huh?”

It was the response Imogene had come to expect anytime the topic of her father had come up. At least Judy wasn’t being openly mean. More

times than not, Imogene had been on the receiving end of harsh criticism for her support of her father and cruelty she didn't wish on anyone. But again, she understood it. He'd been convicted once, and for most people that was enough, and their minds couldn't be changed.

"The justice system is flawed" —Imogene held up her hand— "I know people say that all the time. But in this instance, it's the truth." Imogene paused, waiting for Judy's response.

"I've been doing this a long time. Cynicism comes with the territory."

"I understand." And she did. While innocent people were wrongly convicted yearly, it was by far not the norm.

Judy straightened in her seat, grasping the edge of her desk and pulling herself closer. She scanned Imogene's resume again, biting her lip. Was she contemplating? *Please, hire me.*

"Can you start on Monday?" She peered up with a small smile playing on her lips.

"I can start today," Imogene blurted.

She chuckled and held up her hand. "Monday is fine." Judy sat back in her chair, eyeing Imogene. After a few seconds, it became awkward. "Do you mind if I ask you a few personal questions?"

"No, go right ahead. I'm an open book."

"Married? Boyfriend?"

Oh, that's forward.

Imogene chuckled. "No. I don't really date much."

Ever. The last man she dated was casual and only lasted six months. Things had been going good until her father had been arrested. It was interesting to see how many people bailed when life got hard. Better to find out early though.

Judy clasped her hands, leaning back in her chair. "Why is that?"

"Um, I don't really have time."

Girl, you have plenty of time. But she wouldn't be offering up the details of her pathetic social life. Why advertise?

"You got family close by?"

"Just a cousin who lives in Lawry, but um, we're still in the reconnecting process, so we don't see each other often."

Judy slowly nodded. "Friends in the area?"

Imogene awkwardly cleared her throat. "Not yet, but I'm working on it."

What an incredibly lame answer. She sounded more like a ten-year-old at a new school rather than an independent twenty-seven year old woman.

Judy smiled, though it didn't quite reach her eyes, and she glanced down at her phone. The silence stretched, and a part of Imogene was wondering if Judy was going to withdraw the employment offer.

"Can't make any promises." Judy held up her hand. "But I have a friend who owns an apartment complex downtown. Let me make a call and see if she has any vacancies."

What?

"Oh my God, that would be wonderful."

"Don't get too excited. Even if she has availability, it's far from anything special." She paused, scanning Imogene's face. "But it's safe."

Imogene grinned, and her excitement almost bubbled over. "I don't need fancy."

"Good." Judy snorted. "'Cause you're not going to get it there. Let me make the call and get back to you. Until then, I'll get the paperwork for you to sign so you can start on Monday."

Imogene waited until Judy left the room for her mini celebration. She tapped her feet, wiggled in her chair, and felt an immense pressure lift off her shoulders.

Finally! Everything was working out perfectly.

****

Jekyll clenched his jaw, gripped her hair in a tight fist, and rocked his hips. *Fuck, I needed this!*

She didn't even pull back. She sucked harder, and he lurched forward, coming down her throat. He dropped back on the bed, catching his breath and enjoying the release. It was short-lived. Her nails trailed down his thighs, and his muscles tightened.

He was done.

When he sat up, she immediately stood, inching away, allowing him to stand and pull up his jeans and buckle them. He drove his hand over his shaved head and gave her his back.

"I was thinking maybe I could stay tonight."

Most women knew how he operated. This one clearly did not.

Jekyll squared his jaw, shifting around slowly with his glare locked in place and remained silent.

“Or maybe you want to come back to my place? I have roommates, but they won’t mind.” She hooked her thumb over her shoulder. “I’m in Birch, only twenty minutes away. What do you say?”

“No.”

Her smiled faltered. “What about tomorrow or…”

“No,” Jekyll snapped.

She laughed without an ounce of humor, jerking her gaze to his bed. “But we just…”

Fucking hell. He should’ve known better. She wasn’t a club whore. Every so often they had women come to party with their friends. Jekyll had clocked it the minute she came up to talk to him. He should’ve walked away, but she looked good and was down to fuck. It should’ve been that simple.

“We fucked, you sucked my cock, and I came down your throat. That’s it.”

She gasped, and her brows dipped. “That’s an asshole thing to say.”

What the fuck?

“It’s the truth.”

She scoffed, grabbed her clothes from the floor, and quickly got dressed. “Yeah, well I guess I thought you’d be a decent guy and not a jerk.”

He spread out his arms. “What is it about me that gave you the fucking impression I’m anything but an asshole?”

She scanned his face and down to his chest. “Well, you can at least try to be a little nice.”

“Why the hell would I do that? For you?” His brows shot up. “You got naked less than fifteen minutes after introductions, and somehow you thought this was the beginning of a relationship?”

“You’re a dick!”

He gave a curt nod. “Yeah, I am. And you shouldn’t fuck men you don’t know.”

She turned her back, pulled up her jeans, and mumbled incoherently. Jekyll folded his arms and leaned against the wall. His room at the clubhouse was bare of any of his belongings. He’d fully moved to the house out back a few months ago. Ace asked about him giving up his room for a prospect close to patching in. Jekyll refused. He was still making use of his room. Nightly.

Bringing women into his house was out of the question and off the table. It was his sanctuary. The first real semblance of a home. Growing up, he'd had two dozen addresses and none of them impressive. As he'd entered his teens, he'd no longer bothered unpacking. What was the point? Living out of his duffle bag was easier when they'd only had two hours to escape the raids.

Jekyll waited for her to grab her bag from the floor, aggressively hooking it over her shoulder. She whipped around, waving her hand. *Fuck no.* He charged forward, stopping only a few feet from her. Her eyes widened, and she stumbled back.

"Don't ever fucking point your finger at me."

Jekyll had spent the last two years living under someone else's thumb, abiding by rules, and being told when he could eat, sleep, and shit. Those days were over, and he'd be damned if an entitled stranger thought she could dictate anything in his territory. "And don't think I'm going to listen to any more of your bitching. You willingly came to my room, got naked, and had no complaints when you were coming all over my cock. You're pissed 'cause I ain't gonna take you out to dinner?" He reached in his back pocket, pulled out his wallet, and flipped it open. He grabbed a twenty and twisted it between his fingers. "Go buy yourself a fucking burger and a bullshit latte."

Jekyll waited while she dropped her gaze to the floor, slowly scooting past him. He was seconds from lowering his hand when she snatched the twenty, bolted to the door, swung it open, and disappeared into the hall.

The corner of his mouth curved into a smile. He was out twenty bucks, but it was worth every penny not to see her face ever again. And he wouldn't. Jekyll had a keen sense of people. She'd be back, but she wasn't getting in.

He tucked his wallet in his pocket, adjusted his cut, and walked out of his room. His was located off the addition in the back. Years ago, the club had built a warehouse sized room that held most of their parties, the cage fighting, multiple bars, and pool tables. It could get noisy, but that wasn't much of a concern anymore since he wasn't sleeping in his room at the clubhouse.

He stopped at the opening of the room, looking at the crowds of people. He knew most of them. Some were members, but quite a few were friends and associates of the club. Jekyll cupped his hands, cracking his knuckles.

Since his release six months ago, he was still cagey around large groups of people. It had never been where he was most comfortable, but since he'd gotten out, he enjoyed it even less. He'd spent most of the time with his brothers. That's exactly who he went in search of. They were easy to find once he left the back room, down the short hallway lined with bathrooms. There was a line for the women's. *And look who it fucking is!* The girl from his room scowled and leaned closer to her friend, whispering. The friend glared in his direction.

Enjoy this fucking party because it's going to be your last.

He pushed open the door, and the group in front of him separated, making a clear path to the table. Jekyll took the empty seat next to Cue and across from Oak. He jerked his eyes to the man at the head of the table. Man might've been a stretch. He couldn't have been older than twenty-two. A fucking kid compared to him.

"Prospect." When Joker looked over, Jekyll lifted his chin. "Get me a whiskey, no ice."

Joker furrowed his brows, and Oak burst out laughing.

"Brother, he patched in months ago. I've told you that like four times already."

Cue sipped his beer, smirking. "And I've mentioned it, at least five."

Jekyll leaned back in his seat, eyeing Joker. "Right."

There was a long stretch of silence until Joker's chair scratched the wood floor, and he stood.

"You said whiskey, no ice, right?"

Oak laughed. "Brother, he's fucking with you."

Joker shrugged. "Yeah, I got that the first few times. But" —he glanced over at Jekyll— "you were away during my prospecting and missed out on hazing the fuck outta me. The least I could do is get you a drink." Joker lowered his chin and headed toward the bar.

"That kid is too fucking soft." Oak shook his head.

Cue snorted. "That's called respect, asshole."

It was. Joker had been the only new member to the club since he went away. When he came home, the kid was a stranger but always remained respectful. He kept his distance, not expecting to be accepted by him and Hyde simply because he'd joined the club. *He's growing on me.*

Oak cocked his brow, looking over at Jekyll. "Well, I ain't getting you a drink, man."

Jekyll’s lips twitched. “I got to fucking torture your ass during prospecting, so we’ll call it even.”

Oak twisted his lips. “You were such a brutal fucking bastard.”

“Made you earn the patch.”

Oak slowly nodded. “Yeah.”

Cross walked over with his old lady, Addison. This was a new and surprising development when he was released. Wraith finally claiming Cleo hadn’t come as a shock. That had been years in the making. But the VP settling down? No one was more surprised than him.

Cross stopped at the end of the table with Addison next to him, her arm wrapped around his waist. She gave a short wave, smiling.

“Hey guys.”

Cue and Oak greeted her. Jekyll merely stared. He didn’t know her, but to Addison’s credit, she’d tried making small conversation a few times. Twice at a clubhouse party and once at Barry’s where she was bartending. Jekyll hadn’t given her much. Hyde was more welcoming. They’d always been that way with his cousin being the lighter one. It hadn’t stopped her from trying to get to know him without forcing it. It was a move he could respect.

Cross scanned the room. “Where’s Hyde?”

“Penny’s. Saw him leave a few hours ago,” Cue said.

Cross nodded and grasped the back of his neck. “I take it we won’t see him for a few days then?”

“Probably not,” Cue said.

“I just don’t fucking get it.” Oak sipped his drink. “I mean, I can admit Penny’s hot. Smoking body, pretty face. But the fucking mouth on her. Why the hell does Hyde put up with her?”

Jekyll’s lips twitched. “Why don’t you ask him?”

Oak narrowed his gaze. “’Cause the last time I said anything about her, he nearly took my fucking head off. He’s like a dog with a bone when it comes to Penny.”

Hyde had his reasons, and he wasn’t obligated to share them with anyone.

Cross chuckled, giving a small shrug. “Then keep your fucking mouth shut.”

Joker came back to the table, placing his drink in front of Jekyll. He could’ve thanked him. Jekyll didn’t. He sipped his drink, settling back in

his chair. A few women passed by the table, one familiar face sending him a glare.

"Joker," he snapped, gaining everyone's attention. "Need something else."

Joker nodded, stopping at the end of the table. Jekyll leaned forward pointing to the woman and her group of three.

"The brunette in the black shirt, jeans, and purple stilettos? I want her out. And not just tonight. She's banned from stepping foot in Killcreek. You make that fucking clear."

"Just her or all of them?"

Jekyll sipped his drink, eyeing the women. There was a saying he'd heard a hundred times over, *show me your friends, and I'll show you your future*. The last thing any of the members needed was to get involved with that type of bullshit.

"All."

Without hesitation or question, Joker turned and stalked to the women.

"What did she do?" Addison asked, but her voice was low. She probably hadn't expected him to answer.

Jekyll looked up at the VP's old lady.

"Disrespected me in *my* house."

Addison glanced over at him and nodded. "Well, that's reason enough."

He wasn't sure what he'd expected, but it was a good fucking answer. It clearly showed Addison was very much part of their club and knew how it worked.

A few minutes later, Joker came back to the table and gave a curt nod. "It's been handled. And I know you're not asking for my opinion, but I definitely think that was a good call."

Jekyll finished off the last of his whiskey. When he put his glass down, another appeared in front of him. Joker must've told a prospect to keep them coming. *Again, respect.*

Cross pulled out an empty seat and gestured for Addison to take it. Once she sat, he took the chair next to hers. "I got two jobs. A seven-day run out of state. Got Gent and Ghost. But need three more. You guys want it? Pays double."

Count me the fuck in. Jekyll and Hyde had continued to make money on the inside. The banking was handled by Cypher, and when they got out, they'd both had a good savings. Technically, Jekyll didn't need the cash, but

he never turned down an opportunity to earn more. Spending most of his adolescent life poor, he never wanted to be in that position again. *And I won't be.*

"I'll take it," he said in unison with Cue.

Oak waved his bottle. "I'm in."

"Well, that was easier than I thought. Also got a run to Satan's Hex. Surprise visit. Want to check out their safe house."

Jekyll cocked his brow. "Don't trust them, do you?"

Cross's gaze darkened. "No."

His VP gestured to Addison. It was code for not discussing it further in front of her. Jekyll followed his lead.

"I'll take that one too."

"Good, you'll be riding with me and Ghost to check it out."

"Need a fourth?" Cue asked, and Oak slapped his hand on the table, laughing.

"Brother, you've got to stop denying this shit with her."

With who?

Cue scowled but didn't say a word. Cross tapped his knuckles on the table, gaining all their attention.

"Fourth would be good. After you come back from the seven-day run, take a day or two and then we'll head up there."

Cross stood, with his woman following his lead. He wrapped his arm over Addison's shoulder, and they headed toward the back hallway.

"Cue, man." Oak chuckled. "Don't let this be another wasted opportunity. Just fuck her and get her out of your system. And your mind."

"Shut the fuck up, Oak," Cue snapped.

Oak rested his elbows on the table, shaking his head. "What the fuck is stopping you, man?"

Jekyll had been out of the loop with a lot since coming home from prison. He was filled in quickly about club business, and at this point it was as if he hadn't been gone for two years. However, the personal lives of brothers were taking a bit longer.

He turned to Cue. "Who does he want you to fuck?"

Cue kept his glare on Oak, not answering, but Oak wasted no time filling him in.

"A club whore at Satan's. This fucking gorgeous redhead, stacked body, and she is on Cue every single time we're there. And I'm not talking about

a little flirting, she eye-fucks him from across the room.” He waved his hand over his face. “Blushes for this motherfucker. And he won’t do a damn thing about it.”

“I’m not fucking interested in a Satan’s club whore.” Cue’s tone was laced in anger.

“Bullshit. I’ve seen the way you look at her. You’re interested.” Oak sighed resting back in his chair. “If it were me, and she was looking at me like that, I’d have her bent over the table screaming my name in ten seconds flat.”

Jekyll shifted his gaze to Cue, his nostrils flared and his jaw squared, but he remained silent. It seemed Oak’s commentary had triggered him, making his disinterested comment less believable.

Cue scoffed. “You miss this, Jek? Deplorable fucking assholes.”

Jekyll smirked when Oak rolled his eyes, not taking an ounce of offense from the insult. He’d had Hyde with him in prison, but he’d missed the whole family. All the members of the club. The fighting, the banter, and most importantly, the brotherhood.

Yeah, I missed this.

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CHAPTER THREE

Imogene knew if she wanted to meet people, and she did, she would have to step out of her comfort zone. But meeting a complete stranger at a club went beyond the usual stretch. She kept reminding herself that while she didn't know Lou, Angie and Ricky did, and they'd vouched for him as a good guy. Imogene was ignoring the fact that she didn't know the couple well and who they deemed decent. But she showed up, and so far Lou was nice. *Kind of.*

He'd located her at the back of the line, introduced himself, and for the last fifteen minutes focused on his phone rather than speaking with her. It gave her plenty of time to people watch. *I'm definitely underdressed.* Most of the women wore form fitting flashy dresses, their hair perfectly styled, and makeup on point. Meanwhile, Imogene was in jeans, boots, and a long-sleeved black shirt. But to her credit, it curved around her body, accentuating her assets, and the neckline was low, showing off some cleavage. Not as much as most of the women in line. *I'm pretty sure I saw nipple on the girl in front of me.*

She looked down at her clothes. Maybe she should've worn a dress? She wasn't sure. It had been a while since she'd gone to any type of bar or club. And certainly none as high-end as this one. Imogene hadn't even thought to ask Angie about a dress code.

She tapped Lou on the arm. It took him a few seconds to tear his eyes away from his phone.

Imogene pointed to herself. "Is it okay what I'm wearing?"

Lou glanced down her body and shrugged. "Yeah, they'll probably let you in."

Probably? *Oh great!* She was standing in line with a fifty-fifty chance of gaining entrance to the club. They weren't the best odds.

"It should only be another twenty minutes."

Twenty more minutes?

Imogene sighed. Did people really do this every weekend? Stand around for over thirty minutes, hoping to get into a nightclub? *Maybe I'm*

not cut out for this.

Her shoulders sagged and she glanced up at Lou. “When do you think Angie and Ricky will arrive?”

“They’re inside already.”

Wait, weren’t they running late or had something to do beforehand? Wasn’t that the reason she was going in with Lou? That was strange. But maybe their prior commitment had fallen through.

“Is it always this busy?”

Lou didn’t bother looking up from his phone when he answered. “Yeah. But it’s worth the wait. I work the circuit twice a week and never seen the line shorter.”

Imogene knitted her brows. “You work here?”

If that was the case, why were they standing in line? Surely employees were given a special privilege to bypass the wait.

His hand stilled, hovering over his phone. He licked his lips and drew in a breath. Why was he stalling?

“Kind of. I mean, I don’t directly work for the club, but I conduct business in it.”

“What do you do?”

He glanced down at his phone and held up his hand. “Give me a minute, I gotta return a text.”

“Okay,” Imogene replied, and continued to peer around.

There wasn’t much open in the area. There were factories and a few small shops, but everything was closed for the day, drowning the end of the street in darkness, with only a soft glow from the streetlamps. She turned to the side when a man slipped through the line, making room. It had her positioned facing the street, and she looked up at the high rise. It was massively tall and ironically dark. There were only about two dozen windows lit up. It was after ten and possible the residents were asleep for the night.

When her phone rang, she pulled it out, smiling down at the screen. She tapped him on his shoulder.

“It’s my boss, I have to take it.”

He nodded. “Alright, I’ll hold your spot.”

Imogene stepped out of line, making her way to the curb. She pressed her phone to one ear and plugged her other with a finger in an effort to lessen the background noise.

“Hello?”

“Imogene, it’s Judy. Sorry for calling so late.”

“Oh no worries. I wasn’t sleeping. I’m actually out. At a nightclub with friends.” Imogene spared her the details of technically only being in line. There was still a chance she’d never make it inside. But her boss didn’t need to know that.

“That’s sounds like fun. I’ll make this quick. I spoke to my friend, and she’s got some open apartments. Do I have your permission to give her your information? Social security number, driver’s license, things that are needed for the background check?”

Yes!

Imogene bounced on her toes, grinning. Everything was working out so perfectly.

“Absolutely!”

“Good,” Judy said. “If everything checks out, you can move in tomorrow or the day after?”

Imogene stilled. *Really?*

“They can do a background check that quick?”

The line went silent. For a brief second, she thought Judy had hung up.

“Judy?”

“The landlord has a few connections, so yes.”

“Well, that’s great. Can you give me the address so I can take a ride by?”

“Not until the background check is done.”

Imogene furrowed her brows. “But what if I don’t like it, or it’s not big enough, and I don’t even know the rent yet…”

“Imogene.” Judy sighed.

“Yes?”

“From our talk at your interview, I sensed desperation on your end for better living conditions. It’s the only reason I reached out to *my friend* on your behalf. I called in a favor.”

Oh shit.

“I’m sorry, Judy. I don’t mean to sound ungrateful. I’ve just never done it like this before. Usually there’s a showing and…”

Judy cut her off. “Not for this. The two apartments are identical. Bedroom, bathroom, living room open to the kitchen. The rent is eight hundred dollars.”

That would be tight and put her in debt for the first few months, but if she budgeted right, she'd make it happen.

"My maximum spending for an apartment was fifteen hundred, but I'm sure I can swing sixteen hundred without a problem."

"I said eight hundred."

"Right, for each."

"That's for both apartments. The total is eight hundred."

What? That was unheard of in the city, and she would know. Imogene had checked out hundreds of listings, and not one showed up in that price range. That spoke volumes. It probably wasn't in the best neighborhood. Much like all cities, there were varying sections. *I do have mace and took that self-defense class a couple of years ago.* It was suggested when she'd decided to volunteer at the prison. *Still…*

"And um" —she muttered— "you said it's safe, right?"

"Extremely." Judy paused. "You're a young woman living alone in a new city without a partner, family, or many friends. I wouldn't send you anywhere that wasn't safe."

Ah, I love a girls' girl.

"I'll take them," she blurted.

Judy's soft chuckle echoed over the line. "Smart move. Let me get her your info, and hopefully by tomorrow morning you'll have a new place to live."

This was amazing.

"Thanks so much, Judy."

"You're welcome. Talk to you tomorrow. Bye."

"Bye!" Imogene hung up her phone and clasped her hands in prayer. This was beyond her highest expectations. Two apartments at that price? It was safe *and* affordable? There had to be some type of catch, but she trusted Judy not to steer her wrong. Maybe the universe was taking pity on her for all she'd been through. *And I'm not above pity favors.*

She was about to turn back to the line, but a group of men across the street caught her attention. They were headed down the sidewalk toward the five motorcycles lined up on the edge of the road. She angled her neck for a better look as they turned their backs. Each man was bigger than the other, with none being small to begin with.

Since living in Lawry, she'd seen a few guys from a motorcycle club riding around the city, usually in groups, but occasionally she'd catch one

on his own. The first time she'd seen them, her excitement was almost impossible to contain. For a fleeting moment, she'd thought maybe she'd see a familiar biker. But it wasn't him. It was a different club. Her enthusiasm deflated instantly like a popped balloon. She should've known better anyway. Killcreek wasn't close to Lawry.

Zane's motorcycle club, the Killcreek Drifters, lived up north. Imogene had privately, not telling a soul, looked up the town location. It was a few hours from the city. That had dashed any hope of possibly bumping into him. She'd briefly contemplated a spontaneous road trip. Taking a ride and ending up there fell short of 'I was in the neighborhood' and bordered on the line of 'I'm stalking you.' She'd quickly decided against that road trip.

When the group of bikers disappeared behind two large trucks on the street, Imogene found herself stepping off the curb and crossing to the other side. She was just curious what club they belonged to. There was no harm in it. She'd been too far away to read their patches and wanted a better look. She assumed there were several different clubs in the state. *I wonder if they know Zane.* Not that it mattered. Imogene had no intention of approaching the bikers. And she certainly wouldn't ask. *Why would I?* It wasn't as if her and Zane were friends. Hell, they were barely acquaintances. Practically strangers.

Except at night, in her bed. They'd gotten very intimate courtesy of her faithful vibrator. Her cheeks burned, and she slowed her steps. Masturbating to an inmate who showed zero interest wasn't exactly a romantic recipe for a sexual rendezvous. But in her mind? He was interested. *And it was freaking amazing!*

Imogene slowed her steps. They were only about twenty feet away and close enough to read their patches.

Oh my God!

Her mouth fell open as her eyes skated over the name of the club. *Killcreek Drifters MC.* It was Zane's biker club. *Holy shit!* What were the chances? She inched closer, looking over the men. She couldn't see their faces, but when the man on the end turned to the guy next to him, she gasped and covered her hand over her mouth.

It's him!

Imogene stared, caught in a trance. She'd never seen him in outside clothes. Her gaze travelled over his profile. His beard was a bit longer, but his head was still completely shaved. She couldn't see his eyes, but she'd

stared at him enough to know they were a dark shade of blue. *I memorized those eyes.*

Imogene tripped slightly when they moved closer to their motorcycles. They were leaving? *What do I do?* She hadn't expected to ever see him again. She'd hoped but knew the probability was low. Could this be fate? *Maybe.*

He grabbed his helmet from the handlebars. *Make a choice.* She only had seconds before he'd take off. Could she really stand by and let this opportunity pass? This could be the only chance she ever got. *Freaking take it!*

"Zane!" she tried to shout, but her voice cracked.

Dammit! Her nerves were getting the best of her. She lengthened her steps.

"Zane!" She shouted again, but between the cars whipping down the road and the music from the outside speakers at the club, it was possible he hadn't heard her.

But…

He stilled and looked across the street briefly then swung his leg over his seat. *Shit!* In prison, they used formal names. But she'd heard several inmates use his road name, and it was on his paperwork. What was it? She racked her brain, as she moved in on the bikes. It was something clever tying him and Xander together. What was it? Two of the men started their engines, which triggered her brain, and she shouted at the top of her lungs.

"Jekyll!"

All five bikers turned to look in her direction, but she kept her eyes locked on him. Heat rose from her chest to her cheeks within seconds. He squinted, then his eyes darkened, and his jaw squared. He was just as handsome as she remembered. Maybe not in the classic sense, but this man had a harsh, rugged allure. It was impossible to resist. At least for Imogene.

I can't believe it's him!

She waved, unable to keep her smile at bay. He hadn't said a word as she approached, but the motorcycles shut down, and the road became eerily quiet. She glanced over at the other four men. Their stares matched Jekyll's, and none were welcoming. She stopped a few feet away and shifted on her feet, drawing her gaze back to him.

"Hi!" Her high pitched tone did nothing to conceal her excitement.

He was someone she'd thought of often but never imagined they'd cross paths again. *But here he is.*

Jekyll didn't say a word. He stared as if looking at a stranger.

Does he not remember me? It had been quite a few months, six to be exact. It wasn't very long to keep a memory of a person he'd seen a couple times a week. Or maybe it was if that person wasn't very memorable to him.

He continued to stare, silently. The lines between his brows cut deep, and his lips were tightened in a flat line.

Uh-oh. This wasn't good. *What do I do?*

At this point, she couldn't simply walk away. She cleared her throat to speak but flattened her lips when he pulled off his helmet. He hooked it over his handlebar and stood, swinging his leg over his seat, turning to face her. They were only four feet apart. He still hadn't said anything, and she didn't have anything planned out. *I didn't think this through, but an introduction was a good start.*

She rested her hand over her chest, and his gaze dropped to her breasts.

"Hi! I don't know if you remember me." She gulped. "I worked in the prison library. And um, you were in a few of my classes that I taught there."

His gaze lifted, meeting her stare. But he continued to remain silent. He had a larger presence with his leather vest and street clothes. He'd been an intimidating figure in prison, but it didn't compare to him on the outside. He seemed taller and more muscular. A bit more dangerous and brutal. And so incredibly sexy.

Focus!

"I-I um." She swallowed the knot in her throat and dropped her gaze to the ground. This was embarrassing. "I made cupcakes on your last day for you and Xander before your release. You didn't take one at first, but…" Her voice trailed off.

So this is what it's like to crash and burn?

"I remember you." He growled.

Her gaze shot up. A bubble of giddy excitement rushed to her stomach, and her smile widened, uncontrollably.

He remembers me.

****

What. The. Fuck?

Not much surprised Jekyll. He was usually prepared for anything and everything. But *this*? Not even he could've predicted their paths ever crossing again. He'd banked on it. *And now, here she fucking is*.

"I wasn't sure if you'd remember me since it's been six months since we last saw each other." She let out a heavy breath that rolled into a nervous giggle.

How could Jekyll forget her? She'd haunted his dreams long after he'd gotten out. It was a face he could never erase from his mind. And he'd tried. As soon as he'd heard his name and turned back to see her standing there, he'd known instantly it was Imogene.

"What are you doing here?" It came out more like an accusation than a question.

Imogene lived hundreds of miles away. Her life was somewhere else. What the fuck was she doing in Lawry?

"Oh, I saw you from across the street and thought I'd come say hi." Her cheeks pinkened, and her smile widened as if she was genuinely happy to see him.

Jekyll had a gift for reading others. The tone of their voice, the words they chose, their demeanor, eye contact. He could sense deception instantly. And he got none from her. Most people feared him, keeping their distance. Not Imogene. She'd practically chased him down.

She pointed over his shoulder. "I'm going to the club with some friends."

Rogue's club. *Well, this shit keeps getting better.* But he wasn't asking about her plans. Jekyll wanted to know why she was in *his* state.

"I mean" —he growled, arching his brow— "in Lawry."

His tone alone should've had her on edge. She wasn't. Imogene actually stepped forward, shortening the gap between them.

"Oh." She chuckled. It was soft, just how he remembered. In fact, he hadn't forgotten anything about her. This woman had plagued his mind for almost two years. Even after he got out, he thought of her. Too much.

"I live here now."

What the fuck?

"Since when?"

"I moved here about four months ago."

Jekyll furrowed his brows. "Why?"

"Um." Her eyes shifted to his bike, and she pursed her lips, stalling.

He’d seen her do this before. About a year ago, a fight broke out in the prison library between a few inmates. He’d had no stake in it but stayed to make sure she didn’t get caught in the crosshairs. When it was finally broken up, a guard had asked her if she’d seen who’d started it. She had. But Imogene refused to make eye contact with him, pursed her lips, and said she didn’t see how it started.

“I was looking for a change of scenery.”

Liar.

“No introductions, brother?”

Fuck you, Gent. They all knew who she was. The prison librarian had been a popular topic in the club.

She shifted her gaze to the others and rested her hand on her chest. “Oh, hi. I’m Imogene.”

Gent got off his bike, smiling and stalking to her as if she were his prey. *Motherfucker, watch yourself.*

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“Nice to meet you, darlin’. I’m Gent.” He hooked his thumb over his shoulder. “And that’s Cue, Ghost, and Oak.”

Imogene leaned past Gent and waved to the members. He didn’t see their reactions. He was solely focused on her. He’d never seen her outside of the prison, and her lowcut shirt and tight jeans showing all her curves was distracting. *Fuck me.*

“That’s an interesting name.” Gent’s lips twitched. *Fucking asshole.*

“So, what do you go by?” he asked.

Imogene looked confused. She knitted her brows and leaned forward. “Excuse me?”

“What do people call you?”

She hiked her brows. “Um, Imogene.”

Gent smiled, cocked his head, and his eyes travelled down her body. Jekyll tried to ignore the fire burning inside his chest with another man

looking at her with interest.

"I mean, like a nickname. Em, Genie, what?"

She shifted on her feet, awkwardly swayed, and shrugged her shoulder. "Nope. Just Imogene."

Gent smirked. "I'm gonna come up with something."

Like fuck you are.

"Gent," Jekyll warned. His tone caught her attention, and she moved closer.

Imogene was completely oblivious to the tension.

"It's so crazy just running into you like this."

Yeah, it is. Some might even say suspicious. Jekyll veered his gaze across the street. The line was wrapped around the building with most people on their phones. Except one guy who was intently staring at them. Was she on a date? He clenched his jaw, ignoring the heat rising in his chest.

"Is that your *friend*?" Jekyll asked, glaring at the man.

The guy looked to be a little younger than Imogene, tall but thin.

"Oh, Lou is actually a friend of a friend. My neighbors, Ricky and Angie, invited me. They're already inside. And Lou, their friend, is kind of working tonight. He works the circuit at the club or something like that."

The circuit? *What the fuck is happening?* In a matter of six months, this woman went from volunteer librarian and teacher who made cupcakes to hanging out with dealers?

Jekyll slowly angled his head to her and hardened his stare. "Sells drugs."

Her eyes widened, and her jaw dropped. "What?" She shook her head looking across the street. "No."

Gent, who was only a few feet away, laughed. "That's what it means, darlin'. Working the circuit is selling drugs in the club. My guess, he wants you to play decoy. Did he ask you to hold something for him?"

She knitted her brows, turning to Gent. "Like what?"

Oh, Jesus fucking Christ. Jekyll dragged his hand over his head. She couldn't be this naïve.

"Like a package." Gent snorted.

Killcreek had been in the drug business long enough to know how it worked for the smaller dealers. Though this asshole was taking a risk doing

that in Rogue's club. The only drugs sold from inside would be their product, giving them all the profit.

She shook her head. "N-no, I'm just here for…"

"For what?" Jekyll snapped.

"They invited me out." The color drained from her face, and she rubbed her forehead, clearly in distress. "I just thought it would be fun."

Too innocent for her own good.

"How much fun you think it'll be if you get arrested?" Jekyll asked.

Imogene jerked her eyes to him, and he caught the small tremble. She leaned closer, and he balled his fists trying to ignore the sweet scent of her perfume. This was the closest they'd ever been to one another. So close he could see a light sprinkling of freckles across her nose. *Too fucking cute.*

"You really think he's a drug dealer?"

Yeah, she's this fucking naïve.

He raised his brows. Imogene was a different breed. One he wasn't familiar with. His family in the club and all their associates were deep into the life. No one was innocent or gullible. Not like her.

"Go home, Imogene."

Her lips pulled down in a slight frown. She nodded, seemingly in a daze but giving no pushback on his command. "Yeah, that's a good idea. I don't want to get in any trouble."

But she made no move to leave.

"Darlin', you need me to walk you to your car?"

I'm gonna fucking kill you, Gent. When his brother moved forward, Jekyll matched his steps, sending Gent a seething glare. It was a warning.

"Oh no." —She laughed, though it came off forced, and waved her hand— "I can get there myself." She started past Jekyll, but abruptly stopped next to him and craned her neck, looking up.

Her gaze softened. "How's Xander?"

Among all this chaos, she was asking about his cousin. Hyde had always been the friendlier of the two, but even in prison he was merely cordial with her.

"He's alright."

She smiled. "Will you tell him I said hi?"

Jekyll stared back without acknowledging her request. *Fuck, I can't believe she's standing right in front of me.*

She glanced over at his brothers. “It was nice meeting you all.” Then she turned back to him. “And it was so great seeing you again.” Her voice hitched and her cheeks pinkened.

Jekyll lowered his chin, and she ducked her head. Imogene looked both ways down the street then crossed. He expected her to walk down the driveway leading to the parking lot, but she veered toward the line.

I told you to go home.

“Mmmm” —Gent hummed— “I love a redhead.”

Jekyll slowly angled his head, scowling. Cue cleared his throat, gaining his attention. “Can we head out now? We’re already running late, Jek.”

He clenched his jaw, shifting his gaze across the street. She was talking with a guy in line. Her *friend.* When he pulled something out of his pocket and offered it to her, she stumbled back.

“We told her.” Gent laughed.

Fuck! Jekyll didn’t hesitate and stalked across the street. He bypassed the line and was a few feet away when he heard Imogene say, “No, I’m sorry, I’m really not feeling well. I have to go home.”

“Just come in real quick. I’ll buy you a drink.”

The second the man inched closer reaching for her arm, Jekyll lengthened his steps and came between her and him, grabbing the guy by the throat.

“What the fuck did she just say?”

His eyes widened, and he gasped for a breath. Jekyll squeezed his neck, leaned closer, and lowered his voice. “Do you know who I am?”

The guy shook his head.

“You’re gonna fucking find out if you ever come near her again.” Jekyll dug his fingers into his throat. “And trust me, you don’t want that.”

The other man nodded as his face turned a darker shade of red.

Jekyll gave him a slight push and released him. When he turned, Imogene was standing a few feet away, obviously stunned but showing no semblance of fear.

“Where are you parked?”

When she angled her head in the direction of Lou, he stepped to the side, blocking her view.

“Where?”

Her throat bobbed, and she pointed to the parking lot entrance. He lifted his chin, and she followed his order, heading to the driveway. He stayed

close behind her. Every few seconds she'd look back. He was going to make sure she got in her car and left. As they passed the back of the building, he noticed three members of security standing by the door. He only recognized one, Jared, who held the highest position in Rogue and Trey's security. Jekyll had no doubt it would be reported back that a member of Killcreek was on their property. *And I don't give a fuck.*

When she abruptly stopped, he slowed his steps, glancing down at the car. It was an older model but in decent shape. A sensible, safe, and good on gas type of car. Exactly what he'd expect from her.

"This is me."

"Get in the car."

Instead of doing what she'd been told, Imogene moved closer. Barely a foot separating them.

"Thank you for helping me out with Lou. I just wanted to tell him I was leaving, because if I didn't that would be rude. But your friend, Gent, was right. He tried to give me a package." She drew in a breath. "I just want you to know I had no idea he was a drug dealer."

And she had no clue he and the club transported drugs. It was a world where she didn't belong.

"Alright. Go home."

She licked her lips drawing his gaze to her mouth. Too many thoughts were running through his mind and all of them dirty in this close proximity.

"Can I just explain?"

"Explain what?"

"How I got here. With a drug dealer." She gulped. "I don't know many people in Lawry, so when Ricky and Angie invited me I thought it was a good opportunity to make some friends." She snorted. "That backfired, obviously."

You think?

Jekyll steeled his features, refusing to give in to a smile. He needed to put some distance between them. He gestured to her car.

"Get in."

She opened the door and sat, glancing up at him.

"Now, go home."

"Okay." She smiled. "Thanks for escorting me and stepping in with Lou back there. I know I already thanked you for that but I really appreciate it."

He gave a curt nod, expecting her to close the door. She didn't. Imogene stared back at him, her bright eyes reminding him of the first time he'd seen her in the yard at the prison.

"Would you like to…" She cleared her throat and immediately blushed. "I mean, do you think you might want…"

Whatever she was trying to convey had her hands shaking slightly and her chest rising rapidly. This is where his intuition came in handy. She was showing all the signs.

"Want what?" He growled, and she clamped her thighs together.

She darted her eyes from side to side, and her hands tightened over her knees. *Is she going to fucking ask me out?* Jekyll didn't know everything about females, especially women like Imogene, but he was sensing she was trying to build the courage to ask him on a date.

She blinked and pointed over her shoulder. "Would you like a ride to your bike?"

That's *not* what she was going to ask.

Jekyll cocked his brow. "That's what you wanna ask me?"

"Uh-huh." She nodded.

What the hell was she thinking wanting to get closer to an ex-con biker tied to an outlaw club? This woman should be running far away from him. She needed to go before he did something they'd both regret. He'd always had an undeniable draw to Imogene. He could never act on it behind bars. But there was nothing separating them now.

He grabbed the edge of her door. "Go home, Imogene."

He didn't trust himself to say another word. He slammed the door shut and started walking away when he heard the engine turn over. Security was still watching him, but he didn't acknowledge them. He could've given Jared a heads up about Lou selling in the club. But he didn't.

'Cause fuck you, Rogue.

He walked across the street and got on his bike. He was fully aware of the brothers watching him, but he kept his gaze laser focused on her car pulling out of the driveway. When she turned left, she glanced out the window and gave a short wave. His muscles tightened, but he didn't return the gesture.

"Jek?" Cue said.

Jekyll held up his hand, never taking his eyes off of her car. When the brake lights brightened, he angled his head to watch her make a left and

disappear.

Now they could head out. Jekyll grabbed his helmet and froze when he heard the cackle from beside him.

“That’s a sweet piece, Jek.” Gent’s taunting tone had his muscles tightening. “If you ain’t gonna call dibs, I might have to.”

“Gent, shut the fuck up,” Cue said, clearly reading the tension.

He hadn’t shared anything about Imogene with anyone but Cypher, Ace, and Cross. Even that was minimal. Hyde obviously had his own opinions but knew better than to push him on the subject of her. He didn’t have to. Hyde knew him better than anyone else.

Gent laughed, and his footsteps got dangerously close to Jekyll. “What? If it’s a big deal, I don’t mind sharing. We could do her together.”

A vision formed in his mind. Imogene and Gent. He squared his jaw and slowly turned to Gent, who was watching him from two feet away. Jekyll shot out his arm, wrapping his hand around Gent’s throat.

“Brother, don’t be greedy.”

Jekyll cocked his head, narrowing his gaze. “You’re not gonna go near her. You understand? ’Cause I will kill you. I know a lot of brothers have threatened it, but I’ll fucking do it, Gent.”

Gent’s lips twitched. “You got a thing for the librarian?”

Jekyll tightened his hold. “I *got a thing* for beating the fuck outta you if you ever bring her up again.”

“Alright, brother. I’ll respect your boundaries.”

Jekyll gave him a slight shove. Gent’s amused chuckle only added to the tension. This whole situation with her sudden appearance left Jekyll wired tighter than usual. And territorial.

There wasn’t anything he could do about it now. They were leaving for a run that would keep them away for the next week. He pulled out his burner phone and sent the text.

Jekyll: Need everything you got on the librarian. Dig fucking deeper. Need her current address in Lawry.

He was about to put away his phone when it pinged.

Cypher: Lawry?

He quickly tapped on the screen.

Jekyll: Yeah, she fucking lives here now. I want everything.

Cypher: On it.

He shoved his phone in his pocket and looked toward the empty road.

What the hell was she doing here?

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CHAPTER FOUR

Imogene had rented quite a few apartments in her lifetime. But no process had ever been so quick compared to this one. Within twenty-four hours, she'd gotten the call from Judy. Her background check had been approved, and two days later she was moving into the high rise. It couldn't have come fast enough.

She'd never been exactly comfortable at the motel, but it had become awkward after the night at the club. Imogene had steadily avoided Angie and Ricky the last couple days before her move. Jekyll's friend had been right. When she'd approached Lou to tell him she was leaving, she'd been caught off guard when he insisted she'd stay and offered her a package. *How could I have not seen this coming?* In hindsight, it was blatantly obvious. She was usually good at reading people, their vibes and intentions. Maybe her mind was clouded with the prospect of meeting people. She wouldn't allow that to happen again.

However, had she not gone to the club, she would've never run into Jekyll. As if she hadn't spent enough time thinking of him, he was now a constant in her mind. What were the chances? An organic run-in with a man she'd obsessed over for more than a year. It was as if fate stepped in, and the stars aligned, putting them both on the same street at that exact moment. Or? It could've been a mere coincidence. Either way, Imogene was still riding high from their encounter. God, he looked amazing with his leather vest wrapped over his broad shoulders and the tattoos lining his muscled arms. His prison scrubs hadn't done him justice. Even beyond seeing him and having her attraction reignited at record speed, his protection was unexpected. The way he came between her and Lou when he'd tried to grab her arm. It gave off major hero vibes. *As if I'm not obsessed already.*

Then it was over. A chance encounter was just that. There was no guarantee she'd ever run into him again. He didn't live in Lawry, and she had no clue how often he visited.

"I should've asked him out for a drink." It had been on the tip of her tongue when he'd walked her to her car. What was the worst he could say?

No.

Imogene groaned, aggressively flicking her blinker and turning into the lot. “I should’ve just asked.”

To be fair, Jekyll wasn’t exactly showing signs of romantic interest. Yes, he’d stepped in during her altercation, but his insistence on her going home was sending a clear message.

All thoughts of Jekyll would have to be sidelined. She had more pressing matters at the moment.

Imogene parked in the front lot of the high rise, happy to see the movers pulling in behind her. It was perfect timing.

She glanced up at the building. The irony. She’d been standing across the street from this high rise while she was in line for the club. She’d had no idea she was looking at her new home.

Imogene got out of her car, grabbed her suitcase, and waved the truck to the front entrance. They had just backed up when three men in suits walked out of the building headed directly toward them.

She rushed to meet them at the back of the truck. She assumed they were going to hand over the keys to the apartment and a copy of her lease. Everything had been done electronically. She found it a bit odd. She hadn’t even talked to the landlord, but Judy insisted this was the way this rental was handled. Maybe they did things differently in the city.

Imogene waved, catching the men’s attention.

“Hi, I’m Imogene Peppercorn.”

They halted, scowling hard and remaining silent.

She awkwardly pointed to the building. “I’m moving in today.”

One of the movers rounded the bumper and reached for the rear rolling door.

“Back the fuck up.” The security snapped, and the mover froze.

What was happening? She wedged herself between the two men.

“I hired them to move my things into the apartment.”

The dark-haired man standing front and center glanced down at her, glaring. “No.”

Her jaw fell open, and she widened her eyes. What did he mean no? She shared a look with the moving crew. They were just as confused as her.

“I have some big pieces of furniture. I’m not going to be able to carry it myself.”

He narrowed his gaze but said nothing.

“I didn’t know hiring movers would be an issue.”

He cocked his brow. “Well, now you do.”

But.… She looked up at the building. She’d been assigned to the seventh floor. How did they expect her to move a couch by herself? Imogene was relatively fit, but at five feet five inches weighing in at one hundred thirty pounds, she was no match for a sleeper sofa.

Imogene was at a complete loss when one of the movers cleared his throat, gaining her attention.

“You only got the truck for two hours.”

Shit! What was she supposed to do?

“Unload it onto the pavement.” The security lead commanded.

What? She whipped her head, feeling the ache in her neck. This had all the makings of a severe case of whiplash.

“It’s supposed to rain in the next hour.” She wasn’t above begging. “Please let them move it up to the apartment.”

“No,” he said, leaving no room for argument.

But it didn’t stop her next request. “Can I speak to the landlord, please?”

His lips twitched, which seemed like an odd reaction. “No.”

Her frustration was rising, but she forced a smile, turned her back, and muttered, “Do you ever say yes?”

“No.” He growled.

Dammit. That wasn’t meant for his ears. She grasped her hips and lifted her chin to the truck, addressing the movers. “Please unload it onto the parking lot.”

The movers shifted their gazes between her and security but jumped into action. Imogene stepped back, and for the next half hour watched them unload the truck onto the pavement. The skies began to darken, and she dragged her hand down her face. The last expense she needed was to have to replace her perfectly fine furniture. This was an absolute nightmare.

When the last of her possessions were out, the guy rolled down the door, and she dug into her bag, pulling out her wallet. She grabbed three twenties and handed it to the driver.

“It’s not much, but it should be enough to buy you all lunch.”

“Thanks. Appreciate it.” He glanced back at the entrance. The three men in suits remained stationed in the same position. None of them said a word.

“You okay here by yourself?” He asked.

“Yeah, I’m fine.” She stepped back from the truck. “Thanks again. I’ll be sure and leave you a five-star review.”

The man nodded, and they pulled out of the lot. She glanced up at the sky. The clouds were dark and moving quick. She’d prioritize her belongings. While her couch and mattress were necessities, they could be replaced if damaged. Her files could not.

She walked to the pile of her things and bent down, grabbing a box. Several sets of black shoes appeared in her line of sight, and she looked up. Security had gone from three men to ten.

Mr. No stood in front of the group. “You have two apartments. 705 for your living space. 707 for your office.” He bent down and grabbed two boxes. “I assume these go in your office?”

Wait, were they going to move her things upstairs? It appeared so. She broke out in a wide grin.

“Yes.”

He gave a curt nod, and others started to grab the remaining boxes. When she bent down to pick up the last one, the deep, graveled voice snapped. “We will move it.”

She raised her brows. “I can help.”

His gaze darkened, and he released a heavy breath. “*Or?* You can stay down here, instruct my men where your belongings go, and do what you’re told.”

She clamped her lips, nodding. “I can do that.”

He turned, and she noticed his head shake before he walked into the building. By some type of miracle, all her things had been moved into both apartments in less than thirty minutes. It was interesting to watch the men. They moved like soldiers. No one said a word, at least not in her presence. Even when she thanked them all for their help, none gave any type of verbal response or reaction.

After she’d unloaded the last of her suitcases from the car, she was escorted up to the seventh floor by Mr. No. Her apartments were at the opposite end of the hallway from the elevators. She glanced at the doors as they passed. Not one had any type of decorative hanging or welcome mat.

He stopped at 705 and handed her two sets of keys.

“Thank you.”

“The rules,” he stated.

“Oh, I have a copy of the lease in my email, so I can…”

“The. Rules.”

She clamped her lips. This man was stricter than the prison guards.

“There’s no assigned spaces, but you park in the front. The back lot is strictly forbidden.”

From what she saw, that wouldn’t be a problem. The parking lot was practically empty and huge.

“Okay.”

“No interaction with anyone on this floor. You come, and you go. That’s all.”

It was a bit harsh. It was always a good idea to get to know her neighbors. They’d look out for one another. But she could live with it.

“No guests,” he said.

“Oh.” She awkwardly chuckled and waved her hand. “I’m new here, and I don’t have a boyfriend, so I won’t be having anyone sleep over.”

His gaze hardened. “No guests, period.”

“Ever?” She raised her brows. “Like not even a friend coming over for dinner?”

“No. Guests. Only residents are allowed entry to the building.”

Could he really forbid her from having guests come into her apartment that she was paying for? Before she had the chance to ask, he held up his hand.

“The most important rule. You don’t tell anyone where you live.”

What?

“A P.O. box has been set up for you at the post office. It’s included in your rent.”

“Oh, I already have one since I was living in the motel. But I was going to…”

“Close it, and you’ll use the new one.”

Why would she need a post office box if she had a valid postal address?

“I can’t get mail delivered here?”

“No.”

She squinted, eyeing the man. “Is that legal?”

His gaze sharpened. “Your lease is month to month. I suggest if you like the apartments and *the rent*, you’ll abide by the rules. And if you don’t, you can find somewhere else to live.”

Fair enough. Legal or not, she’d follow the rules.

“Understood,” she muttered.

He started to walk down the hallway, and she called out.

“I didn’t get your name.”

He kept walking. “No, you didn’t.”

She let out a heavy sigh and walked into the apartment. The furniture, which she’d given no direction on where it should be placed, fit perfectly into her apartment. She peeked into the bedroom and smiled.

“They even set up the bed.” She looked around, noticing the dresser against the wall and her nightstand beside her bed. This would make unpacking a lot easier.

Imogene rolled her suitcase to the closet and sat on her bed. She hadn’t done much physically, but she was mentally exhausted. Unpacking could wait. Once she got sheets on the bed, she’d take a nap. *Now, where did I pack them?*

She scanned the boxes, trying to remember where she’d put them. It had been a long time since she’d slept in her own bed. It shouldn’t have been this exciting.

She wandered out to the main living space. It was one giant room with only a breakfast bar separating the two. It wasn’t much, and Judy hadn’t exaggerated, it wasn’t fancy.

But it’s mine.

****

“You know we’re gonna get shit for this, right?”

Yeah.

Jekyll shut down his bike and got off, stalking through the parking lot of the motel. He scanned the area, taking it all in. Why was she living here? It was a shithole.

“Jek?” Cue said.

“Yeah, I fucking heard you. But don’t remember inviting you along, brother.”

Cue snorted. “Yeah, well you know the rules. Riding alone during a run would’ve gotten the whole club all over your ass. Making a pit stop on the way back from a run will only have Ace and Cross ripping you a new asshole.”

This wasn’t anything new, and Jekyll knew the rules. They always traveled in pairs while on a run. It was for safety. It was also a hard rule that they didn’t make any detour stops on the way back to Killcreek. If they

stayed the course and didn't show up when expected, they could be tracked. For as much as Jekyll wasn't into rules and orders, he always followed the club's. Today he made an exception.

It had been almost a week since he'd seen Imogene for the first time in six months. *In fucking Lawry.* Cypher couldn't give him too much information over the phone, but he was able to give him some and provide her last known address in the city. He hadn't planned on making the stop, but once he'd gotten the information and knowing it was on the way back to Killcreek, he'd made the decision.

Jekyll stopped a few feet from the motel. It should've been condemned years ago. The roof was showing signs of caving, some of the windows were cracked, and the paint was chipping over the entire building.

He didn't have all the current intel, but Cypher had pulled information months ago. She had decent savings in her account. She owned her own place and didn't have any outrageous debt beyond a small balance on a credit card. On paper, Imogene could afford better than this place. *So, why the fuck is she living here?*

"We got a plan here, Jek?"

Jekyll scanned the single-story building. Most of the old motels had been torn down and rebuilt. But this was a depressed area of the city. No one was willing to invest in this section of town. The thought only aggravated him more. It was dangerous for anyone, but a naïve woman who wasn't accustomed to the city's underbelly?

He stalked forward, shifting his gaze in search of room 106. The idea of her living here had his blood boiling. This was no place for her. What the hell was she thinking? He walked up and stopped at the door, looking through the window. The curtain covered most of it, and without any lights he couldn't see much but the edge of the bed.

"At least tell me why we're here?"

Jekyll would've preferred coming on his own. But if he was strapped with any brother, he was glad it was Cue. He knew to keep his mouth shut about Jekyll's personal business.

"Imogene."

There was a long stretch of silence, but he could feel Cue's eyes on him. Jekyll angled his head for a better view inside the room, but he saw nothing.

"Is this where she's staying?"

He drew in a breath and gave a curt nod. “Last known address.”

“Shit,” Cue muttered.

Jekyll had the same sentiment.

“She’s not here no more.”

Jekyll slowly turned. An older woman was standing in the doorway of the room next door. She lifted her cigarette to her mouth, bracing her arm on the doorframe.

She took in a drag. “The little redhead? She’s gone.”

“Where?” Cue asked.

The woman snorted, eyeing him and Cue. “Now why would I tell you? Grown men creeping around a little girl’s place.” She clicked her tongue and shook her head.

Cue scoffed under his breath. “Isn’t Imogene like twenty-five?”

“Twenty-seven,” Jekyll confirmed and walked toward the woman. She dropped her hand to her side and straightened her shoulders.

While she didn’t seem afraid, her guard was definitely up.

“You know Imogene?”

She blinked, seemingly surprised he knew her name. But remained suspicious.

“Do you?”

I know everything.

“Imogene Peppercorn. Moved here about four months ago. Works at the library on Center Street.”

The woman sucked on her cigarette and turned her head, blowing out the smoke. “That explains all the goddamn books she’s always carrying into her place.”

Jekyll nodded. “And she’s twenty-seven. Be twenty-eight on December fourteenth.” He narrowed his gaze. “Not a little girl.”

The woman scoffed, waving her hand. “Well, she looks like one. You her man?”

“Something like that.”

She hummed, curling her upper lip. “Not a very good one if you’re letting your girl live here.”

Jekyll ignored the dig. Had Imogene truly been his woman, she wouldn’t have stepped foot near this place.

“You said she’s not here anymore?” He folded his arms. “Where’d she go?”

She glanced over his shoulder, gesturing toward the other end of the building. “Nobody tells me anything, but I saw her loading her car a couple days ago. Check with the idiots in apartment 102. Saw her talking with them a few times.”

The woman flicked her cigarette and walked into her apartment, slamming the door. Jekyll didn’t hesitate. He turned and walked down to apartment 102. He fisted his hand and banged on the door. Jekyll waited a few seconds then knocked again, louder this time.

Cue leaned closer and glanced up at him, lowering his voice. “I can hear them.”

“You can open the door.” Jekyll’s voice was harsh and threatening. “Or I can fucking break it down. Your choice.”

He heard hushed tones and scrambling. Jekyll reared his leg back and just as he was ready to kick in the door, it flew open. There was a younger woman, no older than twenty-five, standing in the doorway in a bra and spandex shorts.

“Hi.”

“Imogene. She lives in 106. Where is she?”

She knitted her brows and pushed off the door. “I’m not sure, I haven’t seen her in a few days.”

“She move?” Cue asked.

The girl giggled and shrugged. “If she did, she’s lucky.” She turned toward her room. From their position they couldn’t see anyone else. “Have you guys seen Imogene?”

“The redhead?” It was a male’s voice. Vaguely familiar.

“Yeah,” she said.

“Who gives a shit about that fucking cunt?”

What the fuck did he just say?

Jekyll’s muscles tightened, and he balled his fists. He charged inside, forcing the girl to step back. He glanced around the silent room and zoned in on the man seated at the table in the corner. It was the dealer Imogene had been with at the club. Jekyll had no doubt he’d been the one to call her a cunt.

Lou tried to stand and possibly run, but he was no match for Jekyll. He grabbed Lou by the back of the shirt and threw him against the wall, dropping him instantly. He heard the door close and the lock click. Cue was manning the door, not letting anyone leave.

The room shifted into utter chaos. The girl screamed, bolting across the room. Another man who'd been seated on the bed, jumped up and quickly ushered her into the bathroom. It was a cowardly move leaving their friend on his own. But a smart one.

Jekyll bent down, grabbed the man by the throat, and lifted him. Blood was trailing down his lips from his nose. Jekyll leaned in.

"Say it again." He growled, and Lou immediately shook his head.

"I warned you."

Jekyll punched him in the gut, and when he fell forward, Jekyll landed an uppercut, sending his head flying back, slamming into the wall. Then he released his hold and watched Lou crumple to the floor.

He scanned the room and locked eyes with Cue who lifted his chin toward the bathroom door. He heard faint sobbing. It was obvious her *friends* wouldn't be of any help in finding her.

"Let's get outta here."

They walked out and headed to their bikes with only one thought plaguing Jekyll's mind.

Where the fuck is she?

*

Jekyll rolled his neck and settled into the chair, gripping his glass of whiskey in his fist. It had been a long fucking run. He'd done them for almost two decades and never complained. This one hit differently. Maybe it was his age catching up to him or not being on an extended run in over two years. Since he'd gotten out, he'd only taken jobs that ran three or four days max.

Or maybe it had nothing to do with business and all to do with his stop in Lawry. Jekyll spent the ride back home thinking of her and the motel. He couldn't wrap his head around it. It didn't make sense why she'd be staying there. But he'd have to put that in the back of his mind until he got to his house.

Jekyll would've preferred going straight to the clubhouse, but they were meeting Ace at Barry's for a handoff before the next crew of brothers headed out. After striking a new deal with Oz a few years ago, their money and work had increased exponentially. It was a good thing.

He sipped his drink, ignoring the dancer on stage. All he wanted to do was go home, not stare at tits and ass all night. He was actively avoiding all the strippers. It wasn't a hard feat. One look was enough to send them

turning on their heels and his disinterest projected loud and clear. Though some were more aggressive than others and needed a reminder.

“Hey Jekyll.” The blonde laid her hand over his shoulder, her red long nails scratching over his cut. “It’s been a while.” She leaned down, thrusting her tits inches away from his face.

Christine or Krista. He couldn’t remember her name, but he remembered those lips. She gave a memorable blowjob. But that didn’t grant her concessions.

“Did I say you could touch me?” He hardened his stare.

She pulled her hand away but remained close. “How long have you been home?”

He grabbed his glass, waiting for his hard-on to kick in. “Few months.”

“Mmmm,” she purred. “I guess I’ve missed you.”

Surprisingly, Jekyll hadn’t spent much time at the strip club since he’d gotten back. There were enough women at the clubhouse to fulfill his needs, and while she may know how to suck dick, the stripper hadn’t even crossed his mind.

Only one woman had taken up residency in his head. And this is the last place he’d ever see her.

“What do you say?” Her lips curved. “We can go into one of the private rooms, and I’ll give you a welcome home present. On the house.”

It should’ve been tempting. It should’ve been a no-brainer. Jekyll should have been half-way across the room with the stripper in tow by now.

“I’d say fuck no.”

She winced, clearly taken aback. It wasn’t like him to turn down pussy, especially since getting out. But he wasn’t into it. Not with her.

The stripper finally got the hint and walked away. He took a sip of his drink, aware of all the eyes on him.

“Taking a break from pussy?” Oak asked, staring toward the stage at the girl jiggling her ass a few feet away.

Cue scoffed. “He’s banged all the club whores at the house. And visitors. Doesn’t sound like a break to me.”

Cue was right. Jekyll had barely come up for air. It had become a nightly ritual if he wasn’t on a run. But that had changed a week ago, and it seemed it hadn’t gone unnoticed by one particular brother.

“Well now, that ain’t exactly true, now is it, brother?”

Jekyll shifted his eyes to Gent, who was openly smiling. He leaned forward, resting his elbows on the table, arching his brow. “You seemed to have taken an oath of celibacy since your run in with the sweet little Imogene Peppercorn.”

Fucking asshole.

Jekyll wouldn’t take the bait. He’d been brothers with Gent far too long to fall for his taunting bullshit. Though, he wasn’t wrong. Since seeing Imogene in Lawry, he hadn’t been with any other woman. It had even been offered at the charter club they’d visited. He just hadn’t wanted it.

Jekyll steeled his features, staring at Gent.

“Months of deep diving pussy and one little encounter with the sweet redhead, and our boy isn’t interested anymore.” Gent sipped his drink. “Brother, I get it. There’s something about a redhead most people can’t resist.”

Oak laughed, glancing over at Cue. “Ain’t that right, Cue?”

Cue jerked his eyes across the table. “Will you shut the fuck up about her!”

Oak smacked the table. “Yeah, you know exactly who I’m talking about without even saying her name. You got it bad for Eden.”

Cue’s jaw squared, and he pushed up from the table without another word. He walked up to the second level and out to the bar in the front.

“Who’s Eden?” Jekyll asked.

“She’s the one I was talking about at the party when Cue got all pissed off.” Oak smirked, wiggling his brows.

“She hangs with Satan’s Hex,” Ghost said.

“Hangs?” Oak snorted. “She’s a club whore.”

“Oh, that’s fucking rich coming from you, asshole. You’re the biggest fuckboy in our club.” Ghost shook his head.

Oak burst out laughing, settling back in his chair. “Ghost, man, lighten the fuck up. You saw her, right? Fucking hot as hell and our boy won’t hit that? I’m looking out for him. Tell me you don’t think she’s hot.”

“With or without the bruises on her face?” Ghost stared back at Oak. “I don’t get off on women with split lips and scars from taking a beating.” The table went silent, and Ghost sipped his beer. “But if that’s your thing, then I guess she’d be hot.”

Jekyll had been briefed on most everything with the club. He’d heard, in detail, about the ambush at Satan’s Hex. He remembered Cross

mentioning they'd gained access when a club whore used the code for them. But he hadn't heard anything else.

Oak dipped his brows, his expression completely void of any humor. "What the fuck are you talking about?"

"The ambush at Satan's? Eden was the one who used the code to get Cue, Cross, and Ace inside. And someone in the Satan's must not have liked that 'cause when we showed up the next week, her face was bruised, along with her arms. Handprints are hard to miss." Ghost shrugged. "And you wanna take a guess at who personally asked her to open the door?" Ghost raised his brows. "So why don't you leave Cue alone when it comes to Eden?"

"Nobody fucking told me that." Oak looked over at the exit. He remained quiet for a few seconds then shot up from his chair and stalked through the room and into the bar. No doubt, he was looking for Cue. And making amends.

Jekyll turned to Ghost. "We doing anything about that?"

They weren't responsible for anyone but their own. A club whore from Satan's shouldn't fall under their protection. But considering Cue's reaction, he was sensing she was more than just a random woman.

Ghost sighed, shaking his head. "Every time we've been back to their clubhouse, she's not there."

"How do you know?"

Ghost glanced over. "'Cause Cue asks. They got a prospect who hasn't learned all the rules of secrecy. He thinks we're friends." He smirked. "And we use that. She's either working or gone for the night on a run with a member."

Ace walked up to the table, scanning the room. "Any issues with the run?"

Gent laughed. "Just that it was seven days."

Amen, brother.

Ace gave a nod and turned his attention to Jekyll. "You and Cue decide to take the scenic route home?"

Cue had called it. They'd get shit for the detour. Well, he would. Jekyll wouldn't let his decision fall on his brother. It seemed Cue was dealing with other things.

"That's on me. Needed to handle something."

"What?"

“Personal.” Jekyll held Ace’s stare. If he wanted more, then he’d have to ask. His president didn’t.

“Alright.”

Ace was walking away when his gaze shifted toward the bar. There were two women behind it. A younger girl making drinks and a woman in her thirties counting the cash. It was anyone’s guess which of them caught his attention. Ace turned back, rounded the table, and took the empty chair beside him.

He lifted his chin toward the bar. “How long has she been working here?”

Gent and Ghost glanced over their shoulders.

“Bartender is new, I think,” Ghost said.

“The other one.” Ace’s graveled tone was showing his impatience.

“Ava?” Gent smirked. “About seven or eight months. And you’d know that if you ever hung out here with us.”

Before his lockup, Jekyll had hung out a lot at the strip club. Ace only made an appearance once or twice outside of business.

“We check her out?” Ace gestured to Ava.

It was routine to do a background check on every employee associated with Killcreek. That included the bar and strip club.

“I think you’re doing a fine job of that right now, Prez.”

Ace shifted his gaze to Gent and glared.

“You’d have to ask Cypher,” Gent said. “But she’s got a sassy mouth on her. Hanging at the bar one time, and Barry started in on her for being late. She put that dick in his place.”

Ghost lifted his hand. “I was there. Very entertaining.”

Ace slowly nodded with his eyes pinned on Ava. When she walked across the room, she had the president’s undivided attention.

Interesting.

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CHAPTER FIVE

Imogene had another hour before meeting with her first client. She'd done all her research and given herself a pep talk to keep an open mind and allow each client a clean slate and no judgement. It was how she'd always approached every inmate. But this one was different. While volunteering in the prison, she wasn't privy to the details of every inmate's case and conviction. Her files for her clients included more information.

She considered reaching out to Judy and asking for a replacement case but decided against it. How would that look if she was trying to hand off her very first assignment? *Like I'm not competent for the job.* Employment was scarce even in the city. She'd applied to countless positions, and this was her only call back. She had bills and rent to pay, and her savings was dwindling. *I can't lose this job.*

With time to spare, she decided to grab something to eat. Maybe a full belly would calm her nerves and clear her mind.

She glanced up at the sign on Main Street. It wasn't much more than a dive bar, but when someone walked out, she was flooded with the smell of burgers and French fries. Just what she needed. Comfort food. Her first choice would've been Parry's down the street. She'd practically lived on it for the last few days since she'd discovered the restaurant. But after getting scolded for letting the door slam behind her, she was officially banned for two weeks.

Imogene walked inside, glancing around at the open tables. It was just after one, and there were barely any patrons for the lunch rush. Was that a sign?

"If you're waiting to be seated, you're gonna be standing there a long fucking time."

She jerked her head to the bartender. A woman in her late forties, possibly early fifties had her arms braced on the bar. Not exactly a warm welcome, but Imogene smiled anyway.

"Can I sit anywhere?"

“Yeah, but if you have any decency, you’ll sit at the bar and save me a trip to deliver your shit to a table.”

Customer service had changed a lot in the last few years. But Imogene would keep her thoughts to herself. She made her way across the room to the bar. She hopped up on the stool, and the woman placed a menu in front of her. She turned, but Imogene raised her hand as if she was in class.

“I know what I want.”

“Oh Babygirl, you’re gaining points with me, making my life super fucking easy. What do you want?”

“Cheeseburger with pickles and raw onion, an order of fries, and a ginger ale.”

The woman nodded, grabbed the menu, and turned to the man at the end of the bar, winking.

“You owe me fifty bucks.”

Imogene glanced over at the man. He was much older, long white beard, and she noticed an MC vest. It was different from Jekyll’s but bore a lot of similarities including the patches.

His scowl shifted to Imogene. “Thought for sure you would’ve hightailed your ass outta here within seconds.”

The customer service was not improving.

The woman laughed. “Well, she didn’t, Grain, so you lose.”

He scoffed, taking a hefty swig from his beer. He lowered the bottle and swiped his mouth with his sleeve. “You already take all my fucking money, Gee.” The corner of his mouth curled. “I’ll think of something else to give you.”

It was like watching a movie as Imogene darted her eyes between the man and the woman. Their banter, while subtly callous and mean, seemed to have an underlying sweetness.

Gee rolled her eyes. “It ain’t a fair bet if you enjoy the winnings. Think of something else.” She walked down the bar and into the hallway.

“My old lady,” he said, which had her turning back to Grain.

Old lady. She knew the term. A wife or partner to a member of a club. *I wonder if Jekyll has an old lady.* Her shoulders slumped, and she settled on her stool. She’d spent way too much time thinking of him. The likelihood she’d run into him again in Lawry was null and void. Killcreek was close to three hours away.

The stool scraped the floor, and she watched Grain step behind the bar. He grabbed a glass from the shelf and walked in front of her, pulling down the drink lever. When it was spilling over the rim, he grabbed a rag, wiped the glass and placed her ginger ale in front of her.

"Thank you."

He hooked his thumb over his shoulder. "Be waiting for a while with Gee." He squinted, staring at her. "You look nervous, or you always like this?" He gave her no chance to respond. He dropped his elbows to the bar, putting them at eye level. "First time at a dive bar? Nobody's gonna fuck with you, sweetheart."

"Oh." She waved her hand and laughed nervously. "It's not that, though this is my first time in a bar like this. But I like it. Very authentic. Bells and whistles are overrated, and they give off the same stuffy aura. I like the old school seventies vibe of this place."

He stared back at her as if she'd grown another head. Her persistence on speaking when she was anxious was a downfall.

"I'm sorry, I tend to babble when I'm nervous."

He grinned, straightened, and slammed his hand against the bar. He looked over at the older man at the opposite end of the bar and pointed. "I knew it 'cause I fucking know women. Tell me why you're nervous."

She widened her eyes. His inquiry and interest was unexpected. Was he always this forward with strangers? It came off intrusive, but also reminded her of a friend who'd insist on hearing her problems and concerns. *If* she had any friends. *And since I don't…*

"I just started a new job, and I'm meeting my first" —she paused— "client today. I just want to do a good job."

"Like I said, I know women. You're gonna do fucking great."

He said it with so much confidence, it gave her a boost. She took a sip of her soda and licked her lips. Aside from coworkers during training, who weren't exactly friendly, this was the most she'd socially interacted with anyone. Imogene wasn't ready for it to end.

"Have any advice on how I could be less nervous?"

"Distraction."

What? He must've read her confusion. He nodded and grabbed a bottle from under the bar, flipped off the cap, and took a long swig. Imogene found herself waiting on the edge of her seat.

He slammed the bottle on the bar top. “Best thing to do is change your focus. Gotta make it something big though.”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know.” He shrugged. “Rob a bank, get shitfaced. Get laid.”

Her cheeks immediately heated, and she felt her blush rush from her chest to her cheeks. Grain waved his finger inches from her face.

“That’s what you need. Get laid. It relaxes women, trust me on this.”

This was hands down the most bizarre conversation she’d ever had with a stranger. And funnily enough, she was semi-intrigued. Imogene knew she was in need of some type of companionship, but sex with a random guy?

She folded her arms, resting her elbows on the bar. “I don’t have a boyfriend.”

Grain scoffed. “You don’t need a *boyfriend*. You need a man. You got one of those?”

She bit her bottom lip when a vision of Jekyll popped in her head.

Grain burst out laughing. “Yeah, you fucking do.”

She immediately shook her head. “I don’t. He’s just someone I...” She couldn’t even finish the sentence. Describing her feelings for a man she barely knew as a crush seemed juvenile. Expressing her obsession might get her a restraining order.

“I don’t think he’s interested in me.”

“Why the fuck wouldn’t he want you?” His arm shot out, pointing to the mirrored backdrop holding all the liquor. “Look at you. Fucking beautiful. Trust me on this, sweetheart. He’s interested.” Grain raked his hand over his beard. “Maybe he’s waiting on you to make the first move. Some men like broads like that.”

Did he just say broads? As in women?

“This is what you’re gonna do.” Grain folded his arms. “Got his number?”

I do. Though it was from false and illegal pretenses. That she would keep to herself.

“Yes.”

“Call him.” He tapped his finger on the bar. “Right now.”

What?

Imogene shook her head. “Oh, I don’t know…”

“Listen to me” —he pointed at her, and she immediately clamped her lips— “You got another ten minutes before your food is up. Plenty of time

to make the call and distract yourself from your job. Unless you wanna spend the next couple hours stressing over your meeting and eating greasy food, which is the perfect storm for heartburn. Does that sound like fun, sweetheart? No! So go make the call."

Should I? She stared back at Grain, and he cocked his brow. "Right now."

Imogene wasn't sure what came over her. Maybe it was his strenuous encouragement or his pep talk beforehand. But she'd made the decision.

"Okay."

He gave a curt nod and pointed to the front door. "Gotta do that outside. My old lady hates when people get on the phone in here. She'll lose her shit, and trust me, you don't wanna be on Gee's bad side."

She hopped off the stool and grabbed her phone. She practically ran out of the bar knowing if she gave it more rational thought, she probably wouldn't make the call.

For reasons unknown to her, Imogene had saved his number in her phone. It was the only contact information on his paperwork. She tapped his name in her list and drew in a deep breath. She hadn't even given any thought to what she was going to say. She'd start with pleasantries and thank him again for walking her to her car. If that went well, maybe she could suggest coffee or lunch.

The phone rang a few times as she silently rehearsed what she would say.

"Yeah?"

She jumped, half startled by the masculine voice. "Um hello."

The line was silent, and she cleared her throat.

"Hi, um, can I speak with Zane Pierce, please?"

"Who?"

"Zane. Pierce?"

"No one here by that name."

"Is this the Killcreek Drifters clubhouse?"

Again, silence.

"Like I said, no one here by that name."

She sensed he was going to hang up and blurted. "Is Jekyll there?"

"He ain't available."

"But he lives there?"

Silence. Imogene knew a few things about motorcycle clubs. She'd done some research when she started working at the prison. MC's, like most gangs, were especially secretive. It made sense why the man on the other line wouldn't be answering her questions.

"Can I leave my phone number for him?"

The heavy breath sounded on the line, and she heard rustling.

"What is it?"

Imogene gave her number. "And he can call me anytime. I have an odd sleep schedule, only in a few hour increments so…"

The line went dead.

"Hello?"

She pulled the phone from her ear, staring down at the screen. *He hung up on me.*

"I didn't get a chance to leave my name," she mumbled.

*

"I need another pep talk," Imogene mumbled.

She was so utterly defeated, she considered going back to Starr's to see if Grain was still around. Two hours with her new client, and she was left unsettled. This was not how she'd hoped it would go. Imogene felt a lot better after her lunch and encounter with Grain. He'd been right. She needed a perfect distraction, and even though it hadn't been Jekyll, he was a worthy second, along with his wife, Gee.

Imogene had left the bar with a full belly and confidence. *And now it's gone.* There hadn't been anything out of the ordinary during the meeting. She'd had her prepared spiel she presented, along with all the resources available. Unfortunately, her client seemed more interested in her personal life rather than what programs she was offering. He made a point of telling her twice that his charges and conviction were bogus. Even after she'd explained that wasn't her business, he seemed driven to convince her of his innocence.

It didn't work.

They had another meeting scheduled for the end of the week. Dread spread over her like wildfire. Something felt off with him. It was a vibe and an uneasiness. Knowing his crime had only compounded her anxiety about their next meetup. She had to get her mind on something else. Grain's gruff tone popped in her head.

Distraction.

She smiled and reached in her bag for her phone. No missed calls. She debated on calling Jekyll again but decided to give it some time. Calling twice in one day would seem desperate. If it walks like a duck and talks like a duck, it's probably because it is a…

Shut up!

She shook her head and stopped to cross the street. She was still on a tight budget until she got her first paycheck, but she could window shop. That was free and served as a distraction. While waiting for the light to turn, she glanced over at the building on the corner. There was an animal mural on the side. She shifted her gaze to the front window and started toward the door.

This was an epic distraction.

The minute Imogene walked in and was greeted with echoes of barking, she felt a silent calm wash over her. In all her time in Lawry, she hadn't noticed the shelter. *How did I miss this?* She walked to the wall, reading the flyers of available animals.

Imogene, no!

She ignored the voice in her head, scanning over the animals in need of homes. It was spelled out in bold letters in her lease. **NO PETS!**

Where was the harm in looking? After the day she'd had, Imogene was in dire need of some innocence that only a dog or cat could provide. She wandered around the room, peeking through the glass window. It was wall to wall cages.

"Can I help you?"

Imogene turned, smiling at the redhead in purple scrubs approaching her.

"I'm just looking. Is that okay?"

The girl smiled, tucking her hair behind her ear. "Absolutely. We've got a lot of sweet pups who are in need of loving."

They did. Every cage was filled. It seemed the shelter was at full capacity. It was sad to think they were all in need of homes. While some played with toys and others napped, she caught a few pitifully staring out into the room. They looked lonely and sad. *I know the feeling.*

It was ironic. These animals were in need of love, and she had plenty to give. Imogene looked at the dogs. *I wonder how firm the no pets rule is.* It was an asinine thought considering she wasn't even allowed guests.

Imogene usually followed the laws and rules. It wasn't to say she didn't bend them every so often, but she tried her best. Would this be considered a break or a bend?

"If you see one you like, I can put you in a room, and you can spend time with him or her."

A dog was out of the question. They needed sunshine and walks, freedom to stretch their legs and run. Besides, the barking would be hard to hide.

"Unfortunately, with my job, I don't think I'd have the necessary time to give." Imogene sighed. "If I'm being honest, I don't know if I'd be getting a pet for the right reasons."

The woman leaned against the wall. "What's your reason?"

"Companionship. I just moved here and don't really know anyone, and…"

Her gaze softened. "Lonely?"

Imogene scanned the puppies vying for her attention and muttered, "Yes."

The woman pushed off the wall and stood shoulder to shoulder with Imogene, facing the window. "Do you promise to give them a good home, love them, and take care of them?"

Imogene nodded, still focused on the dogs.

"Then they don't care what your reason is."

Imogene glanced over at the woman, smiling.

"But if time is an issue, we've got lots of cats. They're lower maintenance. You don't have to walk them, and from my experience, they enjoy their time alone too."

And they're easy to conceal.

"I like cats. I grew up on my grandparents farm and they had a ton of barn cats. I loved playing with them."

The woman's eyes lit up, and she waved. "Come with me."

Imogene followed her down a long hall, peering through the window to the room with the cats, smiling at the sign, *Catland.* It was fitting.

They had plenty of cats ranging in ages, breeds, and colors. Imogene walked the room, stopping at each cage offering pets and soft words. *I'd take them all if I could.*

When she got to the far end of the room, she noticed a separate hallway. "What's in there?"

The woman lost her smile. “Death row.”

Imogene’s mouth fell open, muttering, “What?”

“It sounds harsh, but it’s true.” She sighed, and the sadness in her eyes was impossible to miss. “They’re on the list to be euthanized.”

“Why?”

“Different reasons for some, but most have just been here too long. Unfortunately, the shelter doesn’t have the space, and they have nowhere to go.” The girl inched closer. “Do you want to look?”

“Yeah.”

The redhead perked up, grabbed her wrist, and led her into the adjacent room. There were only a handful of cats as she passed the cages. Several were sleeping, a few hissed at her until she reached the end of the line. An orange ball of fur with green eyes stared back at her. He was positioned at the front of the cage, leaning into the bars.

“That’s Hank. He was brought in a few months ago. He’s ten, and his owner died. The family didn’t want him, so he ended up here. That happens a lot.”

Imogene inched closer to the cage. “Why didn’t they want him?”

“They said they were allergic but…” Her voice trailed off.

Imogene glanced over at the woman as she rocked on her heels. “He has *some* aggressive tendencies.”

Define some. The girl didn’t elaborate and glanced around the room, clearly avoiding eye contact. It was a warning sign.

Imogene looked back at him. Hank seemed completely relaxed, and she slowly reached out, sticking her finger through the bars and lightly caressing his head. He showed no aggression at all. If anything, he leaned into her hand.

“That’s impressive. Hank usually doesn’t like anyone. You must be special.”

Maybe it’s fate. Two lonely souls looking for companionship.

“Hank doesn’t play well with others, so he’d have to be the only pet in the home.”

It sounded like yet another warning, but it wasn’t a concern for her. She wasn’t even supposed to have one pet, let alone multiples.

She glanced over at Hank, who was staring back at her. Everything in the logical side of her brain was screaming, “don’t do it.” This one decision

could lead to an immediate eviction. Then where would she be? Homeless with Hank. It wasn't fair to him. She had to be responsible. And sensible.

Or?

"I'd like to adopt him."

"Really?" Her high pitched voice reflected her complete shock.

Imogene nodded. "I think we're exactly what each other needs."

The redhead practically bounced on her toes and grabbed Imogene by the arms. "You have no idea how happy this makes me."

Imogene widened her eyes, but completely fed off her happy energy and chuckled. "I have a pretty good idea."

The woman released her arms and waved her hands. "Sorry, I just get excited when one of them comes off the list. We all deserve a second chance."

We? It seemed like an odd way of wording a pet adoption. Still… *I couldn't agree more with…* She glanced down at the woman's name tag. *Eden.*

"Let me get an adoption counselor for you and get the paperwork started."

"Perfect."

Eden rushed out the door, and Imogene bent down, smiling at her new companion. "You ready to come home with me, Hank?"

This was good. It would give them both what they needed.

They'd have each other.

Best friends.

****

Jekyll should've still been in bed sleeping. The long run had taken its toll. But he was up early and on his way to see Cypher a little before nine the next morning.

Cypher had only been able to give him limited information over the phone. He'd confirmed she was now living in Lawry as of a few months ago and provided the address. An old one as he discovered yesterday.

He rode down to the motel. The brothel operations had been shut down after the incident with Cleo. But there'd been talk about reopening. It had always been a steady source of income for the club.

It was set up like an old motel with a separate lobby. Cypher had his own office in the back. Jekyll pulled in front and parked. Through the large

cloudy window he saw Cypher and Gent. *How the fuck is he still up?* He wouldn't have this conversation in front of Gent.

Jekyll walked in, lifting his chin in greeting.

"Jek, man, how's it going?" Cypher asked.

"Alright." He veered his gaze to Gent. "Up early."

"Same as you, brother." Gent winked and straightened in his seat. "Let me take a wild guess why you're here? The prison librarian?" Gent laughed. "Imogene Peppercorn? Imagine screaming that shit out while fucking."

I have, brother.

"You got what you need, Gent?" Cypher narrowed his gaze.

Gent darted his eyes between him and Cypher. "Kicking me out?"

"Yeah." Cypher smiled, gesturing toward the door. "Get the fuck out."

He stood, and the corner of his mouth curled. "Maybe I want to know more about her too. What do you think, Jek? Can I stay?"

He clenched his jaw and growled. "Gent."

It was a warning that Gent usually chose to ignore. He didn't this time.

Gent snorted but walked out. Jekyll watched until he drove out of the lot.

Cypher sighed. "Still trying to figure out how no one's killed him yet?"

Jekyll gave in to a smile and looked over at the brother. *Me too.*

"So, Imogene?" Cypher asked. "Heard you ran into her in Lawry."

Jekyll furrowed his brows. He hadn't mentioned any details in his text. He'd just asked Cypher to take another look into her and gave the city location.

"Cue told me."

That made sense. It was a strange encounter and had put him on edge. Every brother noticed. Cypher straightened in his chair and immediately started tapping on the laptop in front of him. The club had done a deep dive when he'd initially asked for the information. He didn't give a reason. He didn't have to. She'd come up clean with the exception of the information on her dad.

"She hasn't updated her driver's license. No current address outside of the motel. But she does have a *new* PO box. It was set up last week. Weird, though. She already had an existing box. Why close it just to open a new one in the same location? Doesn't make much sense."

No, it doesn't.

"Went by the motel yesterday. She moved. Neighbors didn't know shit."

“Well, it must’ve been recent because that’s the address they had on file at the Public Library where she works. But...” Cypher knitted his brows and leaned closer to the screen. “Looks like she just got a second job.”

“Where?” he snapped.

“An independent resource center.”

“Resources for who?”

Cypher glanced up. “Ex-cons.”

Jekyll stilled, his blood shifting to ice. The last place that woman needed to be was around former inmates. At least in the prison there was some semblance of safety. *On the outside, there isn’t.*

Fuck!

He pulled out the folding chair near Cypher’s desk and sat, looking at the computer screen.

“So, she moves here out of state, works part-time making little cash, living in a shitty motel, and for what? Why the fuck would she leave her whole world behind to move to Lawry?”

Cypher held up his hands and shrugged. “I can tell you the where but not the why, Jek.”

He dragged his hand down his beard. “She got any ties in Lawry?”

Cypher looked down at the screen. “Still working on intel, but as far as I know right now” —he paused, glancing up— “No. Only child. Her mom died when she was really young. Looks like she lived with her dad for a little bit, but when she was about ten, her maternal grandparents became her guardians. Lived with them on a farm in the country. Went to college in state, and the summer after her first year, they died. One right after the other.”

Jekyll pushed up from the chair and paced around the room. He’d never given much thought to her childhood but had assumed it was cookie cutter. It turned out to be the opposite.

“Was she removed from her dad’s custody and sent to her grandparents?”

Cypher shook his head. “Not that I can see. He was a long-haul trucker. That’s not a great job for a single parent.”

“Yeah,” he muttered.

“Something I did find interesting. When her grandparents died, she was sole beneficiary of their estate. Wasn’t a crazy amount but left her in a really good position financially. And she kept the house for a few years.”

Cypher clasped his hands, resting his elbows on the desk. “Imogene finished college and then worked as a teacher for a while. She didn’t sell her grandparents’ house until her father got charged. My guess? To cover the lawyers and his trial.”

“The motherfucker doesn’t even raise her, and she’s willing to throw her entire inheritance behind his defense?” His tone was raw, rage inching toward the surface.

“Looks like it. And it’s not just the money. She left teaching at the same time.” Cypher shrugged. “Then again, your dad’s got a murder charge hanging over him. She probably got a shit ton of backlash for that. Especially since she was his biggest advocate.”

He drew in a breath, circling the desk. It was hard to piece all of this together. But Jekyll was going to try. For some unexplainable reason, he had to know everything.

“He goes to trial, gets convicted, sentenced to life. End of fucking story.” Jekyll furrowed his brows. “So how the fuck did he even get a second trial?”

Cypher inhaled a breath and settled in his seat. “Happens all the time. There’s hundreds of reasons, most of them fucking stupid, that a conviction can be overturned and retried. For murder? It’s rare but not unheard of. I mean, you know not everyone inside deserves to be there.”

Yeah.

“From what I got, her dad was arrested, plead not guilty, tried, and convicted by a jury. Spent a few years inside maintaining his innocence. Then hooks up with some innocence project who looked over his case and allegedly found grounds for a new trial during the appeal. From what I see, the jury got it right the first time but I’m no lawyer.” Cypher sighed. “I only got the basics. You want more, I’m gonna need some time.”

What did it matter? He had no skin in this game.

“I want more.”

“You got it.” He stood and folded his arms. “Gonna be transparent here. I can keep this between you and I unless it becomes a problem for the club.”

Jekyll gave a curt nod. He’d never allow anything to put the club in danger. Though he couldn’t see that being an issue with Imogene. Aside from her father, which she had nothing to do with, her record and background were clean.

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CHAPTER SIX

Two days and she was still alive.

It's a freaking miracle.

Imogene slowly walked out of her bedroom, shifting her gaze down the short hallway. She angled her head, peeking into the bathroom. She'd gotten a nightlight after the first incident. Even in the dark, she'd be able to make out his shadow in the soft glow. There was no movement, and she started to the living room. She stopped in the doorframe, scanning the room.

Where are you?

She panned the small area, carefully stepping farther into the room. A low grumble had her whipping her head to the chair in the corner.

At least I got a warning this time. Whiskers, as she'd renamed Hank, was settled comfortably in her favorite reading chair with his eyes focused on her.

"You tricked me," she mumbled and moved into the kitchen, flicking on the light.

Imogene should've seen the signs at the adoption center. Eden's excitement was over the top, which should've been the first red flag, though she chalked it up to Whiskers surviving euthanasia and getting a home.

When they brought out thick gloves to transport Whiskers into a carrier, there was an unsettling vibe in the room. A few staff members surrounded the cage with tension in the air. It seemed strange at the time. So did the fact that a doctor mentioned sedating him for the ride home. Her excuse seemed palpable at the time. Car rides were traumatic for some animals. It made sense. *Lies!*

Imogene glanced over at the pile of cat supplies in the hallway. That should've been the glaring red flag. They'd sent her and Whiskers home with a carrier, three large bags of dry food, two dozen cans of wet food, enough litter for at least six months, and a litter box. *All* free of charge. They even tried to waive her adoption fee, but Imogene insisted.

I'm such a fool.

She flicked on her coffee maker but froze when Whiskers stood. She kept her eyes locked on him with an escape plan formulating in her mind. She might be able to make it back to her bedroom before he could attack. *Again.*

So much for companionship. She was now sharing space with an angry, aggressive four-legged roommate who hated her.

When her phone pinged on the counter, she jumped, grabbing her chest. She was on edge and tense. It had been that way since the first attack. By the time she'd brought him home, he was still groggy, and she was able to take him out of the carrier. She settled him on the chair in the corner. *My favorite.*

He'd slept for another hour before waking up and inspecting his new home. Imogene had purposely given him space, knowing firsthand changes could be scary. But eventually, she walked over to him, slowly reaching out to pet him with some encouraging words.

Now, she was scarred for life in the shape of three deep claw marks down her arm. Imogene figured he just needed more time. Two bite marks on her hand, a dozen fresh claw marks on her arms and legs…*this is not going as I planned.*

Imogene tapped her phone, pulling up her new email. It was confirmation for her second meeting with her client, Logan. This was another thing that hadn't gone as planned. Her first assignment was still weighing heavy on her. Maybe she wasn't cut out for this. She glanced over at the Satan furball.

"I'd rather spend time with you than him." That spoke volumes.

But… She didn't have much of a choice. This was her job. Her only source of real income. The library might as well have been volunteer work considering her pay. Imogene was stuck. The only positive was that her request had been approved by Judy. She'd made arrangements to meet him at a local diner as opposed to the halfway house. Lots of witnesses.

Imogene tossed her phone on the counter, made her coffee, and headed to her room to get ready.

"Today will be better. Positive thoughts," she chanted.

Hopefully, putting those thoughts out into the universe would work.

*

It didn't work.

"I miss sex."

Even for those who thoroughly enjoyed their jobs, there were always challenges. This client, Logan, was Imogene's. Small talk was to be expected, but this was teetering on the line of inappropriate.

"It's been a while for me."

How the hell was she supposed to respond to that? Thankfully, she didn't have to.

"You never answered my question from last time."

She raised her brows. "What question?"

"Are you single?"

She forced a smile, shifting in her seat. "I don't see how that has any bearing on our meeting."

"Two good looking people having lunch. Some might look at us and think we're on a date." He laughed. "Besides, we're friends, right?"

Um, that would be a hard no.

Imogene didn't miss the irony in the comment. She was practically on the verge of desperation for companionship, and the only person wanting to spend time with her was a man she wanted to keep at a safe distance.

"I'd categorize us as associates." She smiled and reached for her bag, eager to change the subject. "Have you gotten a chance to check out any of the programs I mentioned?" She pulled out a stack of pamphlets. "I have a few more, if you're…"

"I think you're single."

Oh hell. Imogene sighed and rested against the back of the booth.

"I'm not."

His brows hiked, and his lips twitched. "You lying?"

Yes. It had been years since she'd gone on a date and even longer since she'd been in a committed relationship. But she wouldn't share any of that with Logan. Imogene was fully prepared to commit to the bit.

"Of course not." She glanced down at her phone. "In fact, I'm meeting him in a half hour, so we should really stay on task. The programs?"

He narrowed his eyes, and there was a shift in the air. It was unsettling, and she felt her heart rate pick up speed. They may have been in a public setting, but an unexplainable fear washed over her.

I don't get paid enough for this.

****

It was just after five when they returned to the clubhouse from a ride. Not a run. Not business. A long ride on the roads he loved the most. While

he’d missed the club and freedom when he was incarcerated, his motorcycle had also been on the top of his list. Some brothers collected bikes, owned a few, and traded them out, depending on the ride. Jekyll had one. It was symbolic of his loner status.

He walked out of his house and started toward the clubhouse. He wasn’t sure if he’d ever get used to the layout of the secret neighborhood, but admittedly, he liked it. Construction had started on a few more houses. He glanced over at the empty lot between his house and Cross’s. It was meant for Hyde, but he hadn’t taken the club up on the offer. He had his reasons. Unless there was a party, meeting, or run, he spent most of his time at Penny’s. Hyde got some shit from the others but not Jekyll. He wouldn’t taunt his cousin over wanting some semblance of balance with his woman. It was a luxury neither one of them had been afforded growing up.

Jekyll headed straight to the meeting in Ace’s wing of the clubhouse. He walked in to find most brothers already there. He took his seat next to Hyde and waited for Ace to begin.

“Got a call from Griggs. They want to add a third to their next shipment.”

The room was drowned in silence. Satan’s Hex had struck a deal while he was away. Since the former president and VP had been locked up, leadership had shifted, and bigger, riskier deals had been set in motion. They’d taken on larger shipments and paid for them. So where was the issue? They didn’t have the distribution reach. *Where the fuck is the money coming from?*

“They take on new distribution?” Hyde asked.

“Not that we know of, and all that shit has to be accounted for. Griggs claimed their dealers are selling more, but even if that’s true, it means their whole area, down to the fucking bingo hall would be buyers. It doesn’t add up.”

“Unless they’re stock piling for a delivery across state lines,” Cross said.

“And they know as part of the deal only *we* do state to state transport?” Jekyll asked.

Even after being caught up on all the club business he’d missed after being away for two years, there were always some missing pieces. It had been a hard rule that due to the nature of the risk involving across state lines transfers, only Killcreek could move the product. There was a heavier

penalty and a great enough risk to take down the club they'd spent decades building. Compounded with exposing Inez and the Underground, Killcreek didn't make exceptions when it came to out of state transfers.

Cross ground his teeth. "Oh, they know."

"Dumb fucks!" Oak laughed.

Ace cocked his brow. "They are. But if they got friends in high places that we don't know about" —he paused, shifting his gaze over the brothers — "it becomes our problem. 'Cause if the product gets in the wrong hands, it could be traced back to us."

Cue scoffed, stretching his arms overhead. "I've been saying this from the beginning. They're gonna try to run it through Ghosttown."

It was the only unsecured point. While the small town and the resident club had the protection of the Underground, it meant nothing if Satan's moved through the shadows.

"You think they've done it before?" Jekyll asked.

His question caught the attention of every member. He straightened in his seat, rested his elbows on the table, and shifted his gaze between Ace and Cross.

"They're asking for a third increase, right? That's pretty confident."

Oak snorted. "Or fucking stupid."

Jekyll glanced over at the younger brother. "Or maybe they've already done a successful run."

Ace's jaw squared, and he shared a look with Cross. The wheels were turning. If the Satan's had already fulfilled a successful transfer, it would explain their demand for more product and the cash flow behind it.

Ace looked over at Cypher. "Who'd Axel and Slade work with out of state?"

"No one big enough to facilitate this kind of job."

"That we know of," Hyde said. "We had the intel on Satan's within the state, but we all got outside associates." He arched his brow. "Present company included. Axel and Slade are no different. Unless they crossed the Underground and us, they were free to make outside deals with others. Oz never put a restriction on that."

He didn't. Oz, along with Rogue and Trey, owned the entire state and set rules for anyone working under the Underground, which included all illegal entities. But outside the perimeter, he didn't demand exclusivity. The

Underground monitored it, but as far as he knew, there hadn't been a cause for concern.

Until now.

"Any way they'd give up their past associates?" Cue asked.

It was a fair question. After all, most of the Satan's didn't have the same loyalty as other clubs. However, Axel and Slade weren't just members. They'd started the club years ago. It was theirs.

"They're not giving up their connections to their club," Jekyll said.

Cross sighed. "I would've agreed with you a year ago. But with Griggs and Spinner running things, I wouldn't put it past them."

Oak laughed. "It's a shitshow run by fucking idiots."

"We could take it to Oz," Cue said.

"It would have to go through Inez first, and with what we got?" Ace shook his head. "Too soon."

Gent leaned back in his chair, smirking. "Yeah, and thinking if we bring hunches and conspiracy theories to *the King*, we might lose credibility."

Jekyll glanced over his shoulder at Cue. "But Oz is the next step when we got more. Just gotta fill the holes first."

Gent laughed. "My favorite fucking pastime."

Jekyll steeled his features and shook his head. Gent could always be counted on for inappropriate one-liners in a serious situation. Allegedly, it was part of his charm. Maybe it was. *He's still a fucking asshole.* But a good brother, nonetheless.

Ace stood, pointing at him, Cue, and Oak. "You guys are taking the ride up to Satan's with Cross tomorrow night. Routine bullshit, but we keep our eyes open. They're hiding something, and we're gonna fucking find it."

Jekyll followed the other members out to the main room. He took a seat at the table with Cue, Gent, Oak, and Wraith. The prospects brought over beers, and one remained standing next to him. Jekyll narrowed his gaze, glaring at the young guy.

"Uh, yeah man." He stumbled through his words. Jekyll was accustomed to this kind of effect he had on others. Especially the prospects. They'd obviously heard of him and his hazing tactics.

His throat bobbed. "You got a call on the main line."

Jekyll arched his brow. Was the prospect going to elaborate or was he expected to fucking guess?

"Someone looking for Jekyll?" Ace asked.

The prospect snorted. “Actually, they asked for Zane Pierce.”

Gent laughed, squeezing his shoulder as he passed. “Using your government name. Well, fuck, Jek, who’d you piss off?”

No one used his formal name unless it was for legal matters. He’d been going by Jekyll since he joined the club. It didn’t necessarily raise red flags. It could’ve been his lawyer, but he would’ve called on his personal phone, not the clubhouse line.

“I didn’t know it was you. When I told her ‘no one here by that name’, I was about to hang up, and she just blurted out Jekyll.”

Her?

“She?” Ace asked, eyeing him.

There were very few women who knew his birth name and even less who dared to call him by it. Aside from legal purposes, he’d buried his name years ago.

“Yeah, I forgot to get her name. But she left a number.”

Jekyll held up his hand, and the prospect handed him the slip of paper. He looked down at the number but didn’t recognize it. It wasn’t local.

“She say anything else?” Ace asked.

The prospect snorted. “Yeah, something about calling anytime and her sleep schedule.”

What the fuck?

Jekyll stood and walked out to the front porch. It could’ve been a cold call, but he’d call back. He never took chances with anything that came off as suspicious. He dialed the number and brought the phone to his ear. On the third ring, he heard the soft female voice.

“H-hello?”

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Every muscle in his body tightened, and his breath grew heavy. *I know this voice.* The tone was off, not nearly as chipper as it had been in the past. But he knew it.

“Hello?” she repeated.

Jekyll balled his fist, clenching his teeth. He lowered the phone and tapped the end button, hanging up. Why the hell was she calling him? How had she even gotten the phone number for the clubhouse? It was registered under Grizz’s formal name for anonymity. Even the address was connected to Grizz with the calls directly forwarded to the clubhouse. It wasn’t a fluke or coincidence.

Jekyll stalked back into the living room and to the table, gripping the back of an empty chair. He stared over at Cypher, who furrowed his brows.

“What’s going on?”

“You can do that reverse number shit, right? Get me a name.”

Cypher nodded, lifting his glass to his lips.

Jekyll tossed the paper on the table. “Need it now.”

Cypher lowered his glass and grabbed the paper and his phone. Jekyll folded his arms, staring down at his brother. He knew it was her but wanted confirmation. A minute later, he got it. Cypher looked up and gave a subtle nod.

“It’s her.”

“Who?” Cross asked, but Cypher didn’t reply. Neither did Jekyll. He stormed out of the room, this time heading toward his bedroom in the back. He opened his door and slammed it shut.

Why the fuck was she calling him? He paced around the room, driving his hand over his head. Their one encounter had sent him off keel. He’d worked hard to keep her in the back of his mind since his release. Now, seeing her once, she’d invaded his mind and taken up permanent residency. The last thing he needed was verbal contact.

Fuck!

He circled the room, stopping at the edge of the bed. He pulled out his phone and dialed the number again.

“Hello?” Her tone was still off. Shaky and unsure.

He balled his fist, digging his short nails into his palm. Staring at the wall, he contemplated hanging up again. Speaking would drag her in deeper to a place she didn’t belong. With him. He pulled the phone from his ear and his finger hovered over the end button.

“Is anyone there?”

Yeah, I’m here. Fuck!

He lifted the cell to his ear. His tight grip threatened to shatter the phone in his hand.

“You looking for me?”

The line went completely silent. He couldn’t even hear her breath on the other end.

“Zane?” The familiarity in her voice was too intimate, and he clenched his jaw.

Admittedly, he hated his name. Not so much the name itself but for what it was connected to. Trouble, anger, pain, and his past. His name was covered by a cloud of darkness.

“I mean, Jekyll?”

“Yeah.” His tone was rough.

“Hi, It’s Imogene Peppercorn.”

I know.

“I hope I’m not bothering you. Oh dammit.” It was impossible to miss the hitch and panic in her voice.

He tightened his hold on the phone. “What’s wrong?”

“Um, can you hold on for just one second. I don’t have my hands-free holder set up yet, and I’m driving.”

Of course she wouldn’t drive and talk on the phone.

“Just one second. Don’t hang up.”

Jekyll didn’t reply, but he stayed on the line. Why? ’Cause he couldn’t bring himself to hang up. He could chalk it up to curiosity. There wasn’t a valid reason she’d be reaching out. *Or is there?*

“Okay, I’m parked.” Her soft giggle echoed through the line. “How are you?”

“Alright.”

“That’s great! It was so nice bumping into you last week. I didn’t think I’d ever see you again.”

Jekyll froze. Had she wanted to see him again? During his time, Imogene had been sweet, kind, and helpful to all the inmates. A do-gooder. At first, he wasn’t buying into it. A gorgeous redhead volunteering her time had to be bullshit. Over time, the assumed mask never faltered. Admittedly, Jekyll only took her classes to break up the day. And? Enjoy the view. Then it changed to something else.

“Still there?”

Yeah, I’m still here.

“You need something?”

“Oh, um no…” The line went silent as if she was stalling.

“Then why are you calling me?”

She cleared her throat. Another stall tactic.

“Well, I wanted to thank you for helping me out last week with Lou.”

Bullshit!

“You already did that.”

“Right,” she muttered. “But um, I never got the chance to offer my services to you.”

Her services? *What the…*

“I work at a resource center where we help former inmates…”

“Ex-cons.”

She cleared her throat. “Uh, yes. We provide resources to help get everyone acclimated back into society.”

Jekyll sat on his bed, not uttering a word. This wasn’t news to him, and he could’ve ended the call. But he had a relentless need to hear her voice. It was a form of self-torture. He’d forced himself to rid his mind of Imogene when he walked out of prison. *And now she’s back.*

“It’s just things like information on getting a GED, though you already got that. Which is awesome. But other things like finding jobs or treatment centers and rehabs and…”

“I don’t fucking do drugs.” That wasn’t entirely true. He’d hung out with Ghost on his roof quite a few times.

She gasped. “Oh no, of course not. I wasn’t suggesting that you did. I was just sharing our services.”

This was why she was reaching out?

“I don’t need help,” he snapped.

“Okay.” Her voice sounded so small. “I wasn’t trying to imply that you did. I just figured…” Her voice trailed off.

He cupped his mouth. *Why the fuck do I feel bad?*

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to offend you. My job just offers all these resources for their clients, and I just thought if you or Xander could use anything, I’d be happy to help. I wasn’t assuming you need them. I just wanted to help if you did. That’s all.”

“Why help us?” He growled.

“What?” She asked.

“Why *us*?”

“I liked you both.”

Hyde was understandable. Of the two, he’d always been the more approachable cousin. Deadly when he needed to be but overall likable. But Jekyll? *Why the fuck would she like me?* Jekyll had never given her any reason. He’d never shown her any type of affection. If anything, he’d been especially cold, at times. It was his personal line of defense to keep her far away.

“And I owe you.”

Jekyll furrowed his brows. Imogene did owe him, but she’d have no way of knowing that. Unless…

“You don’t fucking owe me.”

She cleared her throat. “Mike, the prison guard, told me after there’d been a threat against me, it was you who threatened Myers to stay away from me.” She lowered her voice. “And he did.”

Fuck. He dragged his hand over his face. It had all been prison yard rumors, and he usually didn’t pay much attention to any of it. But when Jekyll heard of Myers talking about Imogene, he’d shut that shit down real quick, making threats of his own and a preview of what would happen if he laid a hand on her. Myers had a ten-day stay in the infirmary, courtesy of Jekyll.

That was never supposed to get back to Imogene.

“Don’t know anything about that.”

“Right,” she muttered. “Well, um, sorry to bother you. I’ll let you go. But if you ever change your mind or Xander does, just call me. If you want.”

Jekyll should’ve been eager to get off the phone. He wasn’t.

“Where are you?”

“Right now?” She paused, but he didn’t answer. “I’m in Lawry heading home. I had a meeting with a client, so I need to file my report. Last time I just stopped by the office after the halfway house since it’s close. But we met at the diner not far from my place, so I’m just going to do it there.”

She’d given a lot away, and he wasn’t sure what he should focus on first. He wouldn’t push for her address since it was something Cypher could get with a little time. The halfway house comment had him on edge, but he was more concerned with the client himself.

“You meet with him a lot?”

There was a long stretch of silence, and he pressed the phone to his ear. He could hear her breathing.

“Today was my second time. But he requested another for tomorrow. So…”

Imogene was definitely off. He may not know her well, but he could gauge her tone and uneasiness. And it wasn’t stemming from talking to him. This client made her nervous.

“Where?”

“What?”

What the fuck am I doing? He dragged his hand over his mouth and down his beard.

“Where are you meeting him?”

“Oh, a café in the west end. The Quick Cup.”

Jekyll nodded. He knew it well, along with the owner. East provided most of the protection for Lawry businesses, but there were a select few that the Underground handled. Usually because they were money laundering for Oz, Rogue, and Trey. And a few times for Inez.

“What time?”

“Four-thirty.” She said. “Why are you asking about my client meeting?”

He wasn’t going to answer that. He ignored the question and shifted the focus back to her.

“Client?” Jekyll scoffed.

“I mean, former inmate.” She said.

“Ex-con,” he challenged. “What was he in for?”

“I don’t think I’m supposed to discuss it with anyone outside of my job. Though I wish I could.” She laughed without an ounce of humor. “I guess I forgot that some crimes are worse than others and hit harder.”

I don’t fucking like this.

“Like what?”

“Just certain ones.” She paused. “Anyway, thanks so much for calling me back. Maybe we’ll bump into each other again.”

He would definitely be seeing her again. Four-thirty tomorrow at The Quick Cup.

When he didn’t respond, he heard a sigh. “Bye, Jekyll.”

The line went dead, and he sat on his bed staring at the wall.

Jekyll had his suspicions about her client, but needed confirmation. He headed out to the living room. A few brothers had joined the group drinking

at the table. When Ace looked over at him, he didn't hesitate.

"How many halfway houses in Lawry?"

Ace arched his brow. "Two. The women's is on Main Street and the men's is on the outskirts near Grove Mill."

Cue lifted his beer. "Yeah, they better fucking keep them all the way out there."

"Who does it house?" Jekyll asked, knowing he wasn't going to like the answer.

Cue's eyes darkened. "Sex offenders."

Suspicion confirmed.

Jekyll lifted his chin to Cross. "I got something I gotta do tomorrow but I'll meet you at the Satan's clubhouse." Jekyll walked away without waiting on approval.

His visit to Lawry was non-negotiable.

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CHAPTER SEVEN

Imogene was only half listening at the weekly check in meeting. She had too much on her mind. While she usually rolled with change easily, she was slightly overwhelmed. It felt as though her whole life as she knew it had been flipped upside down. The heavy weight was finally catching up to her. And the irony? It was all her doing. She'd put so much focus on making her father a priority, she'd lost a little of herself, her needs, wants, and life in general.

At least once a day, she wondered if moving to Lawry, abandoning her life in another state that had been home for her whole life, moving to the city where she didn't have anyone, was the stupidest choice she'd ever made. Depending on the time of day, it was a fifty-fifty split.

But today? She was missing her old life.

"How'd it go, Imogene?"

She blinked when she heard her name and straightened in her seat. All eyes were on her, and she realized she'd zoned out for the last ten minutes. *Shoot!*

"It's going good. I'm settling into my new apartment and almost fully unpacked." It was a reasonable answer though from the spike in Judy's brows, not the correct one.

"I meant with your first client."

Of course she did. *Focus!*

Imogene forced a smile, battening down the blush spreading across her chest and cheeks. She cleared her throat and slid the folder across the table toward her boss.

"I wrote up my report. That's the hard copy."

A universal groan echoed through the room, and she instantly peered around at her coworkers. None seemed pleased with her. *What did I do?*

Judy chuckled, grabbing the folder and flipping it open. "Relax, everyone. I'm not making anyone hand in hard copies. Our newest associate is just extremely thorough. I know better than to expect that from the rest of you."

The tension seemed to ease in the room, though she did notice Marge scowl and roll her eyes.

“Any problems, Imogene?” Judy arched her brow. “With the client.”

“Um, not really.”

Judy clamped her lips and stared back at her. Clearly, she was waiting for more. Imogene rested her clasped hands on the table. “The first meeting was at the halfway house. We discussed resources, and I explained everything in depth, giving him a variety of options.”

Marge let out a heavy breath, and her gaze softened. “I hate that place.”

There was an unspoken understanding, a strange type of comradery that was built on sympathy. Imogene wouldn’t vocalize her own feelings. It seemed unprofessional, but she agreed with her coworker. The halfway house made her uneasy. Meeting at the diner should’ve been a quick fix. It wasn’t. Maybe the café would be different. *Doubtful.*

“Well, we don’t get to pick and choose our assignments or clients.” Judy said, and Imogene immediately nodded. The last thing she wanted was to be perceived as someone who couldn’t handle the job or wanting preferential treatment. This was the first but most certainly not the last of undesirable assignments.

“I completely understand.” She would’ve sounded more convincing had her voice not cracked. She smiled and drew in a breath, hoping she presented herself in a calm manner.

Judy slowly nodded, keeping her gaze locked on Imogene. Her boss was impossible to read. She’d mastered the poker face.

Judy pointed toward the door. “Alright, well, enjoy the donuts in the lobby from yours truly.”

Art, who had been sitting next to her, nudged her arm, “This is her way of bribing us to show up next week.”

Judy snorted. “And I’m not afraid to admit it. Go enjoy.”

Imogene started to stand, but Judy gestured toward her.

“Imogene, hang back.”

Dammit, I messed up. She sank back into her chair, watching the others leave the room. When the last coworker walked out, closing the door behind, she glanced across the table at her boss.

“I’ve been doing this a long time and been exactly where you are. Believe me when I say I get it.”

Imogene appreciated the speech, but it didn't do anything to make her comfortable.

"One of the biggest elements to this job is keeping an open mind. Free of judgement. Looking forward into the future, not at their past. It's easier said than done with particular cases, isn't it?"

Was this a trick question? Even if it was, she answered honestly.

"Yeah," she whispered, nodding.

"Sometimes we get the cream of the crop. And other times we get the bowels of the sewer."

"I really understand, and I will take everything under advertisement."

"Imogene? If he did something to you…"

She shook her head. "He didn't. I'm ashamed to admit it, but I think my bias stems from his crime."

"There's no shame in admitting that. We've all felt it sometime or another." Judy sat back in her chair. "Let me switch you with someone else."

"No," she blurted and held up her hand. "It's fine. I want to follow this through. I can do this, I swear I can." She could hear her own desperation in her tone. And her doubt. She had to rectify this before she was seen as incapable and a liability. *I can't lose this job.*

"My personal life might be interfering a bit with my professional."

"How so?"

"I've had a harder time adjusting to the move than I'd anticipated."

"Tell me about that."

What? *Absolutely not!* It was beyond unprofessional to vent to her boss, especially in the office setting during work hours. Imogene waved her hand.

"I don't want to bother you with…"

"Imogene," Judy smirked. "I've been married for twenty-seven years to a man who would win gold if complaining was an Olympic sport. I have three children who think *not* getting concert tickets will forever alter their fate and future. That was on last night's list of complaints. I also have a mother-in-law who's still convinced my husband made the wrong choice in marrying me because I once messed up her family recipe for lasagna. She reminds me every time I see her." Judy rolled her eyes. "And I saw her last night. Trust me, one more complaint isn't gonna affect me."

Imogene chuckled, feeling her tension ease a bit. "But it's not your responsibility to listen to your employees complain about personal stuff."

“No, it’s not. But I’m still asking. So tell me.”

She let out a heavy breath, sinking into her seat. “I don’t know anyone here. My first friend encounter kind of ended in disaster, which could’ve led to an arrest.”

Judy widened her eyes, and Imogene immediately shook her head.

“I didn’t do anything illegal, I promise. I just may have been a little naïve.”

Her lips twitched. “Okay, go on.”

“Um, well, I’m lonely, so I thought getting a cat might help. You know, for companionship? But I don’t think he likes me.” She snorted softly and mumbled, “Pretty sure he doesn’t like anybody.”

“That’s why I have a dog. Dumb, lovable, and loyal. Just the way I like them.” Judy lifted her chin. “What else?”

She inched to the edge of her seat. “Can I be one hundred percent honest?”

“I listen to about a dozen lies every day. So yes, honesty would be refreshing.”

“While I promise to do my best at this job, it wasn’t my first choice.”

Judy burst out laughing. “Yeah, it’s not most people’s first choice. Tell me what was?”

“The library full time. I worked in the local branch back home, and I ran the prison one too. I really enjoyed it. But they could only give me part-time hours right now.” Her shoulders sagged, and suddenly she was on a roll, free flowing all her complaints. “The apartment is great, but I never see my neighbors. I’m pretty sure there’s only a few of us living on my floor.”

“The landlord is very particular about who she allows to live there.”

“I haven’t even met her yet.” Imogene said.

Judy’s lips twitched. “And maybe that’s not a bad thing. Landlords are a lot like principals. The goal is to never be called into their office, right?”

It was interesting logic, though she didn’t actually see the parallel between the positions.

“Have you thought about meeting people through a dating app? My friend who’s recently divorced is on them, and she’s meeting lots of people.”

“Oh, I don’t think that’s for me.”

“Why not? It would get you out of the house, a free meal, and maybe you’ll find someone you like.”

She felt the heat rush from her chest to her cheeks. It was an insane thought, but she'd already met someone she liked. She'd obsessively replayed her call with Jekyll a million times over. *So embarrassing.* Maybe if she hadn't been caught off guard, she could've planned out a conversation with him. Initially, she was going to ask him to get together for coffee. She'd built up enough courage until she actually got on the phone with him. Her confidence completely evaporated the second she heard his deep, graveled voice.

"I'm not interested in dating at the moment."

Unless a biker shows up.

She clamped her lips and grabbed the arms of her chair to stand. "I guess I should get out there before I miss out on a donut." Imogene cleared her throat. "I really appreciate you taking the time to listen to me rant."

"I would say anytime but I don't mean that. But…" —she smirked— "We have dinner at my place every Sunday. Consider that an open invitation."

What?

"To your family dinner?"

"Yeah. It's when everyone unleashes their problems, and it'll give you an outlet."

"But it's your family…"

"And friends. It's an entire bitch-fest. At least your complaints are valid. And the food is really good. So if you find yourself free on a Sunday and want to hear others whine about their lives, come on over." Judy paused with a soft smile. "I mean that, open invitation. I'll text you my home address."

It was probably the nicest gesture anyone had given her in years. Her eyes welled slightly, but Judy glared, pointing at her. "No tears. I don't do crying."

She snickered, sucking in a breath and keeping her tears at bay.

"Thank you."

Judy looked over at her computer. "Don't thank me for dinner. It's gonna be a shitshow. It always is, but…" She tapped on the keys, and her eyes scanned the screen. "You can thank me for this. Your next two clients are female. This one will take you out of town for about five days. They're both in Birch three days apart. The center will cover your cost for a hotel.

Of course, they get to choose where you stay, so don't expect the Ritz-Carlton."

"No problem. I look forward to it." She turned to walk out when the thought suddenly struck her. *Dammit.* She spun around. "Actually, I do have a problem." She rushed to the desk. "I'm so sorry, I hadn't even thought about it, but I don't have anyone to watch my cat. If it was a day or two I might be able to get away with it. But five? He can't go that long without changing his litter box."

"You can't have a friend come over and do it?"

"Well, I currently don't have any of those. Plus, there's an insane rule about guests. I'm not allowed to have any."

"That's right." Judy muttered as if she fully understood Imogene's dilemma.

"Maybe I can switch clients with someone else."

Judy folded her arms and leveled her with her eyes. "One of the reasons I hired you was because you're not married with children." She waved her hand toward the door. "They all are, which makes traveling a strain for them."

Dammit, this was worse than she thought. The last thing she wanted to do was put the burden on a coworker.

"I'll figure something out. I can sedate him and have him boarded." She glanced up at the ceiling biting her lip. "Of course, that would mean I'd have to get close enough to give him the pills. And he's not big on me invading his personal space." This was a nightmare. Her scratch marks still hadn't healed from the last attack.

"Imogene." Judy sighed. "God, I hate cats, but I'll do it."

"You will?"

"Yes, and for your sake, I'll be discrete."

She knitted her brows. "Well, aren't you friends with the landlord? I'm sure you'd be an acceptable guest."

Judy smiled. "I am, but she'd want to know *why* I'm there. And I'm pretty sure the building still has its *no pets* rule in effect."

Uh-oh. She felt the blood drain from her face.

Judy chuckled, shaking her head. "Your secret's safe with me. Now, go get your donut."

"Thank you. I owe you."

"Yes, you do."

And I'm sure you'll be collecting.

*

Imogene sipped her latte and stared down at the chocolate croissant on her plate. She hadn't touched it. She had zero appetite after ten minutes with Logan. Hate was a strong word. She rarely used it. But…

Imogene had done her due diligence. She'd thought ahead this time, structuring this meeting. The hour session would be accounted for by staying strictly on course with all the programs offered and follow up.

Apparently, Logan had other plans.

"You doing anything tonight?"

Imogene cleared her throat. "Well, if you'd like to sign up for some of the programs, I can get the paperwork done this evening. Have any of them piqued your interest?"

He snorted, his gaze traveling over her body, lingering on her breasts. She was modestly dressed with purpose. A loose fitting top matched with a long, flowy skirt down to her ankles. Most days she'd wear sandals but today she chose sneakers with rubber soles. Minimal makeup and her hair loosely flowing down her back. Imogene put a lot of thought into her appearance and outfit for this meeting. It was society's version of sensible and safe. And ironically? It didn't stop him from gawking and making her uncomfortable. In a perfect world, she would've worn what she liked, whatever she was feeling or most comfortable in. But she didn't live in a perfect world.

"It's bullshit," Imogene muttered, grabbing her coffee and taking a sip.

She'd been lost in her own thoughts and hadn't even noted the silence until Logan cleared his throat. She glanced up, and he was scowling.

"What's bullshit?"

Oh shoot!

She forced out a laugh and shrugged, playing it off. "Life, right?"

Initially, he eyed her suspiciously, but he slowly smiled, dropping his elbows to the table. "So tell me your plans for tonight."

Imogene straightened in her seat, preparing her lie. "My boyfriend is coming over. We're going to order in and binge watch a new series. Kind of boring."

Was it? With the right boyfriend, and Jekyll popped up in her mind, it sounded amazing. Though she couldn't imagine him nestled on a couch, under a blanket, settling in for a five hour television show.

“Fuck!” Logan snapped, staring down at his phone with his brows dipped in a severe scowl.

“Is something wrong?”

“It’s almost six. I gotta get back to the house and check in.”

Thank you, Jesus!

“Oh, okay.” She forced a sympathetic tone while silently celebrating as if her favorite team had won the World Series. “Well, you have all the information. Please feel free to reach out to me by email if you’d like to sign up for something, and I can get that all squared away.”

Logan jerked his head. “I thought I got four meetings.”

Imogene sucked in a breath. *Dammit!*

“You do, but if you wanted to correspond through email, that’s completely fine too.”

He shook his head. “No, I want to see you again.”

A chill ran down her spine, but she managed to muster up a smile.

“Okay.”

He stood. “Next week sometime.”

Great!

Imogene nodded and watched him walk down the street. When he disappeared around the corner, she inhaled a deep breath. The first in the last hour. She glanced down at her croissant. Finally, she could enjoy it in peace. She grabbed the end, bringing it to her lips, then stilled. The loud revving engine had her turning in her seat. In the distance, she saw a motorcycle pull out of a parking spot, make an illegal U-turn and ride down the street. Imogene leaned forward past the table next to her, squinted, focusing on the patch of the leather vest.

Was that…

She swallowed the knot lodged in her throat.

“Jekyll?” she whispered.

****

“Where the fuck have you been?” Cross spread out his arms and met him halfway through the yard.

Jekyll wouldn’t be mentioning his little detour to any of the brothers. Thankfully, it had all gone smoothly. Well, from his view. Imogene had been tense for the whole hour but seemingly relaxed when her *client* left.

“I told you. Had something to handle.”

Cross lifted his chin. “You get it done?”

“Yeah.”

He met up with the others near the back door.

This wasn’t Jekyll’s first time at the Satan’s clubhouse since new leadership had taken over, but he was seeing the decline since his last visit. Oak was right. It was a shitshow. It served more as a party venue than an actual clubhouse for members. On any given day, there were as many outsiders as members, in the middle of the fucking afternoon on a random Tuesday?

Their security was shit with no one manning the doors. Anyone off the street could’ve walked right in. Under Axel and Slade, they would’ve never allowed that. Then there were bigger issues that inadvertently affected Killcreek. They were willing to openly talk about the transport and business with strangers around. It was a complete lack of awareness.

Griggs was fully prepared to start talks. It was Jekyll who shut him down and ordered everyone who wasn’t a member out of their clubhouse. No one hesitated and practically fled from his order.

When he took his seat, Griggs glared. “I think you’re forgetting where you are, brother.”

Jekyll’s gaze darkened. “I know exactly where the fuck I am. And I am damn fucking sure we ain’t brothers.” Jekyll leaned on the table, and Griggs settled back in his seat, creating distance. *Yeah, be fucking scared, motherfucker.* “Let me tell you something you forgot.” He tapped his finger on the table. “We run this operation. It’s our product that we choose to let you sell and profit from. That makes *me* your fucking boss. You do what we say. Next time we meet up to discuss business? You clear this place out before we show up. ’Cause if you don’t? I’m just gonna start throwing them out on their asses. You feel me, Griggs?”

He shared a look with Spinner but didn’t answer Jekyll. No one wanted to be disrespected, especially in their own house. But sometimes it was necessary to get everyone in line.

Cross straightened in his seat. “By the end of the week, you’re gonna have a list for us, tracking every transport and cash sale. We wanna know where the product went, who bought them, and for how much.”

Giggs furrowed his brows, swiping the beads of sweat from his forehead. “I don’t keep records of that shit.”

“Well, then you’re gonna be fucking busy this week ’cause *you will* have all the numbers for us by Friday.”

This was all part of the plan. Griggs would have to show his cards. If it was all legit, there wouldn’t be an issue or pushback. That was an unlikely outcome.

“Unless you can’t provide that ’cause you haven’t sold shit.” Jekyll shrugged but kept his eyes laser focused on Griggs. His face paled and he started tapping on the table. A nervous twitch? That proved Killcreek’s suspicions might just be on point.

“Not stockpiling product, are you, Griggs?” Cross asked.

Griggs swiped the back of his hand across his mouth and slammed his beer bottle on the table.

“What the fuck are you talking about?”

He was playing innocent, but Jekyll was reading through his bullshit. His reaction was confirmation. Cross stood, and the others followed suit.

“We’ll see you on Friday,” Cross said and walked across the room, leading Killcreek through the back hallway.

Jekyll was last in line, glaring at Griggs before disappearing behind the wall. He gave in to a smile, knowing they scared the shit out of the Satans and thrust them into panic mode.

No one spoke until they walked outside, but he noticed Cue glancing into the open doors in the hallway. He wasn’t making himself particularly obvious, but knowing a little backstory with the Satan’s club whore, Jekyll suspected that was who he was looking for.

They walked out into the yard, and a prospect rushed across the ragged lawn. He was the only person in the back.

“Hey, brothers.” He waved, and Jekyll narrowed his gaze.

It should’ve been expected that with Satan’s lack of leadership, they’d recruit anyone to prospect. This guy was proof of that.

“Who the fuck is that?”

Cross snorted, grabbing his shoulder. “I like to think of him as our personal snitch. He doesn’t fully understand that not all clubs are friends.”

“He’s the guy I was telling you about,” Ghost said.

The prospect couldn’t have been more than twenty-one. He smiled, glancing over the brothers.

“How’s it going?” Ghost asked.

“Great, man. We got a big party tonight. I’m in charge of the kegs.” He rushed forward. “You guys coming back later?”

What the fuck? Killcreek was cordial, at best, with Satan’s for business. But partying with these assholes? *Not on your fucking life!*

“Maybe,” Cross said, fully knowing they wouldn’t be. Obviously the club had their reasons for keeping ties with the prospect. But Jekyll couldn’t see the purpose.

“Got a full house tonight?” Cue asked.

“Yeah.”

“Lots of girls?”

The prospect’s smile widened, and he puffed out his chest. “Yeah.”

Cue nodded. “Eden gonna be here?”

His smile faltered. “I don’t think so.”

“Why’s that?” Cue snapped.

Settle, brother.

He shrugged. “She hasn’t been around much.”

Jekyll glanced over at Cue, and his jaw squared. He’d only gotten a brief rundown, but clearly it was affecting Cue. Jekyll expected him to dig deeper. Cue didn’t. But he wanted to. *I got this, brother.*

Jekyll stepped closer. “You’ve seen her though, right?”

“Oh yeah, saw her last week. She was picking something up. Had her dog with her.” He laughed. “She doesn’t go anywhere without him.”

“She here now?” Jekyll asked and could feel the weight of Cue’s stare.

“No. Not sure she stays here much anymore.”

He glanced over at Cue and saw the relief flash over his features. His tension eased, but he didn’t say a word. Jekyll had no clue what this girl meant to Cue, but she meant something.

They walked back to their bikes in silence. Once they were situated, Cross looked over at Cue, who was staring across the lot.

“She doesn’t stay here anymore. That’s a good thing.”

Cue nodded and started his engine.

It was a long ride back to the clubhouse. It would give each of the brothers time to think about their meeting and possibly come up with a prospective plan to deal with the Satan’s. Though, he was sure Cue’s mind would be elsewhere.

*

The ride took longer than expected with the storm. Jekyll could ride in any weather but drenched and dodging lightning put him in a mood. Ace insisted on getting the discussion taken care of before Wraith and Cypher headed out for a transport. He'd grabbed a bar towel on his way into the meeting, drying off his arms and face.

"How was the ride, Jek?" Gent taunted.

"Fuck off." He yanked his chair from the table and sat. A quick glance around the room showed everyone was in attendance. He was turning in his chair when he caught Cypher staring.

Jekyll cocked his brow. *What?* It was at that exact moment Ace started the meeting. Then Cross took charge, giving a rundown of their meeting with the Satan's. A few had been confused, which was to be expected.

"You really think they've been keeping a physical log of their transports?" Hyde scoffed.

"We know they haven't, but when I ordered them to provide one, Griggs got nervous. He knows he can't account for the sales, because there aren't any. When I joked about him stockpiling, all the fucking blood drained from his face. His reaction alone confirmed what we suspect." Cross folded his arms. "They got someone backing them, and they're probably gonna move it soon if they think we know."

Ace sighed, dragging his hand down his jaw. "Fuck." He jerked his eyes to Cypher. "And we got no idea whose cash is behind this?"

"Not yet. I need more to go on, Ace." Cypher grasped his hips. "They got over two hundred thousand in product. They're gonna move it and probably cut through Ghosttown. I don't know any associate stupid enough to try that knowing the Riders are under the protection of the Underground."

"Gotta be someone outta state. No one's gonna risk going up against the Underground for a couple hundred grand." Wraith said.

Jekyll had given the deal a lot of thought. It could go deeper than just a transaction.

"Maybe." Jekyll leaned back in his chair, grabbing the arms. "Or maybe someone's looking to shake up power. Oz has been reigning King for a long time. Could be someone trying to dethrone him. Solid way would be to infiltrate an unsuspecting area that won't see it coming."

"We could give Ghosttown the heads up," Oak said.

Hyde blew out a heavy breath. "That would rock their fucking world."

It would. The Riders had been players in the Underground for a long time but had gotten out of it. Well, most of it, years ago.

Oak chuckled. “Tough love, man. Sink or swim.”

Jekyll swiveled in his seat, facing Oak. He didn’t have any ties to that club. Crossing paths a while back was the extent. But underestimating Ghosttown wasn’t smart.

Jekyll lifted his chin. “You think they’d sink?”

“I mean” —Oak smirked— “it’s fucking Mayberry.”

Jekyll snorted, shaking his head. *Ah, the youngbloods, they don’t fucking get it.*

“What? Am I wrong?”

Yeah. Jekyll couldn’t fault Oak and the younger members for discounting the Ghosttown Riders. They only saw one side. But for those who had been around a long time? *We know better.*

“It’s dangerous to underestimate them. *You* know who they are today.” Jekyll arched his brow. “I remember who they were back then. They may have changed their lifestyle, but they’re the same guys. And now they got a lot more to lose. If you think they’d sink with their women and kids on the line” —Jekyll paused— “then you don’t fucking know them.”

Oak shrugged. “Then why have protection?”

Jekyll narrowed his gaze. “Because they fucking earned it.”

He wasn’t taking a hard stand for Ghosttown. He had no skin in that game. There was a good chance that, given the intel, the Riders would hold their own, but not without casualties.

“Doesn’t matter,” Ace snapped. “’Cause we don’t deal with Ghosttown. *Ever*.”

Oak flattened his lips, gave a curt nod, and the room fell into silence. There were secrets among the club. There were things they never talked about. Killcreek had never had a reason to deal with Ghosttown. This was no different.

“We’ll take it to Inez. See how she wants to handle it. In house or with Oz,” Ace said and scanned the brothers. “We got anything else?”

God, I fucking hope not.

Jekyll was prepared to stand when Cypher stepped forward, staring directly at him. “It’s a problem.”

Jekyll stiffened, keeping his eyes locked on Cypher. He’d been warned.

“What’s the problem?” Cross asked, shifting his gaze between him and Cypher.

Cypher didn’t answer. He was waiting on Jekyll. There was no way of getting out of this. He nodded and settled into his chair, watching Cypher move closer to the table.

“I got some information. Don’t know if it’s something we should be worried about but figured I’d mention it.” He looked over at Jekyll. “Got a little more on Imogene.”

“The prison librarian?” Ace asked.

Cypher nodded. “Looked into her again when Jekyll ran into her and she mentioned moving to Lawry. At the time, she didn’t have a new address on file. Since then, it’s been updated.”

“Wait” —Hyde shifted in his seat— “You saw her? In Lawry?”

“Yeah.” He gave his back to his cousin and lifted his chin toward Cypher. “Where is she at?”

“5276 Bloomfield Court.”

He wasn’t familiar with the residential sections of the city.

“Alright. So?”

Cypher hiked his brows. “It doesn’t exist.”

What?

“It’s a dummy address.”

While it was strange, it wasn’t necessarily an issue for the club. It could’ve been something as simple as a street name mistake.

“That’s the problem?” Jekyll arched his brow.

Cypher sighed. “There’s more. She’s got one relative who lives in Lawry.”

“You said she didn’t,” Jekyll snapped.

“When I initially checked, there wasn’t any information. But it isn’t exactly like I did her family tree, Jek. All her social media was deleted years ago. Kind of hard to trace her moves without it these days.”

Ace lifted his hand, gaining their attention. “I’m failing to see what the fucking problem is. She’s got family in Lawry. So what?”

“Her cousin is Detective Erik Murdoch who works for the Lawry PD and has a connection to Ghosttown East.” Cypher drew in a breath. “And the Underground.”

Oh shit!

Hyde jerked his head, staring at Jekyll, but he refused to look at him.

“Why do I know that name?” Hyde snapped.

Ace dragged his hand down his face, cupping his jaw. “We don’t need this complication, Jek.”

It was official. *Imogene is a big fucking problem.*

“Can someone fucking clue me in?” Oak asked.

Ace sighed, dropping his hand to the table with his eyes pinned on Jekyll. “Few years back, East’s president Gunner’s ex, who was also his son Con’s mom, was murdered. Pretty much tortured. It was tied to the Underground.”

“And the detective?”

“She was his woman.”

“Oh shit, I think I remember that,” Oak said.

Jekyll did. Killcreek played no role in it, but it certainly outlined the true danger of getting involved in their world.

“As far as I know, it was handled in house by East. But” —Ace blew out a heavy breath— “Your woman dies under the hand of the Underground with no legal repercussions, the detective is still gonna hold a grudge.” Ace glanced up at Cypher. “Any proof she’s in contact with him?”

“Yeah, phone calls. Not many and they’re all initiated by her. But it could be a problem especially with her connection to Jekyll and Hyde.”

“Well, fuck yeah there is. Something ain’t right here.” Hyde tapped his knuckles on the table. “She shows up, just happens to run in to Jekyll? Now we find out she’s connected to the police in Lawry?”

Gent chuckled. “And let’s not forget her call to Jekyll.”

Hyde shifted in his seat, knocking into his arm. “You talked to her?”

Jekyll grabbed the arms of the chair and stood. “She called the main house.”

“What the fuck, Jek?”

The cousins didn’t have any secrets. Not usually.

He ignored Hyde, turning to Cypher. “And maybe all this shit is coincidence.”

“And maybe it’s fucking not!” Hyde shouted but abruptly stopped when Ace lifted his hand.

“Hyde, man. I was there when we were coming out from Inez’s, and she showed up,” Cue said. “She looked just as surprised as Jek.”

It was true.

“Or she’s a really good fucking actress. I don’t like this.” Hyde hardened his gaze.

“I thought you liked her, brother.” Gent smirked.

“From a fucking distance. Why the hell is she in Lawry? In our state?” He pointed to Jekyll. “Reaching out to him.”

He could blame paranoia on Hyde’s end, but he’d be ignoring the obvious. The timing was suspicious. The encounter was too. Then calling him at the clubhouse without any real purpose? By nature, Jekyll didn’t trust anyone who hadn’t earned it. But he was usually able to see past bullshit and read people. However, even he could admit to himself that he didn’t think straight with her in mind. Maybe what he was seeing with her was all a ruse.

“I could always pay her a visit.” Gent lifted his hand.

Jekyll balled his fists as his muscles tightened.

“Not if you wanna fucking live,” Jekyll threatened.

Gent snickered and clucked his tongue. “Giving me mixed signals. First you say you’re not interested, but every time I mention her, you get territorial. Why is that?”

“Hey Gent.” Hyde pressed his palms to the table, leaning toward the brother. “Shut the fuck up.”

“How about everybody shuts the fuck up? We gotta get on the road,” Wraith said, breaking up some of the tension in the room. And for that, Jekyll was thankful. He immediately walked out when Ace ended the meeting. He didn’t even bother stopping at the bar. He headed out the back door and across the yard to his house. He was halfway to his place when he heard the pounding boots coming up from behind.

“Not fucking now, Hyde.”

He didn’t need to see his cousin to know it was him. They’d been joined since almost birth. No one knew him better than Hyde.

“Why didn’t you tell me she’s in Lawry?”

The fucking balls on you, cousin. Jekyll didn’t care that he spent the majority of his time at Penny’s. But he wasn’t about to be interrogated over something that was probably nothing. And more so, something that had nothing to do with Hyde. *Imogene is mine*.

“Can’t tell you if you ain’t here. Maybe you spend less time with Penny and more with the club, you’d know shit.” It was a dig and meant to shut him down. It did the opposite.

Hyde pushed past him, blocking his path. His jaw squared, and his scowl deepened.

“That’s bullshit. I don’t like this thing with her, Jek.”

Jekyll ground his teeth, narrowing his gaze. He shot out his arm, pointing to the clubhouse. “Yeah, I heard you both fucking times you said it back there. What the fuck do you want me to do?”

“Be fucking honest.”

Jekyll knitted his brows. “About what?”

“Imogene.”

What the fuck was he talking about?

“I know you, Jek. And you and her…”

He stepped up, practically butting chests with his cousin. “There is no me and her.”

Hyde squared his jaw. “You want to keep that up for the club? Fucking fine by me, Jek. But I was fucking there. You weren’t just an inmate who stopped in the library and took some of her classes. Not to her.” Hyde paused briefly and inched closer, lowering his voice. “And she was never just the librarian. Not to you.”

Jekyll never once spoke about Imogene to anyone, including Hyde. But his cousin knew him better than anyone. He’d read through the silence and watched him watch her. But he wasn’t going to admit to anything.

“Did I go after her when I got out? Fucking no!”

That should’ve ended it, and for anyone else, it might have. Not his cousin. Hyde slowly nodded but didn’t say a word. The silence only intensified Jekyll’s anger, and he turned, stormed away, and headed to his house. He was about to climb the porch stairs.

“So she’s nothing to you, right? You don’t give a shit about her. Then why threaten the whole fucking prison?”

Jekyll stilled, and he slowly angled his head, glaring at Hyde.

“I don’t know what the fuck you’re talking about.”

“Yeah, you do. You made a deal with Morty in block two. Ran into him the morning we got out. He told me all about it. You watch over his mom, help her out if she needs something? And in return, he’d make sure Imogene stayed safe. And that was after you issued a threat to the whole goddamn prison. Your warning had been heard loud and clear. ‘You come for mine, I’m gonna come for yours?’ That’s a pretty bold statement for someone who means *nothing* to you.”

There was no disputing it. Not that it mattered. Jekyll didn't have to answer to anyone. Not even Hyde.

"Why the fuck do you care?"

The corner of Hyde's mouth hiked. "I don't. But I do give a shit what happens to you. And her being here, this close, and running into you, calling you? Too many coincidences. Now her connection to the law? I don't trust her, Jek."

Jekyll snorted. "You afraid of a librarian?"

Hyde sighed. "I am when it comes to you."

He scoffed. "She's none of your fucking business."

"Is she yours?"

Jekyll didn't answer. Hyde could read through any lie. All he needed was to look him in the eyes. Jekyll turned, and walked inside, slamming the door behind him.

Fuck!

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CHAPTER EIGHT

The hotel wasn't much to brag about. It was old, dated, and just off the highway. But it was clean, the owners were sweet, and it didn't cost her a dime. Imogene even received a small meal stipend. Though after doing some research on the tiny town, she hadn't come across any eateries. When she'd gotten the assignment in Birch, she'd expected to be put up in the town. Nothing surprised her more than seeing her reservations for Killcreek. Her heart skipped a beat, and a tingling heat raced through her blood. It was silly. The chances of running into him were still small considering there weren't many places to randomly bump into Jekyll. But she was holding out hope. Not that it really mattered. She'd crashed and burned during their last interaction. Making decent conversation was a challenge, and he seemed irritated with just her presence when they ran into each other. Or maybe she'd just caught him off guard.

Should I call him again?

Imogene sat on the edge of her bed staring down at the phone. It couldn't go any worse. She could just call and ask if he had recommendations for places to eat around Killcreek. *Lame.* But a realistic option. She was new to the area. It was a plausible reason to connect again.

Or you could look up restaurants on the internet like normal people do.

"Shut up," She rolled her eyes and muttered, silencing her inner voice. Sliding her thumb over the screen, she tapped her contacts list.

Zane (Jekyll) Pierce.

Imogene wasn't looking for rational thought. She just needed a believable excuse to hear his voice again. She'd have to use the main line. When Jekyll had called her, it had been from a blocked number. She assumed it was his personal line, and disappointingly, he didn't offer it up.

"Just do it," she mumbled and hit the contact number, then brought the phone to her ear. When her leg began to shake, she squeezed her knee in hopes of easing her anxiety. It was just a phone call. *Relax.*

"Yeah?"

The gruff tone had her straightening her back and tightening her hold over her leg.

“Hi, is Jekyll there?” Her words were rushed, but at least she didn’t stutter this time.

She was off to a much better start with this second call.

“Hang on.”

She sucked in a breath as the blood rushed through her veins.

Okay, this is it. She didn’t have an exact script memorized, but she’d go with her initial reason. And maybe if he knew she was in town he’d… *He’d what, invite you to dinner?* Was it that far-fetched? *Yes!*

“He ain’t here.”

She sank into the mattress with the weight of her shoulders dragging her down. All that adrenaline built-up for nothing. She picked at the edge of the comforter.

“Oh well, thanks for checking.” She paused slightly. “Can you…”

The line went dead. Again.

Wow, that went just as well as the first time.

She glanced around the room, meshing her lips together. Crash and burn. Twice in a row. *Look at me, setting records.*

Her phone vibrated in her hand, and her heart skipped. Unfortunately, it wasn’t a call. It was her alarm reminding her to leave in five minutes for her meeting. She had to table her thoughts if she was going to be on time. Initially, it had been set up at the client, Shelby’s, home earlier in the afternoon, but she’d called to reschedule and change the location. It seemed a bit unorthodox to be meeting at a bar, but who was she to judge?

Imogene pulled into the lot with five minutes to spare and glanced up at the sign. It had seen better days. When she got out of her car, she scanned the parking lot. There were quite a few trucks and motorcycles. However, when she walked inside, the lot wasn’t a representation of the bar. There were only two men seated at a table in the corner. *Strange.*

When she locked eyes with the man behind the bar, he scowled, taking a long perusal. She didn’t usually mind men looking at her, but this guy was old enough to be her father. And there was no missing the gold band on his left hand. Though, he didn’t seem too interested or impressed. If anything, he was giving off an irritated vibe.

She lifted her hand in a short wave. “Hello.”

His brows knitted, and he squinted. “What?”

Oh.

"Um…"

"You want a drink, food, what? I don't got all day." He waved his hand. "And if you're selling something, we don't want it."

This had to be the most hostile welcome she'd ever received at a food establishment. What the heck happened to good customer service?

"I'm not selling anything. I'm looking for someone." She cleared her throat. "Could you tell me where I can find Shelby Carson?"

"Who?" he snapped.

"Shelby Carson."

His scowl deepened. "No."

No?

"Barry." The feminine voice came out as a warning. A blonde-haired woman sidled up next to him.

Barry spread his arms. "How can I tell her where Shelby Carson is if I don't know who the hell Shelby Carson is?"

Imogene leaned closer. "I believe she works here."

Barry hooked his thumb over his shoulder. "Yeah, well we're the only two working here and her name is Addison." His brows spiked to his hairline. "And do I look like a fucking Shelby to you?"

Imogene winced and stepped back from the bar.

Excuse me, sir. Rude!

"Charming, isn't he?" Addison chuckled, waving Imogene to the end of the bar. "Now, Shelby? You said she works here?"

"Yes, as of the last time I spoke with her, which was about five hours ago. She gave me this address as her place of employment." Imogene dug in her bag, ruffling through the paperwork. She pinched the end of the small slip of paper and read the address confirming this was the correct location. She held it up for Addison.

"See?"

Addison's gaze scanned the paper, and she smiled. "I see. Any chance she mentioned her occupation?"

She hadn't, and Imogene hadn't thought to ask. She propped her bag up on the stool and dug inside, pulling out her file. Imogene scanned the paperwork and stilled, widening her eyes. How had she missed that? She swallowed the lump in her throat.

"Adult entertainment."

Addison muffled a snicker, waving her hand. “Follow me. We’ll find her.”

Imogene rushed to catch up to her at the curtains. “As Barry so rudely introduced me, I’m Addison.”

“Oh, hi, I’m Imogene. Thanks for helping me.”

“No problem. And for future reference, Barry’s like that with everyone, so just ignore him.”

Addison greeted the girl behind the counter and opened the door leading into a darkened room. The techno music and dark lighting fit the bill. This was definitely adult entertainment. The seating area was two-tiered with the stage in the center. There were a few girls at tables with men, and one on the stage sliding down a pole dressed only in her panties. Imogene took in her surroundings. This wasn’t her first time in a strip club. One of the prison guards had a birthday and invited everyone. At first, she’d declined, but when he’d insisted wives would be there, she went. It turned out to be an interesting experience. While not all the guys’ partners had been present, she’d been surprised at how many showed up. And actively participated.

It was much more upscale than this place though. It wasn’t a packed house, but plenty of tables were filled, especially for seven o’clock on a Wednesday.

“Most girls only go by their stage names. But the manager will know.” Addison glanced around the room then lifted her hand, waving.

“Ava?”

Another woman sauntered over, smiling. “Hey.”

Addison pointed to Imogene. “She’s looking for Shelby Carson?”

Ava eyed her, and while she seemed to have a serene smile, there was something behind her gaze. An element of suspicion. It was best to explain why she was there.

“Shelby is expecting me. We had a meeting set up for earlier, but she had to reschedule and asked if I could meet her here.”

The explanation seemed to appease Ava. She parted her lips but the bouncer standing near the entrance called out for Addison.

“Barry said to get your ass back at the bar.”

Addison rolled her eyes. “You’re in good hands with Ava.”

“Thanks for your help.”

“No problem.” Addison winked and walked away, leaving her with Ava.

“Shelby aka Sunny, goes on stage next, so it’ll probably be about thirty minutes.”

Imogene peered around the room. “Is it okay if I wait for her here?”

Ava shrugged. “I don’t mind you waiting, but you might make the customers uneasy just standing here. You look like a wife searching for her husband. That’s going to put that same thought in all their minds, and they’ll be hightailing it out of here, if they think *their* wives are on the way to bust them at the strip club.”

That was fair.

Imogene hooked her thumb over her shoulder. “I can go wait at the bar out front.”

Ava slid her hand down Imogene’s arm and grabbed her hand. “No, stay here. Let’s get you set up at the bar so you blend in.”

Ava led her to a spot in the corner, gesturing to a stool, and then went behind the bar.

“First drink is on the house. What would you like?”

“Free?” Imogene chuckled. “That must draw customers in.”

Ava laughed, shaking her head. “Free for you. I make the others pay.”

“Can I have a tequila with lime?”

Ava widened her eyes, and her lips twitched. “I was *not* expecting that order.” She dropped her elbows to the bar, smiling. “I thought for sure you’d have me making a margarita or daiquiri.”

“I’m not a fan of the fruity drinks. I like my liquor simple.”

“Girl after my own heart.” Ava pushed off the bar, grabbing the bottle from the wall. Imogene watched her make the drink, but glanced over at the stage when the lights dimmed and the music changed.

“That’s Shelby. Good dancer.” Ava paused, and Imogene looked over to find Ava staring at her. “She’s a good girl too. Not in any trouble, right?”

Imogene held up her hand. “Oh no, not at all. I work for a resource center that helps former inmates. We offer help with counseling, job placement, anything to better acclimate them after their release.”

“Shelby was in jail, huh?”

Oh shit! This was not all Imogene’s fault. By law, Shelby was supposed to disclose to her employer that she’d been convicted of a crime. Still, she’d just aired her dirty laundry and possibly got her in trouble.

“I shouldn’t have said anything.”

Ava scoffed, placing the glass down in front of her. “Girl, I don’t care and neither do any of these men watching her. Everyone makes mistakes, right?”

“Yeah.” Imogene sipped her drink.

This was a prime example of her talking too much.

Imogene heard the faint ring and Ava reached into her back pocket, pulling out her phone. She closed her eyes and shook her head.

“Hey Kira,” Ava said, releasing a heavy breath.

She stared across the room and a small smile emerged, then she once again shook her head.

“And he said I *insisted* he play an extra hour tonight?” There was a slight pause. “Put him on the phone.”

She glanced over to Imogene and mouthed, “*kids*.”

Ava snickered. “Don’t you, ‘hi mom’ me. I told you two hours of gaming, then homework, dinner, shower, and bed.”

She rested her hand on the top of the bar and tapped her long purple nails on the wood. They were shimmery, and seemed to change color with different angles. Ava’s whole aura was beautiful.

“Alright, how do you wanna do this, kiddo? You either follow the rules or lose the system for a week. Your choice.” She rolled her eyes. “No, there’s no option three. So, what’s it gonna be?”

Ava slowly nodded, and she seemed to be fighting against a smile.

“Yeah, I know life is hard. But I promise you’ll survive without a third hour of video games.”

Imogene couldn’t hear the other end of the line, but Ava seemed to handle it without raising her voice or any inch of frustration.

“Alright, kiddo. I love you too.” She clicked the screen of her phone and smiled over at Imogene. “You have any kids?”

“No.” She shook her head. “I have a cat, though. He’s annoyed by me the majority of the time. Probably not so different from parenting.”

Ava burst out laughing. “Yep, that pretty much sums it up.” Ava walked out from behind the bar. “I gotta make my rounds, but if you finish that off and want another, let me know. And” —Ava paused— “I think what you’re doing for them is a good thing. Which is why your second drink is on me too.” Ava winked and started across the room.

Once Shelby’s set was done, she wandered around the room. Ava had pulled her aside, whispering something in her ear and pointing toward the

bar.

Shelby glanced over, smiled, then held up both hands and spread her fingers, indicating she needed ten more minutes. Imogene immediately nodded. She wasn't on any specific time restraint. She turned in her stool, faced the bar, and grabbed her drink, taking a sip.

"Hey, darlin'."

Imogene choked slightly on her mouthful of tequila, not expecting any company. She licked her lips, looking over to the man next to her.

"Imogene, right?"

She licked her lips again, nodding. He looked kind of familiar, and she knew she'd heard his voice before. She just couldn't place where they'd met.

"Yes. I'm sorry, I don't remember…"

He scooted closer, smiling. "I enlightened you on the phrase *working the circuit* meant selling drugs."

That night had been ingrained in her head.

She gasped and pointed without thought. "You're Jekyll's friend."

His eyes gleamed, and he laughed. "Yeah, darlin', I'm Jekyll's *friend*."

He was only repeating what she'd said, but she had the distinct feeling he was mocking her. In all her research, *brother* was a common use for describing members of an MC. Not *friend*.

"What are you doing here? Thought you lived down in Lawry."

"I do. But um, I'm in town for work."

His gaze traveled down her body, lingering on her breasts. "Auditioning?"

For the strip club?

"No," she blurted. "I have a meeting with a client. I work for a resource center for..." *Stop oversharing!* Imogene cleared her throat. "People. But that's all I can say about my job."

He slowly nodded. This man had a strange vibe she couldn't place. He hadn't said or done anything that was obviously or outwardly inappropriate. He'd been nothing but polite, minus checking her out. Even that wasn't done with rudeness or sexual comments. But still there was something. Alluring with an underlying dangerous element. The type of man who could convince her of something even while suspecting it was a trap.

"Like a charming serial killer," she muttered without thought and felt heat rush up to her cheeks. She forced an awkward smile.

His lips flattened, and his gaze darkened briefly, then he broke out in a laugh, slapping the bar and dragging his hand over his mouth. Clearly, he wasn't insulted by the comparison. *Is that a good or bad thing?*

"How long you in town for?"

"Just until Saturday. I have a meeting in the afternoon. After that, I head home."

"You got plans for Friday?" he asked with a small smile playing on his lips.

Her only plans were going through her next case file, reading a book, and watching videos on her phone. Though she wouldn't be sharing her pitiful existence with him.

"Not really."

"Having a party at the clubhouse. You should come." He smirked. "Jekyll will be there."

Her cheeks immediately burned at the sound of his name.

"I don't know if…"

"Hyde too. Haven't seen him since he got out, right? Be a little reunion. You can be my guest. Friday night parties are a lot of fun, darlin'. You don't want to miss out."

It would be a lot more fun than sifting through paperwork. She couldn't remember the last party she'd gone to that didn't include those collecting social security. And the major factor had her heart picking up speed.

"And you don't think Jekyll or Hyde would mind if I came?"

"Not at all, darlin'." He put out his hand. "Give me your phone. I'll give you my number and send you the details."

She watched as he tapped on her screen and heard his phone ping. He handed it back to her and stood, putting him only a foot from her.

"Now, don't stand me up, darlin'."

"I won't."

She watched him walk away. He had a confident swagger as if he owned the room. *Don't all serial killers?* As he headed toward the door, she noticed Addison watching him from the main level, and her eyes shifted to Imogene. She lifted her hand, waved, and turned back around with only one thought racing through her mind.

What does someone wear to a motorcycle club party?

****

As much as Jekyll liked his new separate quarters away from the clubhouse, he got cagey anytime he was in one spot for too long. He'd spent the morning sleeping in, eating breakfast, and doing laundry. *So fucking domesticated.* Jekyll still hadn't furnished much of his house and wasn't sure he actually would. This was all new territory. It had taken him years to be comfortable in his own room at the clubhouse. A house might take a decade. It made sense. He'd spent his entire life with no real space of his own. This was an adjustment.

He grabbed his cut and keys, and walked out the front door. He had an empty garage but still opted to park in his driveway. He was a creature of habit. He walked down the steps, and from the corner of his eye, caught two brothers on the sidewalk. *Yeah, we got fucking sidewalks.*

"Heading out?" Cross asked with Ace by his side, walking past the open lot separating their houses.

It was specifically reserved for Hyde, but he hadn't shown any interest. Jekyll mounted his bike but didn't start the engine.

"Yeah."

Cross gestured toward the property. "Think he'll ever build?"

"That'll be up to Penny. So I'm thinking that's a hard no."

Cross laughed, and they stopped a few feet away.

"Taking a ride?" Ace asked.

"Was thinking about it? You need something?"

"No." Cross smirked. "But you're gonna miss the party."

He scoffed. "Been partying for six months. I can skip one."

Ace shared a look with Cross and folded his arms. He was getting the impression this wasn't going to be casual small talk. The president and VP had an agenda. Jekyll had been with the club long enough to know when he was approached by these two, there was a problem.

"I'm thinking you both got something to say," Jekyll said, shifting his gaze between them. "And since we're not in a meeting, guessing it's personal."

Ace lifted his chin. "You tell us."

Jekyll immediately went on the defense. "Tell you what?"

Ace stared back at him. It was Cross who spoke. "Heard from Imogene again?"

He tightened his grip on his handlebar. "No." He sighed. "Is that it?"

Ace smirked. "Need a little more."

“Like what, Ace?”

“Wanna know how deep this thing with you and her is.”

Jekyll clenched his jaw, grounding his teeth. “It isn’t.”

Ace held up his hand, reading Jekyll’s anger. It’s what made him a good president. “Not saying it can’t be, Jek. We just need to know.”

“I got the same bullshit from Hyde the other day. Don’t need it from you guys.”

He started his engine and grabbed his helmet.

“Well, maybe that’s because we’re all seeing something, Jek,” Cross said.

“Then you’re all seeing it wrong.”

“Are we?” Ace challenged.

Jekyll was done with this conversation. Unless it directly affected the club, he wouldn’t entertain any discussion involving Imogene.

“Yeah.” He shifted gears and passed them in the driveway, turning right onto the street.

He was just past the clubhouse when he slowed down and came to a stop. He waved at the van backing up to the front door. Friday night parties were usually smaller than Saturday night, but they still had a decent crowd. Two brothers rounded the van, and one started to walk over to him.

“Where you going?” Gent asked.

“A ride.”

He hummed. “Be back for the party?”

Jekyll snorted. “Why the fuck does everyone keep asking me that?”

Gent shrugged. “It’s just not like you to miss pussy. I have it on good authority there’ll be a new batch here tonight.”

The last thing he wanted to think about was women. His main objective was to rid his mind of a certain redhead.

“Well, you have fun with that.”

Gent laughed, cupping his mouth. “Gonna need you to remember *you* said that.”

“What the fuck are you talking about?”

“Nothing, brother.” He slapped Jekyll’s shoulder. “Enjoy your ride.”

Cryptic fucking asshole.

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CHAPTER NINE

Imogene stared at herself in the mirror. She spun slowly, catching every angle as a small smile played on her lips. She'd done her due diligence and researched common outfits for biker parties. Leather was a popular choice. It was definitely not part of her own wardrobe, but she was able to order the clothes and have them delivered to the motel. *Is it too much?* It was the perfect fit. Maybe too perfect? She smoothed her hands over the red leather pants. They fit like a glove, leaving little to the imagination. She'd actually stolen the look from a picture and matched the pants with a black corset top.

She again found herself asking, *was it too much?* She glanced down her body, zoning in on the plunging neckline strapped with laces. For precaution, she double-knotted the bow. Now her concern shifted from coming untied to her breasts popping out. Imogene was second guessing the outfit. She peered down at her suitcase. Nothing in her wardrobe was suitable for a motorcycle club party. It was leather or nothing.

Imogene stared at her reflection in the mirror. She was definitely out of her comfort zone, but she shrugged, fighting against her smile.

"I kind of look good though."

The decision was made. Surely, in leather she'd blend in with everyone else. *I hope.*

According to Gent's directions, the clubhouse was only ten minutes down the road. Since arriving in Killcreek, she hadn't ventured out much. Honestly, there really wasn't much to see. But she'd taken a short ride canvassing the area and doing a trial run. Even with his directions, the clubhouse couldn't be seen from the road. She'd been tempted to go up the driveway but reconsidered. She was invited for the party. It didn't give her free rein to show up unannounced.

Imogene grabbed her keys and bag, taking one last look in the mirror. The butterflies swarmed her belly. If she didn't leave now, she might chicken out. She rushed to the door, locked up behind her, and got into her car. The owners were sitting on the front patio and waved as she exited the driveway.

By the time she arrived, the lot was almost full. She was able to find a spot, but if anyone pulled next to her, she ran the risk of being blocked in. There were a few people milling around in front of the house and a group on the porch. She smiled when making eye contact with a woman near the stairs. It wasn't returned.

Great!

Imogene had been to parties, but this was on another level. It was wall to wall bikers and men with quite a few women scattered in the mix. It probably wouldn't have been so intimidating had she had a friend with her. *But I'm flying solo.*

When she attempted to make it to the bar, she got caught up in a crowd. Mosh pit would've been a fair description. She found herself moving deeper into the room until she saw a small opening and pushed her way to the wall. She pressed her back against it, surveying the room while trying to level her racing heart.

"I'm so out of my element," she muttered, turning to the left. The bar was now about fifteen feet away. Even if by some miracle she got there, all the space was taken.

"Hey, darlin." His sultry drawl and breath against her ear had Imogene spinning around quickly. So fast she lost her footing and essentially fell into Gent's chest. When she realized her hands were on his pecs, she yanked her arms down to her sides.

"Thought for sure you were gonna stand me up." The corner of his mouth curled, and his gaze skimmed over her outfit, lingering on her breasts. "This for me?"

She nervously chuckled and waved him off. "I had to look up what to wear to a motorcycle club party. Is this okay?"

"Yeah." He licked his lips. "You nailed it."

Her smile was shaky at best. While he didn't say anything directly to make her uncomfortable, he had a strange aura. A quiet, dangerous vibe.

She leaned closer, shouting over the music. "Is it always this packed?"

Gent glanced over the room. "A lot of people like to party here."

Imogene nodded, looking at the men across the room with Killcreek cuts. She recognized two from the night she'd run into Jekyll but didn't see him. It seemed a bit forward and eager to ask Gent. But she did it anyway.

"Is Jekyll here yet?"

The corner of his mouth hiked. “Asking about Jek when you’re my date?”

Date? *What, no!* She widened her eyes and waited on Gent to laugh or make some type of joke. He did neither. Was this a date? *No.*

“This isn’t a date.”

He flinched. “It’s not?”

Uh oh.

She crinkled her nose. “Is it?”

He burst out laughing and slid his knuckles over her arm. It sent a tremble over her flesh but not in the good way. Imogene stepped back, forcing a smile. While she appreciated the invitation, she didn’t want to give him the wrong impression.

“I’m sorry but this isn’t a date.”

His lips spread in to a wide grin. “You need to relax, darlin’.”

Yes, I do.

“Let’s get a drink to calm you down.” He passed her and grabbed her wrist in a secure but painless hold. Unlike her, Gent moved through the crowd with complete ease. In fact, he didn’t have to push through the crowds. They moved for him.

He stopped at a pub table a few feet from the bar. It was occupied by three men and two women. Clearly, there wasn’t any room for them. But Gent wedged himself between the women and knocked on the table gaining their attention.

“This table is taken.” He jerked his head, and the three men immediately grabbed their drinks and walked away without question. He pulled on Imogene’s arm, and she bumped into his shoulder.

The women, however, made no move to leave. They smiled at Gent, eyeing him with a flirty gaze.

“Can we stay?”

Gent smirked. “No, you can get the fuck away from my table.”

The women lost their smiles and turned to Imogene. Her mouth fell open, and she darted her eyes between the women and Gent. This put her in an awkward position.

“They can stay if they want.”

Gent leaned closer, and his warm breath tickled her ear. “What they *want* is to suck my dick and have me eat them out. I got this little tongue

trick thing I do. Had the blonde cumming all over my face two nights ago in record time."

Did he just say that out loud?

Gent laughed, sliding his arm over her shoulder, and she immediately stiffened. "That's all they're after, so no darlin', they can't stay." He paused, turning to the women and losing his smile. The air chilled. "And 'cause this is my house, when I tell someone to get the fuck out, they gotta go. I'm thinking these two don't wanna leave the party just yet, so they'll leave my table 'cause I *told* them to." Gent slid his hand over her back, addressing the women. "As much as I know you both enjoy a spanking and some hair pulling, you ain't gonna like my method of making you leave if I gotta tell you twice. But hey" —his gaze darkened, sending a shiver down Imogene's spine— "you wanna test me?"

Oh shit.

The girls disappeared within seconds. Imogene was caught in a trance. Did that really just happen? In a surprise move, Gent pulled out her seat and gestured for her to sit. And she did.

Imogene shifted on her stool, replaying Gent's speech on repeat. Who spoke like that to people? Imogene was all about honesty, but Gent took it to another level.

"You alright, darlin'?"

Imogene peeked up through her lashes.

"You know, they say kindness goes a long way." He folded his arms and rested them on the table with his head angled toward her. His lips spread into a smile, and he scanned her face.

"Is that what they say?"

Imogene nodded.

"Yeah, that's not really my thing." He winked and lifted his hand, and a prospect showed up out of nowhere.

"Bring me a whiskey on ice." He smiled at her. "What would you like, darlin'?"

It was insane how this man could change his demeanor in an instant. Charming one minute and threatening the next, and seconds later, he was being sweet. Gent was a walking red flag. And possibly, a serial killer. *What have I gotten myself into?* She swallowed the knot in her throat.

"Um, can I have a tequila with lime?"

"You can have anything you want."

The prospect rushed toward the bar. She stiffened when Gent rested his arm on the back of her chair. He hadn't touched her again, but his closeness put her on edge. She needed to lighten the intense mood. She blurted out the first thing that came to mind.

"So, what's the tongue trick?"

Gent flattened his lips, seemingly holding back his amusement, but she read through it.

"Want me to show you?"

What?

She shook her head. "No, thank you."

Gent snickered and looked across the room just as the prospect came back with their drinks. As soon as they were placed on the table, she grabbed the glass and took a large sip.

"Tongue trick is still on the table, but we got other things we gotta take care of first."

She knitted her brows. "Like what?"

"Nickname."

She remembered him mentioning it when they'd first met.

"What's wrong with Imogene?"

It may not be traditionally beautiful or very popular, but she liked it. It was different and unique.

"You need something better."

That's rude.

"I'm named after my great-grandmother," she countered.

"Darlin', you think my parents named me Gent?" He raised his brows. "You know Jekyll's real name, right? We all got road names. Just offering you one. Trying to be all inclusive."

Oh well, in that case.

"Okay, thank you."

He bowed his head, chuckling. Clearly she was missing something.

"What about red? Like my hair." She pulled on a strand.

Gent squinted. "Too obvious."

True.

"What about shortening my last name? Like Pepper?"

"Nah." He smiled. "I got one though. Cherry. Like the hair but sweet and innocent."

Cherry. *It was cute.*

“I like it.”

“Then, Cherry it is.” Gent winked and grabbed his glass, taking a sip.

Imogene had to admit, even though he did have some disturbing qualities, he had his moments. And if not for Gent, she would’ve been crushed against the wall by herself. Maybe this was the start of a friendship. She took another sip of her drink. And then another. She was starting to finally ease a little. *Thank you, alcohol.*

She glanced over at Gent, who was scanning the room. She couldn’t tell if he was looking for someone in particular. Without his eyes on her, she was given the time to truly stare at him. He was handsome with chiseled features and a strong jawline. His red hair was lighter than hers, carelessly styled as if he didn’t spend any time on it. Yet, it was as if every hair was perfectly placed.

He must’ve felt her stare, because without warning, he shifted his gaze to her. Light blue eyes, similar to hers. It reminded her of a study she’d read about years ago.

“You know, if you and I had children, the likelihood of them being redheads is significantly high.”

“Is that right?”

“I mean, they’d have to carry the gene, and there are some other factors, but we’d have a good shot at them being little gingers.”

“Did you do that research right after you met me?” His flirty tone had her smiling.

“No.” She giggled. “I saw a study done a few years ago. I found it interesting.” She shrugged. “I’m a plethora of useless knowledge.”

Gent smirked. “You know, we can go back to my room and test out that theory.”

Imogene rolled her eyes. “Do you sexualize everything?”

He leaned closer, and his eyes darkened, whispering. “Yes.”

Imogene burst out laughing and slapped his hand. “Thanks for hanging out with me.”

Gent stared back at her, but it was impossible to read his thoughts. Her appreciation probably sounded a bit desperate.

She shifted in her seat, circling her finger over the rim of the glass. “I haven’t been out a lot in the last couple years, and friends are just” —She cleared her throat, recognizing her own vulnerability. Speaking the truth would put a damper on the night— “I mean, I have friends.”

Girl, you mean you had friends.

"But since moving, I haven't really met any new ones, so this is a lot of fun for me." She peeked up at Gent. "So, thank you for inviting me."

"Ah Cherry" —His groan was laced with humor— "Don't be sweet and ruin this for me."

What did that mean? Ruin what? Before she could ask, Gent smiled over at her.

"It's my pleasure, darlin'."

****

Jekyll got back from his ride an hour ago, and now the lot was almost packed. He'd considered just staying at his house but relented and went to the party. He usually looked forward to them. Not tonight. There was too much going on with the club. His mind was on business, not getting laid. Though, even that had shifted in the last few weeks. As Gent had pointed out, Jekyll hadn't so much as looked at another woman since his encounter with Imogene.

He grabbed a drink from the bar in the back and watched a few cage matches with Wraith. The prospects were the most entertaining. Always trying to prove their worth in the ring. But it took a lot more than knocking someone out to wear the patch. He'd only stayed for thirty minutes before venturing into the main clubhouse.

He looked around the room, eyeing the throngs of people. The place was packed, rivaling a Saturday night party. He caught Cue and a few others at the main table reserved for members. The brother lifted his hand, and Jekyll made his way toward them. He was a few feet away when Cross glanced over his shoulder.

"Change your mind?"

It was either the party or alone in his house. The jury was still out on which was the better choice. He sidled up next to Cross, ignoring the blonde who slid her hand down his arm, vying for his attention. No woman would get it tonight.

"Prospect!" Oak shouted and lifted his empty bottle. "You see anything wrong with this?"

The prospect was new in the last few months, and Jekyll wasn't sure of his name. He never took the time to learn them until they became full-fledged brothers. His back was to the table and seemingly ignoring Oak.

What the fuck?

Oak shoved him. “Fucking wake up, man.”

The prospect jerked his head and laughed. “I’m plotting out how to steal the redhead from Gent. ’Cause fucking damn.” He smirked. “That’s my type.”

Jekyll turned his head, scanning the room in search of Gent. He found him on the opposite side of the room talking with a woman. Jekyll’s gaze trailed over her back, zoning in on her ass molded by red leather pants. He was more of a breast guy, but he could appreciate an ass, and hers was fucking perfect.

When she turned slightly, he got the perfect view of her profile. Within seconds his muscles tightened, he balled his fists, and he clenched his jaw. *What the fuck?*

He’d seen her dozens of times. Enough to have every detail embedded in his mind. Never once had he envisioned her like *this*. At the prison, she’d always been covered from neck to ankles, nothing to show off her form. Even when he’d seen her that night at the club, she was dressed in a long sleeve top with barely any cleavage showing and jeans.

But this?

“Is that who I fucking think it is?” Cross’s deep tone shared the same shock as Jekyll.

“That’s Imogene.” Addison said.

Imogene Peppercorn had been mentioned in the clubhouse several times but never in front of anyone but the members.

Jekyll jerked his head, scowling. “You know her?”

Addison nodded. “I met her at Barry’s. Well, actually she was going to the strip club.”

Jekyll froze, wondering if he’d heard Addison correctly. Did she say strip club?

“What was she there for?” Cross asked.

There was usually only one reason anyone went to a strip club. Entertainment.

“Something about her job. A counselor, I think. She was meeting with one of the dancers.” Addison glanced over at Jekyll. “She’s very sweet.”

Yeah, I fucking know.

“When?” Jekyll snapped. He was unable to level his tone. Her presence in his club wearing those red leather pants was sending him over the edge.

Addison shrugged. “A couple days ago. I think she’s staying in Killcreek at the motel.”

She’d been in Killcreek, this close for days, and he knew nothing about it?

Cross shared a look with him then turned to Addison. “Did you invite her?”

“No.” Addison snorted. “I barely know her.”

The prospect laughed, staring across the room. “Looks like Gent knows her pretty well. Lucky bastard.”

Blood rushed through his veins. “Prospect! You are two seconds away from getting knocked the fuck out, so shut the fuck up.”

His face paled, and his lips flattened.

“I think Gent might’ve invited her.” Addison sighed and rolled her eyes. “The bathroom at the bar is down again and when I went to use the strip club’s, I saw Gent at the bar with her. They looked…” Addison peeked up through her lashes. “Friendly.”

I’m gonna fucking kill him.

Jekyll slammed his bottle on the table and rounded his brothers, stalking across the room. He didn’t even bother looking to see who he was plowing through in the crowd. His main focus was Imogene at the table with *fucking* Gent.

Jekyll was only a foot away when he slapped his hand on the table, glaring across at Gent. Through his peripheral vision he saw her jump but kept laser focused on his brother.

“What the fuck did I tell you?” He shouted.

Jekyll had specifically told him to stay away from her. Gent had the nerve to smirk and side eye Imogene, who hadn’t said a word.

“You tell me a lot of things.” He lifted his chin. “Refresh my memory, Jek.”

Ah, you motherfucker.

From the pumping blood through his veins and his muscles constricting so tightly, Gent’s death wasn’t a far-fetched possibility.

Gent grabbed his glass, took a swig, and licked his lips. “Actually, it’s coming back to me now. Earlier, I mentioned the party with the *new batch*, and you said I should ‘*have fun with that*.’” Gent grinned and eyed Imogene. “Just doing what you told me, Jek.”

Gent's words played over in his head. *It's just not like you to miss pussy. I have it on good authority there'll be a new batch here tonight.*

Jekyll could almost envision his hands wrapping around Gent's throat and squeezing the last breath out of him. These antics were nothing new from Gent, but it had never hit this close to Jekyll.

"Hi, Jekyll."

He clenched his jaw and scraped his nails against the wood of the table. Her soft voice did nothing to calm him, but it did distract him from murdering his brother with his bare hands. He slowly angled his head.

"What are you doing here?" His tone was harsher than intended. This whole scene had him on the brink of losing control.

"Um." She glanced over at Gent, which only heightened his anger. Why the fuck was she looking to him as some type of savior or ally?

Jekyll stepped in front of her, blocking her view of Gent. Her gaze traveled up his chest, locking in on his stare.

"Gent invited me." Her voice was shaky, and he took a deep breath, trying to calm down. The last thing he wanted was her to be scared of him.

"We ran into each other at Barry's. Figured since she was *staying in Killcreek*, why not have her come to the party," Gent said. "As my date."

Imogene's mouth fell open, her eyes widened, and he heard the harsh gasp. She leaned past him.

"It's not a date!"

Jekyll turned to find Gent smirking. "It's not? Are you sure? 'Cause it kind of feels like a date."

Jekyll clenched his jaw, knowing at this point Gent was now fucking with Imogene too. No one was safe around this psychotic asshole.

She shook her head, darting her eyes between him and Gent. "He didn't pick me up. It's not a date."

Gent burst out laughing, and Jekyll glanced up at the ceiling trying to regain control of his anger.

He jerked his stare back to Imogene. She gave a shaky smile, shifting her gaze between him and Gent.

"Gent?" Cross sidled up next to him. "Need a word with you. *Now*."

Gent stood, rounding Imogene's back. The smile playing on his lips had Jekyll straightening his back and balling his fists. He was dangerously close to her, and Jekyll didn't like it.

Cross grabbed the back of his cut, pushing him forward. “I should’ve fucking let Wraith kill you.”

Jekyll was watching them cross the room when he felt her hand on his arm. His muscles tightened instantly.

“I’m sorry. Gent said you wouldn’t mind if I came to the party.”

I bet he did.

“But um” —She cleared her throat and pulled her hand away, slipping off the stool— “It’s clear from your expression that you do mind, so” —she hooked her thumb over her shoulder— “I’ll leave.”

She moved an inch, and he shot out his arm, curling his hand over her hip. She stilled and glanced up, and he leaned closer, leaving only a small gap between them.

This was a mistake. A huge fucking one. And still…he didn’t hesitate.

“You’re not going anywhere.”

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CHAPTER TEN

This is awkward.

For all her excitement when he told her to stay, it was quickly dwindling. Jekyll was being an attentive host. *Kind of.* After the incredibly uncomfortable and tense moment with Gent, Jekyll ordered her to grab her drink. He led her through the crowds, and into the back. It must've been an addition to the original house. It was a huge room, reminding her more of a banquet hall than a MC clubhouse. Even for the size, it was packed with people.

His steps were much longer than hers, and she had to speed walk just to keep up with him. It cut down on her time to check out her surroundings until they stopped a few feet from the large cage in the center of the room. Two men were boxing.

She cocked her head. Intense boxing. She was pretty sure they were breaking dozens of rules. There weren't any gloves, no referee, and lots of blood. When one of the men fell to the ground, the other gave a sharp kick to his ribs. Imogene winced, unknowingly inching closer to Jekyll and inadvertently bumping his arm.

"You don't like fights?"

She pointed to the cage. "I'm pretty sure kicking someone when they're down is illegal."

"Not here."

Imogene glanced up, noticing Jekyll's lips twitch.

Imogene hadn't thought too much about what would actually happen at the party. She hadn't imagined anything more than a group of people and bikers hanging out. Maybe some drinks, music, possibly dancing. This was a bit overwhelming. She'd been to an occasional party in the past but nothing to this magnitude. She peered around the room lost in her own thoughts. She hadn't even realized someone had stopped to talk with Jekyll until she heard her name.

The man next to Jekyll was a little older, maybe late forties, with salt and pepper hair, and a beard to match. He had a similar build to Jekyll, and

wore the same vest. The rectangular patch over his chest read “President.” She smiled, lifting her hand in a short wave.

His brows dipped, and he shifted his eyes back to Jekyll. It wasn’t exactly a warm welcome, but so far, aside from Gent, she hadn’t gotten one from anyone, including Jekyll. Why should she? He didn’t invite her. If he’d wanted her there, he had her number. He could’ve asked her himself.

“Stay close.” Jekyll shouted as he started across the room.

There was a table near the wall with three empty chairs. There were others seated, but as soon as they got a few feet from the table, the two men stood, grabbed their drinks, and walked away. Jekyll sat in the chair with his back to the wall. She contemplated which seat she should take, but the decision was made for her when he pulled out the one next to him.

Imogene sat, shifting in her chair, glancing around the room. She knew from the prison that Jekyll wasn’t a conversationalist. If they were going to talk, she’d have to be the one to start it. She turned in her seat, shouting over the music.

“Is that guy your president?”

He gave a curt nod. “Yeah.”

“So he’s in charge of your club?”

“Something like that.”

She chuckled. “Kind of like your principal.”

It was an attempt at a joke, and if his scowl was any indication, not a very good one.

She waved her hand, “I just mean, if you mess up or break the rules, you probably have to report to him.” She gulped. “You know, like a principal.”

It felt like another crash and burn. Imogene didn’t have a problem making small talk, but usually the other party showed some interest. She racked her brain trying to come up with something to talk about, but they were very different. Aside from books, she couldn’t think of anything they might have in common. Imogene knew nothing about motorcycles, clubs, or anything involving biker life. Asking about his hobbies seemed lame.

“How long are you in Killcreek?”

His inquiry caught her completely off guard. She perked up.

“I have a meeting tomorrow and head back to Lawry tomorrow night.” She shifted in her chair. “The meeting should only take an hour though. Other than that, I don’t have any plans.”

Imogene waited for some type of response. He basically had her whole itinerary and availability. If he wanted to get together, all he had to do was ask.

“So, I’m free most of tomorrow.”

Jekyll nodded, sipped his beer and veered his gaze across the room.

This is so embarrassing.

Maybe it was time to wave her white flag. She’d just crashed and burned for a third time. A person could only take so much rejection. It was nice of Jekyll to hang out with her but clearly he was doing it out of obligation rather than desire. *I should go.* There was no need to prolong this. She was just about to call it a night when Gent appeared in front of their table. Without thinking, she smiled and waved.

“Hi Gent.”

Jekyll jerked his eyes and glared. *At me.* But he swiftly turned on Gent.

“What the fuck did I tell you?”

Imogene stiffened. The tension between these two wasn’t something she understood. They were friends. Where was all the animosity coming from? Oddly, it seemed one sided on Jekyll’s end.

Gent smiled, looking down at her. “Brother, be nice. Remember, she’s *my* date. I’m just willing to share.” There was no missing the sarcasm. Or the inaccuracy.

“Guest.” Imogene blurted. “Not date.”

Gent shrugged, seemingly unbothered by the correction.

Jekyll squared his jaw. “Don’t make me fucking kill you.”

What is happening? It was the second time Jekyll had threatened him with death. *This is bad*. And it seemed she was the catalyst.

“Alright, man, you want to hang out with Cherry, then have fun.” Gent gestured to Imogene. “Gave *our girl* a nickname.”

She kind of liked it, but from his reaction, Jekyll didn’t.

“You’re seconds away from your last fucking breath.” Jekyll growled and started to stand.

On pure instinct, she grabbed his arm. Jekyll stiffened under her touch but didn’t move. He glared down at her hand and she quickly pulled it away. Another member came in between Gent and the table, pointing across the room. “Ace is looking for you.”

Gent cocked his brow. “Is that right, Cue?”

“Yeah, so I suggest you go fucking find him.” Cue scowled. “Now, Gent.”

Gent smiled, seemingly unaffected by the tense interaction.

“See you around, *Cherry*.” Gent winked.

He walked away, and she expected Cue to follow, but he pulled out a chair and sat. He looked over at Jekyll and shook his head.

“I swear that fucker has a death wish.”

“And I’m gonna make it come true if he keeps that shit up.” Jekyll’s graveled, stern voice was void of any humor.

This is my fault. Imogene was obviously causing tension between the men. She wasn’t sure what she’d done, but at this point it didn’t matter. It was best she left. If for no other reason than to keep the peace between the friends.

“Jekyll” —she hooked her thumb over her shoulder— “I should go. I didn’t mean to cause any trouble.” She went to stand, but he grasped her wrist and pulled her arm. She lost her footing and stumbled backwards, landing in his lap.

“Oh my God, I’m sorry.” She scrambled to get up, but his arm wrapped around her waist with his hand gripping her hip, making it impossible to move. It put them in a very intimate position, and her cheeks heated.

“Why the hell do you keep talking about leaving?”

Wasn’t it obvious? She adjusted her position on his lap, and his eyes heated. *Her ass was planted dead center against his, if I’m right…* —She gulped, trying to batten down the heat rising from her chest— *his growing erection?*

Imogene subtly shook her head, getting her mind back on track and off of Jekyll’s hard cock.

“I’m causing a problem.”

He shook his head. “No, you ain’t.”

What was he talking about? Of course she was.

She chuckled without an ounce of humor. “I think I am.” She leaned close to his ear and his fingers dug into her hip. “I’m the common denominator. If I leave, the problem goes away.”

His chest rumbled, and she couldn’t tell if he was laughing or growling. She straightened as much as she could, and the corner of his mouth curled.

“Then it looks like we’re gonna have a problem all night, ’cause you ain’t going anywhere unless you *want* to leave.” He cocked his brow,

pulling her closer to his chest. “You *want* to leave?”

Did she? Not at the moment.

A novel for your next quiet moment.

Find something to read on Lokepub.

“No,” she whispered.

His eyes darkened, and he reached forward, grabbing his glass and shifting her in the process. She expected him to let her go. He didn’t. “Then you’re gonna stay. With *me*. Not Gent.”

Okay.

****

Jekyll was stationed near the hallway, leaning against the wall and waiting on Imogene. She seemed to have relaxed a little in the last thirty minutes. Cue continued to hang out with them, making small talk. He’d been the perfect buffer. *’Cause I don’t know what the fuck I’m doing.*

When he glanced down the hall, he heard Cue chuckle.

“Jek, man, she’s been gone for five minutes. I think she’ll be fine.”

Imogene went to use the bathroom. He should’ve offered her the one in his room, but he hadn’t thought of it until she disappeared down the hall. This was all new for him. He’d never once hung out with a woman at the club without it ending in his bedroom. And that wasn’t going to happen tonight. Imogene was different.

“Hey Jekyll.”

He glanced over and immediately glared at the woman sidled up next to him.

“How’s it going?”

He hardened his stare and didn’t answer. He fucked her. Maybe twice. Still couldn’t remember her name. And he didn’t care.

“I was looking for you.”

“Jek.” Cue’s voice was low, but he lifted his chin behind him.

He glanced over his shoulder to find Imogene a few feet away with her eyes on the woman next to him. She smiled but shifted on her feet. The last

thing he needed was for her to get the wrong idea.

The woman leaned past him, bumping his chest. “If you don’t mind, can you give us a minute?”

Imogene’s brows hiked, and her mouth fell open. “Um, sure…”

“I *fucking* mind,” Jekyll snapped at the woman.

The woman widened her eyes and stepped back. He kept his glare locked on her until she was halfway across the room, sending a direct message. His muscles tightened when he felt a soft hand graze his arm. Imogene was only a few inches away.

“I feel like I’m monopolizing you. If you want to go and hang out with the others, I can leave.”

What the hell was she talking about?

He hooked his arm around her waist, pulling her against his chest. The sudden move had her breasts practically spilling over the top of her corset, and he bit back his groan. *Fuck.*

The move caught her off guard. She looked like a deer in headlights staring up at him. He’d fucked up the night. This was the second time she’d mentioned it.

“We’re gonna do this again? You wanna leave?”

Her cheeks pinkened. “I just…”

He strummed his thumb over the slip of bare skin on her hip. She trembled slightly but inched closer. *I fucking like that.*

“Do you want me to leave?” she asked.

Imogene wasn’t going anywhere if he had any say.

“I got you” —he dropped his hand over her ass— “in these red leather pants. Where the fuck would I wanna go?”

The corner of her mouth curled, and her chest rose and she sucked in a breath. Pressed against his chest, he could feel her heartbeat racing.

Her fingers trailed over his chest. “They’re new. I wanted to fit in.” She gulped, looking up through her lashes. “Do I?”

Fit in? *Fuck, no!*

She stood out. But that wasn’t the answer she was looking for. He wasn’t the only man in the room appreciating how she filled out the leather pants and corset top. But stating the obvious wouldn’t put her where he needed her…at ease. So he lied.

“Yeah.”

Her smile grew, and she seemed to relax into his chest. As much as he liked the feel of her against him, it was testing his control. He dropped his hand from her ass and grabbed her hand.

"We'll check out the band." He needed a distraction.

When she nodded, he started through the room. Jekyll couldn't remember if he'd ever been on any type of date, but he was going to wing it. They hung out by the makeshift stage for a while. A few people had come over to talk to him. It was mostly bullshit and she didn't pay any attention to it. Imogene was too engrossed with the music, swaying her hips. It took a lot of effort not to stare at her ass. This woman was clueless. She had no idea the effect she was having on him. She stayed close, but a few times she moved toward the stage. Jekyll only allowed her to get a foot away. He hooked his finger through her belt loop, pulling her back.

Territorial? *Yeah.* Regrets? *No!*

When she finished off her drink, he grabbed her waist, pulling her back against his chest. "You want another?"

"Oh yeah." She turned in his arms, completely relaxed.

Oak was passing by, and he snorted. "Good luck if you're looking for a prospect. Those fucks are getting laid and forgetting their duties. Assholes are gonna regret that tomorrow morning."

Yeah, they will.

"I can just get my own drink." She pointed to the bar about ten feet away.

"I'll get it," Jekyll said.

"No, let me, and I'll get you a refill too." She looked over at Oak, cupping her mouth and shouting over the music. "Would you like something?"

Oak grinned and looked over at Jekyll. "I mean, if you're going" —he held up his bottle— "I'll take another."

Imogene pulled away, and he watched her walk to the bar, weaving through the group of people. Most of them in the immediate area had seen her with him, and they acted accordingly, getting out of her way. She stopped behind Cue, seemingly waiting her turn.

"Alright, don't fucking kill me for this but" —Jekyll glanced over at Oak, who was smiling in Imogene's direction— "I like her. Can't remember the last time a woman got me anything that I wasn't paying her for."

Jekyll looked over at Imogene. She was grabbing the two bottles in one hand and the glass in the other. And struggling a bit. When she turned, the woman who'd interrupted them earlier smirked and poured her drink down Imogene's back. *You fucking bitch!*

That wasn't an accident and caught Imogene completely off guard. She jumped and in turn, dropped the bottles and glass on the floor.

Jekyll pushed off the wall, stalking toward her, but Cue got to Imogene first. He pulled her away from the shards of glass littering the floor and tucked her behind his back.

Cue's pointed to the woman. "You don't fucking pull that shit with *her*. All that gets you is your ass out the fucking door."

His shouting had caught the attention of the room even beyond the music in the background.

The woman held up her hands, arching her brow. "It was an accident."

Bullshit!

"The fuck it was!" Cue stalked toward the woman, and Jekyll looped his arm around Imogene's waist.

"I'm so sorry. I'll clean it up." Her voice shook slightly.

He scoffed. "No, you won't. Come on." He pressed his hand on her lower back, guiding her through the back room toward the hallway. The woman was rushing toward the front of the house with Cue on her heels.

"Is she okay?"

He glanced over his shoulder and saw Addison looking at Imogene. He gave a curt nod and walked her down to the end of the hallway to his room. He ushered her inside and closed the door behind them.

There wasn't much to his room other than a bed and nightstand. But he'd kept a few shirts in the drawer. They'd be huge on her small frame, but at least she wouldn't be soaking wet.

"Was that your ex?"

He jerked around with the T-shirt in his fist.

"What?"

Imogene pointed to the door. "The girl out there? Was she upset that we were hanging out together?"

I fucked her twice and don't know her name. But that wasn't something he'd be sharing with her.

"No." He tossed the shirt on the bed. "Get changed."

"Okay," she mumbled.

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

This was a nightmare. All that effort spent on her outfit just to end up in an oversized T-shirt. She pulled the ribbon, untying the bow to her bustier. It would be a few days before she could wash it, and even then the instructions called for dry cleaning. On her budget, that was out of the question. It hadn't been overly expensive, but she'd spent more than she would've preferred on the outfit.

She unhooked the clasp and was half-way to her belly when she heard the feral growl echo through the room.

"What the fuck are you doing?"

She jerked her head and widened her eyes. Jekyll's jaw was squared, his temple pulsed, and the cords on his neck strained.

"Changing?"

He pointed to the bathroom behind him, but his eyes were trained on her, mainly her breasts. "Use the bathroom." His voice was raw.

"Oh." She leaned forward without thinking. The sudden shift loosened the top and did nothing to salvage her modesty. She spread her hands over her cleavage and heard a hiss. She peeked up through her lashes. His gaze darkened, and his breath heaved. The butterflies in her belly swarmed, and heat spread across her skin.

"Go to the bathroom." He growled, fisting his hands.

Why was he so upset? Jekyll seemed to tense instantly as his gaze traveled down her body. Imogene wasn't well-versed with men, especially guys like Jekyll. But there was definitely a semblance of interest. And something else? Desire.

Wait, do I have a shot here?

It wasn't her usual line of thinking, but then again she'd never been in a position like this before. She'd secretly lusted after this man for a year. It had been strictly one-sided. He'd never given her any reason to think differently. Until now.

Imogene straightened, keeping her eyes locked on Jekyll. She slid her finger through the loop and felt the opening give way another inch. A cool

breeze feathered across the tops of her breasts.

“You could be a gentleman and turn around.”

“I’m not a gentleman.” His deep graveled tone sent a shiver over her skin, and her nipples beaded.

She licked her bottom lip, and his eyes immediately zoned in on her mouth. She’d imagined kissing this man more times than she could count. Imogene dropped her hand, releasing her hold over her top, and it spread apart, exposing her breasts.

Jekyll didn’t hesitate. He stalked forward, stopping an inch away. They were practically touching.

“You get topless in my room, makes me think you’re looking for something.”

“Like what?” she whispered.

“Imogene.” He growled.

I might never get this chance again.

Opportunities like this didn’t present themselves often. *Especially not for me.* Now or never?

Imogene pressed her hand on his chest, popped up on her toes and leaned in. She was going to give him ample time to back away. Men had every right to say no too, and she’d respect that. But…

Please don’t say no.

He didn’t. In fact, Jekyll didn’t say a word. His lips came down over hers, stealing her breath. His tongue plummeted into her mouth, tangling against hers. This was better than anything her mind had come up with in the past year. His lips moved over hers as his hand threaded through her hair. She’d been kissed before but never like this.

She wrapped her arms over his shoulders and pressed her breasts against his chest. Every inch of their bodies was meshed together. If she had any doubt he wanted her, it was quickly dashed by his hard erection between her legs. A tingling heat shot straight to her core. His hands covered her breasts, squeezing hard as his lips trailed down her neck, sucking her skin.

In every fantasy and scenario, it had never felt this good.

His lips trailed over her collarbone, and down her chest. The coarse hair of his beard brushed up against her nipple and she sucked in a breath. A low rumbling groan had Imogene tightening her thighs. For as hard and gruff as Jekyll was, his touch was soft as if he was savoring every second. His

mouth slid over her breast taking her nipple between his lips in a strong pull. She dug her fingers into the leather of his vest and moaned.

"Jekyll." Her voice was barely a whisper.

He lowered down to her stomach, licking her skin. It was a torturous seduction and she felt the moisture pool between her legs. *Oh my God.* Her hand softly curled over the back of his neck, caressing him and she dropped her head against the wall.

Then something shifted.

He dropped to his knees, ripping open the button to her leather pants and lowering the zipper. She barely had any time to comprehend what was happening. He fisted the waist of her pants and pulled them down to her ankles along with her thong.

He glanced up with a heated stare that sent her heart rate spiking to an unnatural level. The corner of his mouth curled seconds before he lowered his head.

Was he going to…

"Ahhh…" Her body tensed and her muscles tightened. *Yes, he is.*

His mouth spread over her pussy, his tongue dipping between her folds. It sent a bolt of electricity through her veins, and her breath shallowed. She dug her nails into his neck and gripped the other hand on his shoulder to steady herself. This may not be her first time getting oral, but it *was* against a wall. She dropped her chin to her chest.

Imogene tried to catch her breath, but looking down and watching him between her legs wasn't helping. The pads of his fingers dug into the backs of her thighs, keeping her in place. *I'm not going anywhere.*

"Jekyll." Her moan was breathy and barely audible but it echoed off the walls.

His tongue flicked over her clit and she tightened her grip. His rumbling growl had her pressing her hips closer to his mouth. His hand curved around her inner thigh and between her legs, sliding his finger inside her. Imogene rocked her hips, riding his hand. It had never been *this* good. Or so she thought. Because then it got better.

Jekyll dipped another finger inside of her while sucking her clit between his lips.

That's what put her over the edge.

Imogene fell forward, unable to balance the weight of her body on shaky knees. His tongue slid over her clit, teasing, and she gasped, pushing

at his shoulders. *Too much, too much!* Jekyll pulled back and angled his head, pressing his lips against her inner thigh. It was the perfect ending to a mind-blowing orgasm.

The room was drowned in silence. She wasn't sure how long she'd stood with her back pressed against the wall, but he didn't move until her breathing leveled.

"You good?" His deep voice was low.

Good?

"So good." She carelessly laughed at her response. Good didn't come close to covering all her emotions and more importantly, her satisfaction at the moment. Good was an understatement. *But yeah, I'm good, Jekyll. So damn good.*

Jekyll grabbed the waist of her pants, pulling them up, and straightened. He towered over her by almost a foot, and his head was bowed, adjusting her pants, lifting the zipper, and clasping the button. It was a little unexpected that he'd dress her afterwards. It was…sweet. Not something she'd come to expect from him. She slid her fingers over his forearms, and he stiffened, meeting her stare. Dark blue eyes pinned on her.

"I feel like I should thank you, but that might be weird."

His gaze still held residual heat, but the corner of his mouth curled into a half smile. He grabbed her neck and kissed her.

I guess it's not that weird.

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Thank him? Yeah, that would be fucking weird. *But I like it.*

Jekyll turned his back as she grabbed his shirt off the bed and pulled it over her head. He wasn't being a gentleman and showing her some privacy. It was for his own salvation. His dick was pressed so hard against his zipper, he didn't trust it not to bust open if he got any harder. The attraction was always there, but he was now at a new level with her. One taste and he was already planning for the next. He balled his fists and rolled his neck trying to relieve some of his built up tension.

He was good at reading women, and she was sending him all the signals. If he wanted her in his bed, he could have her there within seconds. The thought had crossed his mind. Quite a few times. But he needed to take it slower with her. Imogene wasn't some random woman he'd bang and send away.

And that's the fucking problem.

This was new territory for him. Imogene had his mind and thoughts going in a million directions. If he was going to fuck her, it wouldn't be in his room at the clubhouse on dirty sheets with the scent of other women. Imogene deserved better. *I want to give her better.*

"Do you want to go back to the party?"

He slowly turned. She was standing a few feet away at the edge of the bed. His shirt would've touched her knees, but she tied it up to her waist, knotted on the side. Wasn't quite as sexy as the bustier, but it had its appeal. Or maybe he just liked seeing her in his clothes, marking Imogene as his. That intrusive thought brought on a whole new tension.

He gestured toward the door. "You're going home."

Her smile faltered, forming a small pout. "I am?"

Her disappointment was evident. *And fucking adorable*. He could've allowed her to hang out longer, but he needed space from her. Jekyll didn't trust himself.

"Yeah."

She nodded and grabbed her top, heading to the door. She didn't say another word and reached for the knob, opening it slightly. He was a walking contradiction, because the minute he saw the door crack open, he lunged forward, pressing his chest to her back and slamming it shut.

"I thought you wanted me to leave," she whispered.

He did. *Fuck!* And he didn't.

She slowly turned, but he had her caged in with limited space. She stared up at him. Blue eyes. To anyone else, they might not be special. To him? They were everything. Beautiful and honest, kind and accepting without judgement. *I don't deserve her.* He cupped her jaw, sliding his thumb over her bottom lip.

"I can stay, if you want."

No, you can't.

For his own self-preservation, he needed her to leave. But… He just wanted a little more, and then he'd send her on her way. At least, that's what he told himself.

His mouth brushed against hers and her tongue slipped between his lips. He pressed her against the wall, ignoring the tightening of his jeans against his zipper. Kissing this woman had become a new type of torture.

Jekyll was only after one more kiss. Imogene had other ideas. Her hand dragged down over his chest and spread over the bulge in his pants. *Fuck!*

He swirled his tongue over hers, tasting every inch of her mouth. She squeezed his cock and he battened down his groan. Imogene was definitely testing his self-control. He felt her fingers at his waist, struggling with the clasp of his jeans. He should've stopped her. He didn't. His mind was focused solely on her tongue sliding against his and the sweet taste of her lips. He was so caught up in her mouth, he barely realized his pants being lowered to his knees, until her hand was wrapped around his cock, stroking him.

Fuck!

It had been forever since he'd been jerked off by any hand other than his own. She pulled back slightly from the kiss and muttered against his lips. "My turn."

Turn? Jekyll had no time to process what she said as she dropped to her knees and slid his cock between her lips, swirling her tongue down his shaft. He pressed his hands against the door, lowering his chin to his chest and watching her suck his dick.

He should've stopped her, but he was greedy. He wanted her mouth on him.

He shifted his stand, bracing his forearm on the door with one arm and drove his hand through her hair, cupping the back of her head. It was a sense of protection as he fucked her mouth. If he'd lost complete control he'd be slamming his cock down her throat. He was tempted, and he had a feeling she might enjoy it. Imogene caressed her hands over his thighs.

He'd had blowjobs before. Hundreds, possibly thousands. But never this good.

He grasped a handful of her hair and groaned. This wasn't going to take long. He was close to coming. Her hands spread over the back of his thighs, urging him deeper as her nails pricked his skin. The sharp bite of his flesh with a smooth, wet mouth was a combination that put him over the edge.

"Fuck." He grunted, dropping his head back on his shoulders, driving his cock down her throat, coming hard.

The roles had officially been reversed, and he was the one with shaky knees and unsteady balance. He pressed his hands against the door, taking even breaths.

Her soft hands slid over his legs in a soothing touch. He'd fucked a lot of women but never with any type of intimacy.

Imogene grasped his jeans at his ankles, pulling them up his legs until she stood. She lifted his zipper and clasped the button. When she peeked up through her lashes and smiled, Jekyll was thrown over the edge once again. *Too fucking sweet.* His lips crashed down over hers. He'd do the right thing and send her back to the motel. But not yet. He wrapped his arms around her waist, crushing her against his chest and deepening the kiss.

When he finally broke away to catch his breath, she whispered. "If you changed your mind, I can stay."

Fuck me!

This woman was too tempting.

"You have your meeting tomorrow. It's late."

She nodded with a small smile that didn't quite reach her eyes. "Yeah."

Jekyll stepped back, adjusting himself. The silence was deafening. Imogene looked around the room but refused to make eye contact.

"I should go now." This time when she opened the door, he didn't object. She stayed close to him as he walked her through the clubhouse and out the front door.

"Where'd you park?"

She pointed across the yard, and he rested his hand on her back, guiding her to the car. She unlocked and opened her door, getting inside. He braced his arm on the open door and bent down.

"You're staying at the motel in Killcreek, right?"

She nodded.

Addison had mentioned it earlier. He tightened his grip on the door. She'd been so close for days and he hadn't even known it.

"Out the driveway and make a left. You'll see the hotel on your right past the traffic light." There was no way she could get lost, especially since the whole town only had one light.

"Okay." She smiled.

He was tempted to kiss her again but straightened.

"Thanks for tonight. I had fun."

He gave a curt nod and closed the door.

He'd wanted her for too long. His own self-control was teetering. He needed space to get his mind right when it came to her.

He watched from the yard. She maneuvered out of the tight spot, coming pretty close to hitting a bike. But she was able to slide through the narrow passage.

“Prospect,” Jekyll snapped, but kept his eyes locked on her bumper.

“Yeah, what do you need?”

He lifted his chin, gesturing to her car. “Follow her to the hotel. You don’t leave until she’s inside.”

“Got it.”

Imogene didn’t know it yet, but she was officially under the protection of Jekyll.

And the Killcreek Drifters MC.

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CHAPTER TWELVE

Imogene was still reeling from the night before. It had her wondering what might've happened had she stayed. She'd been willing. And eager. It was Jekyll who had been the resistant party. Though it wasn't for a lack of desire. He'd certainly proved that.

A rush of heat spread over her chest, creeping up to her face. He was the last person she should be thinking about at the moment. In an hour she'd be meeting her last client. She needed to be professional and keep her thoughts on her job, not a romp in Jekyll's bed. Or in the shower, or against the wall.

Stop!

She gave her body a sharp shake and focused on the sandwich display case. With time to spare and a growling stomach, she'd stopped in the local convenience store in Killcreek. She would've preferred a restaurant or even a fast-food drive-thru. Gas station food had a stigma, though she had to admit, this store had a huge selection, and everything seemed fresh.

Imogene grabbed a turkey and American cheese sub and made her way to the beverage cooler. When she reached for a water bottle, she collided hands with a man and immediately pulled back, turning to the left.

"I'm so sorry, I…" *Well, isn't this a surprise.* A good one. Her lips spread into a wide smile. It had been six months, but he looked the same. *Kind of.* His facial hair had grown in, and his face was a little more rounded. Prison food was probably a perfect diet for anyone wanting to lose weight. She'd had it a few times when she'd forgotten to pack a lunch. It served as a reminder to always bring food from home. But the added pounds on him only accentuated his attractiveness.

"Xander." She cocked her head and cringed at her faux pas. "I mean, Hyde, right? Long time no see."

"Imogene." Hyde grabbed an energy drink, and she noticed his lips twitch when he turned his head, giving her his profile. "Heard you were in Killcreek."

He did?

“Did Jekyll mention me?” she blurted and instantly regretted her eagerness.

Hyde straightened, and she craned her neck to look up at him. He was a few inches taller than Jekyll, which put him close to six and a half feet. He wasn’t as bulky and broad as his cousin but definitely fit and muscular. They shared similar features but could never be confused with each other. Jekyll had an overall harsher look, rough and unapproachable. Whereas Hyde had a softer, more youthful appearance. Both were handsome, sexy, and attractive in their own right, just different.

The silence grew a bit awkward after a few seconds. She shifted on her feet, forcing a smile.

“I saw him last night.”

Hyde slowly nodded with a small smile playing on his lips. “Party?”

“Yeah. It was a lot of fun.”

“Bet it was.”

A man of few words. She’d never noticed at the prison because compared to Jekyll, Hyde was more outgoing and talkative. But one on one? He was quiet.

She reached for the cooler door, but his arm shot out, and he grabbed the handle, widening it for her. She grabbed a water and lifted it along with her sandwich.

“Well, got my lunch.” She stepped back. “It was nice seeing you again.”

“Yeah.”

Imogene walked down the aisle, and a chill ran down her spine, pebbling her skin. It was the same reaction she had when she suspected someone was staring at her. Considering they were the only patrons in the store, she assumed Hyde was watching her.

She dumped her sandwich and drink on the counter at the register and eyed the fruit basket beside it. It was probably smart to balance out her meal. She bit her bottom lip, trying to decide between an apple and banana.

“Jesus Christ, just pick one!” The booming voice startled her, and she winced, glancing up at the older man behind the counter. He looked to be close to her father’s age. The stern scowl was reminiscent of her grandfather when he got angry. It didn’t happen often, which made it so memorable. She blindly reached into the basket, allowing fate to choose her fruit.

Banana it is.

His eyes lifted over her shoulder, and she felt a presence dangerously close. Hyde stretched out his arm, placing his drink on the counter. She slyly peeked up and moved to the side. Hyde gestured to the rack of cigarettes, and the man grabbed a pack. Hyde must've been a regular if the man knew his brand.

"This together?" the man asked.

Hyde angled his head, looking down at her. He didn't say a word. Was he expecting her to pay? While she didn't necessarily mind buying him a drink, supporting his nicotine habit was a lot to ask. His stare was locked on her. *Okay, fine, I'll buy you cigarettes.*

"Ah yes, it's together." Imogene reached in her pocketbook to pull out her wallet but stilled when Hyde grasped her elbow.

"Put it on the club's tab," Hyde said.

Oh…he was treating her? It was a kind gesture but unnecessary.

"You don't have to pay for my lunch."

His gaze softened. "And you didn't have to make us cupcakes."

He remembered.

She bowed her head, concealing her smile. It was a small gesture. But she'd always wondered if that act had been appreciated. She knew everyone in the class enjoyed them but got the feeling Hyde had taken one out of obligation. Or pity.

"Get your stuff." He lifted his chin toward the counter.

She smiled at the cashier and grabbed her drink, sandwich, and banana. Imogene started toward the door, acutely aware of Hyde following behind her. She hadn't had any relationship with him while he was serving time. Much like Jekyll, he'd been quiet in her classes. She had offered some book recommendations when working at the library. But she was never sure if he took her up on the suggestions.

When she turned to press her shoulder to the door, his arm stretched out, pushing it open for her.

"Thank you." She stopped just outside the entrance and turned toward him. "It was nice seeing you again."

"You got somewhere to be?"

"Not for another half hour. I have a client I'm meeting in Birch. Figured I'd just drive over and eat in the car beforehand."

"Got a job *here*?"

She shook her head. “No. I work in Lawry for an outreach program that helps former inmates acclimate and offers free services for their benefit. It’s actually got some really great opportunities if you’re ever interested. I can…” Her voice trailed off when Hyde narrowed his gaze.

“Or not,” she muttered.

“Where in Birch?”

“Barry’s.” She drew in a breath. “I suggested a café, but she insisted on the bar. She said it was her comfort zone for meeting strangers.”

Hyde squared his jaw, giving a curt nod. She was about to walk to her car when he gestured to the corner of the building.

“Come on.” He gave her his back, and she followed him.

When he rounded the corner, she angled her head to the left, seeing past his shoulder. There were three wooden picnic tables with umbrellas that had seen better days. He stepped up on the seat of one and sat on the table’s surface.

“Better than eating in your car, right?”

She wasn’t sure about the accommodations, but the company certainly was. She’d always gotten a good vibe from Hyde. Plus, she’d eaten alone a lot; this was better.

She put down her food but instead of following his lead, she sat on the seat about two feet away. He cracked open his energy drink and chugged a good amount. Then it was quiet. Silence had a way of making people uncomfortable. Imogene had grown accustomed to it, and it usually didn’t bother her. Until now.

She opened up the wrapping on her sandwich and took a bite. Not bad for a gas station. She peeked up at Hyde, who was staring off into the distance. There wasn’t much to see. Aside from the road, it was an open field with overgrown brush.

“You must be happy to be home.”

“Yeah.”

He didn’t elaborate. She took another bite. Considering he’d invited her to sit with him, it seemed odd he wasn’t taking an initiative to talk.

“Are you still with your girlfriend? Penny, right?”

He stilled and slowly angled his head, glancing down at her.

“Asking if I’m single?”

Was she? That wasn’t the question. *Wait, does he think I’m hitting on him?* His jaw was squared, and his gaze narrowed. She couldn’t read his

thoughts, but he didn't look happy with her inquiry. *Oh my God, he does think I'm making a pass at him.*

She forced the remainder of the bite down her throat.

"No, I was just wondering because I met Penny once. We kind of ran into each other. She recognized me in the store, and we started talking." She shifted on the bench. "She's very nice and beautiful."

His gaze softened, and his lips twitched. "Nice, huh?"

Imogene gave a small shrug. "She was to me."

Hyde took another sip from his drink. "Yeah, we're together."

Imogene smiled.

"She lives down in Lawry too."

That took her by surprise. She'd often seen his girlfriend visiting and always assumed she lived close by, not states away. It definitely spoke volumes of Penny's commitment if she was willing to travel that far to see him.

"Oh, maybe I'll run into her again."

"Maybe," he said. "You like the city?"

Did she? It was still too early to make a firm decision. But instead of listing everything she didn't enjoy, she'd pivot to positivity.

"Lots of restaurants. And um, stores. I can walk most places, so that's kind of cool. Different from back home. I've never lived in a city this big, so it's an adjustment, but" —she cleared her throat— "Yeah, I like it."

Hyde eyed her, slowly nodding. "That's a big move you made."

Imogene shrugged. "I needed a change of scenery."

"Yeah, I get that. Stay too long in one place, I get cagey."

Imogene couldn't relate. She'd lived her whole life in one state and hadn't ever thought of leaving. Until circumstances forced her hand.

"Why Lawry?" Hyde kept his eyes locked on her, resting his elbows on his knees.

"Like I said, change of scenery."

"Yeah, but you could've chosen anywhere." He cocked his head, and his stare didn't seem nearly as friendly. "Why Lawry?"

She swallowed the knot in her throat. "I didn't have anything left there for me. Not my house or my grandparents. No one."

"Yeah, I guess that's what happens when you openly support a murderer."

It might as well have been a punch to her gut. It wasn't the first time she'd heard something similar and wouldn't be the last. And? It was the truth. She lifted her sandwich and took a bite, staring down at the battered picnic table. There was a lot of shame being connected to her father. She still believed it wasn't warranted, but she was the only one.

"You're gonna make me ask again, aren't you?"

She glanced up at Hyde, and his lips twitched. "Why Lawry?"

Was she really going to unload on a virtual stranger?

"I didn't have anything left for me back home."

"You had your whole life." Hyde arched his brow.

He wasn't wrong.

"But my life didn't look the same anymore. All my family was gone. I sold my grandparents farm for my dad's defense, so that was gone. After he was arrested, and it circulated around town, I became kind of a pariah. Even people I'd known my whole life didn't want much to do with me. And the ones who stuck around dropped me when I stood behind my dad and his wrongful conviction." She snorted. "Even my job asked me to resign because my situation made everyone uncomfortable."

"Wrongfully convicted, huh?"

This was why she never spoke with others about her father.

"Everyone is entitled to their opinion."

Hyde smirked. "Just speaking on facts, Imogene."

Let it go.

"Sometimes key facts are missing."

Hyde let out a soft chuckle. "A conviction tells me they weren't missing much."

She sighed. "I understand how it looks. But you didn't know my dad."

He lifted his brows and countered. "Did you?"

This wasn't anything she hadn't heard in the past.

"Yeah, I did."

Hyde took a sip of his drink. "Guess that doesn't matter much anymore since he's *dead*."

Imogene was accustomed to cruelty when it came to her father. Usually, she let it slide off her shoulders. But this time? It stung a little deeper. His tone was callous, as if he was trying to get a reaction from her. Or at the very least hurt her feelings. *Well done, Hyde!*

“I should probably go.” She started to wrap up the remainder of her sandwich but froze when Hyde rested his hand on her shoulder.

“Finish your lunch.”

She could’ve protested, but she didn’t. Imogene kept expecting him to walk away, but Hyde remained seated next to her on the picnic table. She grabbed her drink, washing down the last of her meal. She balled up the wrapper and made a small pile.

“So?” He laughed, shaking his head. “Why Lawry?”

It was strange he’d been almost obsessed, but in fairness he’d asked a few times, and she’d unintentionally evaded the question. It wasn’t so much a secret, though her reasoning came off a little desperate. But at this point, she suspected Hyde didn’t think much of her anyway.

“I don’t have much family, but I have a cousin.” *Well, second.* “And um, he lives there. Thought it would be cool to reconnect. But he’s really busy.” She smiled and turned slightly. “He’s actually a detective with the Lawry PD. It’s pretty impressive, don’t you think?”

Hyde raised his brows. “Asking *me* what I think about law enforcement?” Hyde cupped his mouth, but she noticed a small semblance of a smile. “So that’s the reason, huh?”

This was slowly becoming an inquisition. But for some odd reason, she felt compelled to share. Maybe it was because someone was finally asking.

“If I’m being a hundred percent honest, I like the idea of nobody knowing who I am or my family and past.” She snorted. “Of course, it’s like a catch-22. No one knows me, which is good to escape your past, but it also leaves me with no one.”

He slowly nodded, scanning the parking lot. “You better head out.”

She stood, and he pointed to the front of the building. “Garbage can is by the door.”

She flattened her lips into an awkward smile and grabbed her bottle and sandwich wrapper, rounding the front of the store. When she returned, Hyde was standing near the table.

She tossed her banana in her pocketbook and hooked it over her shoulder. “Thanks for lunch.”

“Yeah, you’re welcome.”

She started toward her car and glanced over her shoulder. “It was nice seeing you again.”

He lifted his chin but didn't say a word. She walked to her car and got in. As she pulled out of the lot, a tremble skated over her skin. Hyde was staring at her again. But she remained focused on the road ahead, resisting the urge to look over.

****

The sun beamed through his window like a silent alarm clock. *I have to get fucking shades.*

Jekyll rolled on his side, dropping his feet to the cool floor and dragged his hand down his face, threading his fingers through his beard. It was a miracle he'd even managed to fall asleep. The whole night played over in his head. He shouldn't have touched her, but she'd proved impossible to resist.

Being in prison, there were boundaries he was forbidden to cross. When he was released, the miles of separation served as another boundary, making her less tempting. But now she was here, and he was left relying solely on his self-control. It shouldn't have been a feat. He'd been connected to his emotions and actions his entire life. Nothing rocked him to the core. Except her. *My Achilles fucking heel.*

"Fuck me," he muttered and stood, making his way to the bathroom.

Jekyll should've made the decision to keep his distance, but he had an incessant need to hear her voice. He glanced down at his phone and forced himself not to pick it up. This woman was testing him in ways he'd never had to deal with.

After he'd showered and dressed, he made his way into the clubhouse and found Hyde and Cypher sitting at the table. On first glance, they seemed to be heavily into their conversation. But when Hyde looked over, it abruptly ended.

"Rough night?" he asked, smirking.

Jekyll ignored his cousin, walking into the kitchen and grabbing a coffee. When he walked over, he sat on the opposite end, eyeing the two brothers.

"Got tired of playing house with Penny?"

"Never get tired of that." Hyde laughed. "She's working. Thought I'd come home, catch a run or two." He gestured to Cypher. "He was just filling me in on everything that's been going on."

"Yeah?" Jekyll sipped his coffee.

"Yeah, Jek. Heard about Imogene showing up at the party."

His gaze darkened. “Gent invited her.”

Hyde settled in his seat. “Of course he fucking did. He’ll do just about anything to get under your skin.”

It’s working.

Jekyll steeled his features. He wouldn’t admit to anything. Unfortunately, he didn’t have to. Hyde knew him better than anyone.

Cypher tapped the table, getting his attention. “We were talking about her dad.”

“Yeah, since my run in with her, I wanted to know more,” Hyde said.

Jekyll jerked his head. “What fucking run-in?”

“About two hours ago at the gas station.” He smiled. “I treated her to lunch.”

Fucking asshole.

“Yeah? What a fucking gentleman you are.”

Hyde laughed and turned to Cypher. “Got home and found Cy waiting on you. It seems Imogene is a hot topic around here.”

What the fuck? He turned to Cypher.

His brother held up his hand. “You asked me to dig deeper, so I did. Was waiting on you when Hyde showed up.”

“You get something else?”

“So I told you about her inheritance, right?” Cypher asked.

Jekyll nodded. “She used it for her father’s defense.”

“Right and that money was all kept in a bank account specifically for the lawyers to withdraw funds. Most of it was used for the first trial.” Cypher clasped his hands. “Looked into her finances, and she also sold her condo. Made about a hundred grand on it.”

Jekyll clenched his jaw, suspecting where this was going. “Don’t even tell me she put it towards her father’s lawyers for the retrial.”

“Well, see, that’s what I can’t figure out. She definitely deposited it over to her father, but it didn’t go into that specific account. There was another one set up with the cash from her house about three weeks after she closed. Imogene gets the money, wires it to her dad’s new account.” He paused. “And three days before he’s murdered, the money is gone. And I can’t trace where it went.”

“Back to Imogene?” Hyde asked.

Cypher shook his head. “I got all her financials. There’s a reason why she was living at the motel and on a tight budget. She can’t afford much

more if she wants to eat. She recently made a cash withdrawal for sixteen hundred dollars. Thinking that's rent and security, but who the hell pays in cash anymore?"

What the fuck was going on with her?

"You find out where she's living?" he asked.

Cypher scoffed. "No. At this point, it'd be quicker just to ask her."

Jekyll intended on doing just that. He grasped the back of his neck, going over everything Cypher just told him. Imogene gave her father everything she owned, and now she was left struggling. Why? Jekyll ground his teeth, clutching his fist around his mug. From everything he'd learned, her father was nothing more than a murdering conman who was exactly where he should be. Six feet under. Everyone knew it. Except her.

"Why would she stand by him, give him everything?"

"She thought he was innocent." Cypher said.

"Everybody knows he fucking did it."

Hyde shrugged. "Not Imogene. Her dad maintained his innocence, right? Sounds to me like she's just holding onto that."

"That's fucking crazy," Jekyll snapped. "She's got all that evidence in front of her face, and she's still at his back fucking defending him?"

"You'd do the same."

Jekyll jerked his head, watching Ghost walk up to the table and pull out a chair, taking a seat. His brother stared back at him, knitting his brows.

"Tell me I'm wrong," Ghost said.

Jekyll scoffed. "You're fucking wrong."

Ghost slowly nodded, glancing over at Hyde. "He gets locked up for murder and tells you he didn't do it. You believe him?"

What the fuck kind of question was that?

"I kill someone, Jek is probably there helping me get rid of the body, Ghost." Hyde laughed, and Jekyll raised his brows in confirmation.

"Not talking about in our world. Talking about some innocent person who's got nothing to do with the club or the Underground. Just some random guy on the street walking home from work." Ghost looked over at him. "They arrest Hyde, but he's saying it wasn't him. Do you believe *him*?"

Jekyll furrowed his brows, rolling over the scenario in his mind when Cypher interjected.

"Ghost, man, they got piles of evidence against her dad."

“Alright, so same scenario. They got all the evidence to convict Hyde. But they don’t have a confession because he’s telling *you* he didn’t do it.” Ghost arched his brow. “Do *you* believe him, Jek?”

The room was drowned in silence.

Ghost settled back in his chair. “I remember the case, don’t have all the details but know they had enough to convict him and a witness pointing the finger at him. But he never faltered on his innocence.”

Cypher scoffed. “You don’t think he’s guilty?”

Ghost snorted. “Oh no, brother, he did it. Not a fucking doubt in my mind. I’m just saying you’re questioning why Imogene can’t see it, but you’re not looking at it from her point of view. It’s her dad. She’s probably convinced herself that he’s innocent partly because he’s telling her and the other because she *wants* it to be true.” Ghost shrugged. “That’s the thing about the mind. It’s a treacherous fucker sometimes. You could have the proof all laid out for you, but in your head, you still hold on to what you *want* the truth to be.” Ghost grabbed his coffee and stood.

Jekyll watched him walk out of the room. He still couldn’t wrap his head around Imogene defending her dad. But Ghost’s analysis opened his eyes to something he hadn’t thought of.

“Here.” Hyde slid a pink phone across the table toward Cypher then looked over at Jekyll. “I swiped her phone when she was throwing out her garbage. You need to track her, Jek.”

Yeah, I do.

Cypher grabbed the phone and stood. “Give me twenty minutes.”

When he walked out, Hyde got up from the table and stood at the edge. “Ghost is right.” He gripped the back of the chair. “She stood by him ’cause she believed him.”

Jekyll fisted his hands. “He lied to her.”

“Yeah.” Hyde nodded. “But you’d believe me, Jek. Just like I’d believe you. Even if I had my doubts, I’d take your word to me over everything else. Same story, just different players.”

Yeah. *Fuck!*

“She told me about Murdoch being her cousin. Said he was one of the reasons she moved to Lawry, him being her only family.”

Jekyll slowly nodded. “Not trying to hide it.”

“No, even fucking bragged about how impressive he was. To me.” Hyde snorted and folded his arms. “Totally fucking clueless. But you know

what surprised me about her?”

Jekyll arched his brow. “What?”

“She’s the same as she was in prison.” Hyde smiled, shaking his head. “Talking to her? Kept trying to see behind the mask. Pushed her on a few things just to see if she’d crack. But she didn’t, and when she told me about Murdoch, I realized I was looking for something that wasn’t there. Not used to people like her.”

“No, me neither.”

“That might be a good thing.” Hyde smirked. “Gonna check in with Ace.” He started walking past the table. “She’s meeting her client at Barry’s. Figured you’d want to know where to find her.”

I do.

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

This was definitely not protocol. *And I'm making a habit of it.* There was no actual handbook or set of rules in place. However, getting together in a bar was probably a faux pas when meeting with a former inmate. In fairness, she'd made the exception for Shelby. But the dancer hadn't been on her second beer when she'd initially showed up.

Elaine was an interesting character. Imogene had her script all set. It was practiced and rehearsed. She didn't even get past the first line. Elaine didn't want to hear any of it. Somehow, this informational meeting had spawned into a therapy session.

"And that piece of shit thinks he can cheat on me and take my kids?" Elaine snorted, drawing the cigarette up to her lips. "Fucking idiot! What did he think was gonna happen?"

Certainly not setting fire to all his possessions, including his brand new truck.

"Hell hath no fury…"

Elaine's brows dipped into a tight scowl, and the lines deepened. "What?"

Imogene blinked, waving her hand. "Just a saying, 'hell hath no fury like a woman scorned.'"

"Ain't that the fucking truth." The corner of Elaine's mouth curled. "I like that."

Okay, well let's not make that our mantra, Elaine.

She raised her glass and finished the remnants of her beer. When she slammed the glass on the table, Imogene flinched slightly.

"So what do I gotta do?"

"Excuse me?"

"Parole officer said meeting up with you looked good on my record, so here I fucking am. Now what do I gotta do?"

"Oh, you don't have to do anything you don't want. I'm just here to provide resources you could possibly use." Imogene smiled. "You know, programs that can make your life easier."

Elaine scoffed. “My life ain’t been easy since I was five. Pretty sure nothing in that little packet of yours is gonna change that.”

Imogene expected to be met with opposition and a hint of disbelief, topped with distrust. By all accounts and from everything that was in her file, Elaine hadn’t had the easiest life. Harder than most. Imogene just wanted to help if possible.

She reached into the folder, pulling out a sheet of paper. Most of the programs came with pamphlets, but they were mostly filler, not giving a true description. Imogene had taken it upon herself to personalize and give in-depth details of each program that applied to Elaine. She placed the paper on the table and slid it in front of the woman.

“From all your information, I’ve narrowed down ten government-assisted programs that I think you can utilize in your best interest.” She pointed to the first one on the list, and possibly the most important. “It’s a group in Birch that meets twice a week to discuss different ways of dealing with anger management. It’s a group setting, so it feels less like therapy and more like a support system. Plus, it gives you an outlet to vent.”

Elaine stared back at her, giving her no indication that she was interested. Imogene dropped her gaze to the sheet, sliding her finger down to the third on the list.

“I know you have children. I took the liberty of finding your children’s schools, and they provide aftercare until six o’clock. Finding sitters can be costly when you’re working fulltime, so this is a great alternative. They do arts and crafts, make use of the playground when weather permits, and even offer a snack. From my research, it’s a pretty good deal.”

“How much?” Her voice was low.

“Excuse me?” Imogene asked.

“How. Much?”

“Oh, it’s completely free.”

Elaine furrowed her brows.

“You qualify for it. I’ve already checked.” Imogene paused, knowing her next statement would come off a little forward. Elaine hadn’t agreed to anything, and it wasn’t her place to make assumptions, but…

“I’ve actually looked into the aftercare extensively and spoken to the school counselor on your behalf.”

Elaine narrowed her gaze, and Imogene quickly explained. “Just so I could have all the information for you. The decision is solely yours. They’re

your children. *You* know what's best for them."

That statement seemed to ease the tension. Elaine glanced down at the paper.

"What did the counselor say?"

"That there's room for all three children. And they can start as soon as next week."

"And it's free?"

Imogene smiled, nodding. "Yes."

"I'm paying some fucking moron with two brain cells right now. Pretty sure she spends the whole time on her phone while I'm paying her."

"This sounds like the perfect alternative."

"Yeah," she muttered, sliding her hand over her mouth.

Imogene explained the rest of the programs. Not all would be a fit for Elaine, but there were plenty to choose from.

"Yoga?" She looked up and twisted her lips. "Flaky granola bullshit."

"It can be very centering. I used to do it twice a week. And I loved it."

"I'm sure you did." She snorted, shaking her head.

That seemed to be an underhanded insult, but Imogene let it go.

Every so often her gaze would drift over Imogene's shoulder. She was tempted to look behind her but wanted all her attention on Elaine.

"You with Killcreek?"

She blinked, completely caught off guard with the question. With Killcreek? What did that even mean?

"Excuse me?"

She jerked her chin toward the bar. "He's been watching us for the last twenty minutes. And I know he ain't here for me."

Imogene turned in her chair and gasped. Jekyll was seated at the bar, a cigarette between his lips and his hand wrapped around a beer. He was looking up at the television above the bar.

"That your man?"

What? She spun around so quickly her hand hit her soda and spilled some from the top. She frantically grabbed some napkins, cleaning it up.

"I take that as a yes."

"No," Imogene blurted. "He's not my boyfriend. We're just um…"

"Fuck buddies?"

Jesus, Elaine!

"No," she swallowed the lump in her throat. "Um, we're friends."

Elaine smirked. “My friends don’t watch me like that.” She laughed. “But maybe if they did, I wouldn’t get in trouble.”

Imogene forced a smile but remained silent.

“Alright, well, you coming back next week?”

“If you want me to.”

Elaine rolled her eyes, “Well, I’m not doing yoga by myself. Saturday morning works best for me. Set it up.” Elaine stood, and Imogene rushed to grab her bag.

“You want me to go to yoga with you?”

Elaine rolled her eyes. “Isn’t that what I just said?”

Yes, but...

“Okay.”

Elaine gave a curt nod, side eyeing Jekyll. “And call the school and set that up for me.”

“I will.”

When Elaine left, Imogene slowly made her way to the bar. Jekyll took a long swig from his beer, placed the bottle down, and side-eyed her as she approached. Seeing him again after screaming out his name while riding the best orgasm of her life had her cheeks heating, but it didn’t slow down her pace. She stopped only a foot away from his stool.

“Hi. What are you doing here?” she asked.

“Heard you were here.”

It was a basic answer, but she had a physical reaction. She pressed her thighs together and rocked back on her heels.

He reached into his chest pocket and pulled out a phone, offering it to her. It seemed odd until she realized it was *her* phone. What the…

“Hyde said you left it on the table at the gas station.”

Really? She hadn’t even realized she’d taken it out of her bag. Maybe when she was grabbing her wallet? She couldn’t remember. She took the phone, grazing her finger over his knuckles. A small touch shouldn’t have evoked this much desire. But it did. She inched closer, gripping the cell.

“Thanks for returning it to me.”

His gaze scanned her face, and he pointed to the seat next to him. Imogene immediately climbed up and hooked her bag over the back of the stool.

Jekyll lifted his hand, and Barry started to walk over. He pointed to her. “Tequilla and lime.”

He remembered. It was only last night, but it meant something. Or it didn't. Imogene was in unfamiliar territory. Jekyll wasn't like any other man she'd been with. His intensity was hard to read. He was an anomaly. His sweet gestures were often disguised. He wasn't much of a conversationalist, which made him all the more a mystery.

****

Jekyll was only staring at the television screen. He wasn't watching the game. He was more interested in what was going through the mind of the little redheaded mute seated next to him. Imogene hadn't said a word since she'd sat down a few minutes ago but it didn't stop her from staring. He'd mastered the art of knowing when her eyes were on him during his days locked up. He'd always been hyperaware of his surroundings since he was a kid. It's what kept him and Hyde safe during their adolescence. As he got older, he became more intuitive to people and their thoughts, responses, and most importantly, reactions. Jekyll had a gift of knowing who was in the room, where they were, and their intention.

With Imogene, it was no different. She was easier to read than most of the people he knew. Open book. It was a dangerous trait for someone in his world. *But she's not part of my world.* Yet. He grabbed his beer, taking a long swig as Barry set her drink down.

"Thank you." Her voice was soft and welcoming. It had been the initial draw when he'd first heard her speak.

There was a lot of down time in prison. It was initially Hyde's idea to make use of the library. Jekyll only joined to break up the day. Then he saw Imogene recommending a book to an inmate. A lot of the volunteers were surface nice but not warm to those incarcerated. But she was. Jekyll kept his distance and rarely spoke to Imogene, but he watched her.

"Can I ask you something?"

Oh, fuck me. Nothing good ever came from that question, in his experience. But…

Jekyll sucked in a breath and gave a curt nod.

"Is this the first or second time you're showing up at one of my meetings?"

Jekyll grasped tightly on his grip of the bottle keeping his eyes laser focused on the tv above the bar.

"I had a meeting a few days ago with that client I was telling you about in Lawry." She paused but he kept his eyes locked on the screen, steeling

his features. “I told you we were getting together at The Quick Cup. After the meeting ended, I saw a motorcycle take off down the road. It kind of looked like yours.”

Jekyll drew in a breath, lifted the bottle to his lips, and took a long swig.

“Was it you?”

Jekyll took another sip and placed the bottle on the bar, angling his head as his brows dipped.

“Yeah.”

Her eyes widened to the size of saucers, and she leaned closer. There was barely a foot of space separating them.

“You were there?”

When he didn’t respond, she inched closer, her fingers grazed his forearm, and he clenched his teeth.

“Why?”

Jekyll could have brushed it off as coincidence. The right place, right time. He could’ve given her any excuse, and she probably would’ve bought into it. He opted for the truth.

“I don’t like your fucking job.”

Her bottom lip fell open, and her brows shot up.

“It’s not safe. So yeah, I fucking showed up.”

Her tongue slid over her bottom lip. “To make sure I was okay?”

“Yeah.” His tone was gruff.

Her lips spread in a smile. “Thank you.”

Jekyll jerked his attention back to the tv and inhaled a deep breath. There was a long stretch of silence. He could feel her eyes on him, but he remained focused.

“So” —she paused— “Apparently, I’m coming back next weekend for a yoga class.” She giggled. “Maybe we can get lunch or something, if you’re around.”

It seemed like a normal request. Sweet and unsure but testing the waters to see if he was open to seeing her again. Imogene was ignoring the obvious truth right in front of her. He was here because of her. He slyly glanced down at her lap. She clasped her hands, twisting her fingers.

“Do you have plans for this afternoon?” she asked.

He fought against a smile and looked over.

“Yeah.”

“Oh.” Her smile faltered, and she turned on her stool and grabbed her drink, taking a long sip.

“What about you?”

She licked her lips. “No plans. I have to check out by three, and then I guess I’ll get on the road.”

No, you won’t.

“You got work tomorrow?”

She shook her head. “Not until Monday. We have a weekly check in at eleven.”

Fucking perfect!

“Finish your drink so we can get out of here.”

She blinked. “I thought you had plans.”

“I do.” He smirked. “With you.”

Her eyes widened. “Where are we going?”

“We’ll swing by the motel. You can grab your shit and check out. Then we’ll go to my place. You leave by seven on Monday, you’ll make it back to Lawry in time for your meeting.”

Her jaw fell open. “Y-you want me to stay with you until Monday morning?”

“Yeah.”

“At your place? Like in your room?”

Jekyll was no match for her cuteness, and he gave in to his smile. “Something like that.”

She would be staying in his bed but not at the clubhouse like she was thinking. He was going to give her the ultimate *in* with him and take her to his house.

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

When Jekyll invited Imogene back to his place, she'd assumed he meant his room at the clubhouse. But when they pulled into the driveway, he completely bypassed the front of the clubhouse and led her down the side and through a wooded area. It opened up to a small neighborhood.

What the…

She would've never suspected there was anything behind the clubhouse except woods. He pulled into the gray cape-style home, and the garage door opened. He parked on the left side and pointed next to him. She followed the instructions, shut down the engine and got out just as he dismounted his bike.

The garage was pretty barren with the exception of two totes in the corner and a tool bench at the back wall.

"Whose house is this?"

"Mine," he said, walking past her to the door.

Imogene rushed, following close behind. When he walked in, she stopped in the doorway. It was obviously new construction with state-of-the-art appliances in the kitchen. It wasn't huge, by any means, but it was the perfect size for one or two people.

"You gonna stand there all night or come in?"

Imogene stepped in, closed the door behind her, and peered around the space. The large living room was open to a decent size dining area with a glass sliding door. From her view she saw a deck and a good-size yard.

Jekyll opened the fridge, took out two beers, and popped off the caps. Imogene clutched onto her bag and walked over to the kitchen. She took the beer he offered.

"No tequila and lime here," he teased, and she shrugged.

"I like beer every once in a while." She took a sip and twisted her lips.

The corner of his mouth curled. "Want something else?"

"No, this is fine."

He scanned her face, walked to the fridge, and opened the door wide. He had a collection of beers, milk, and water.

“Can I have a water please?”

He let out a faint chuckle, grabbed the water, and in a sweet move, twisted off the top for her.

“Where should I put my bag?”

He lifted his chin and she followed him down the long hallway. There were two small bedrooms that were bare and a bathroom separating them. At the very end of the hallway, Jekyll led her into another bedroom. This was bigger and furnished. *Kind of.* It had a bed, one night stand, and a dresser. There were no curtains, or anything hanging on the walls.

“Did you just move in?”

“When I got released.”

Six months ago?

“Gonna give me shit about my *décor*?”

Just hearing him say décor had her chuckling. She shook her head. “No but I might for your lack of.”

He smiled, taking the bag and dropping it on the floor near the closet.

“So, what do you want to do?”

Jekyll glanced back at her, and his gaze darkened. He was usually hard to read, but she was getting his message loud and clear. It was perfect. *Because that’s exactly what I want to do.*

She inched closer, but he closed the gap in two steps. He wrapped his hand around the back of her neck and kissed her. The warm heat from his breath had her squeezing her thighs together. This man had an effect on her that went beyond normal attraction. His tongue speared past her lips and tangled with hers. Imogene circled her arms around his waist, slid her hands under the back of his shirt, and caressed her fingers over the taut muscles of his back.

Jekyll hooked his arms around her waist, lifting her off her feet and carrying her over to the edge of the bed. He wasted no time. He grasped the hem of her shirt, and pulled it over her head. He only broke from the kiss for a moment then his mouth crashed down over hers. Her shirt had built in bra cups, so she was exposed from the waist up. His calloused hands spread over her stomach, up to her breasts and her nipples beaded instantly into his palms. She trembled, pushing closer to him and dropping her hands to the buckle of his jeans. Thank God he didn’t wear a belt. There was no time for that. As it was, Imogene was eager to get naked.

She must've been taking too long because he yanked her hands from his zipper. Jekyll guided her down on the bed, kissing her and forcing her onto her back. He straightened, unbuttoning her jeans and pulling them down her legs along with her panties. Then it was her turn, and she was treated to a show. No music, no dancing. All of that was unnecessary. Jekyll's body was the showstopper. He took off his cut, hanging it near the door, then ripped off his shirt, tossing it across the room. Her eyes followed his hands as he dropped his pants to his ankles.

Oh God.

Obviously she'd seen him last night, but she hadn't gotten the same view. She licked her lips, and he growled, coming over her body. He grabbed the back of her thighs, sliding between her legs and inside of her.

"Ahh," she moaned, arching her back.

His hands spread on either side of her head, caging her in, and when he thrust inside of her, his mouth came down on hers. Hard. His tongue slipped past her lips, tasting her. Imogene wrapped her arms around his back, urging him closer, but he held most of his weight off of her.

It had been a long time since she'd had sex, and never this good. When Jekyll bit her bottom lip, she moaned into his mouth and he sank deeper into her core.

So good.

She traced the muscles of his back with her fingers and deepened the kiss, sliding her tongue against his. Imogene had always been a big fan of kissing, but with Jekyll it was somehow different. She swiveled her hips in tandem with his moves. She wasn't going to last much longer. He was hitting her in spots she didn't even know existed. One in particular was putting her over the edge. She dug her nails in his back, screamed his name and he slammed inside of her.

Yes!

"Fuck." He grunted, and she gasped.

Her whole body tensed, her toes curled, and she locked her legs tightly, riding her orgasm. He dropped his face to her neck, and his warm breath blanketed her skin.

I want to do that again!

****

Fucking curtains!

Jekyll threw his arm over his eyes, shielding them from the light. As much as a domesticated life wasn't something he craved, he'd have to break down and buy window coverings. He rolled over, stretching his arm across the bed. His eyes shot open when he realized it was empty.

He pushed up on his elbow, surveying the room. Her bag was on the floor in the corner along with a pair of panties and bra. She obviously hadn't left. An unexpected wave of relief washed over him. He dragged his hand over his face and stilled when he heard voices coming from the living room.

A faint laugh. Then another. Jekyll sat up, staring at the open door and focusing on the sound. One voice was definitely Imogene, and the other was also female. Realistically, it could be only one of two women. Cleo and Addison were the only ones who had access to the houses beyond the clubhouse.

He threw off the sheets, grabbed his jeans, not bothering with his underwear or the snap, and stalked out of his room and down the hallway. He immediately stopped at the opening to the living room, taking in the scene.

I should've fucking known.

Imogene was standing by the door talking with Cleo. Wraith's woman must've sensed his presence and looked over. She lifted her hand in a short wave.

"Morning, Jekyll!"

He lifted his chin but remained silent.

"Cleo brought over breakfast." Imogene lifted a container. Her hair was matted down on one side, and her waves were a little frizzy and in disarray. She had on nothing but a tank top and form fitting cotton shorts. *Fucking beautiful.* And tempting.

"I made too much and brought it over to the clubhouse, but not many guys were around, so I figured I'd deliver some to you and Cue. It's just bacon, eggs, hashbrowns, and pancakes." Cleo shifted her gaze between him and Imogene. "I hope I didn't interrupt."

"With that spread, you can interrupt anytime you want." Imogene chuckled then waved her hand. "Besides, I'm an early riser, so I've been up since five." She hooked her thumb over her shoulder, gesturing to him. "While he's been snoring all morning."

What the fuck?

“I don’t fucking snore.”

Imogene clamped her lips, but he noticed them twitch. “I’ll just put this in the oven so it doesn’t get cold.” She walked through the room and glanced over at him. He narrowed his gaze, which only had her lips spreading into a grin.

This was another first for him. Women didn’t usually tease Jekyll.

“Well, I should get going.” Cleo opened the door, smirking. “I guess those plates are coming in handy, after all.”

Fucking smart ass.

He pointed to the door. “Go.”

She grinned and leaned past him. “Bye Imogene. It was so nice meeting you.”

Imogene poked her head out of the doorway. “You too, Cleo. Hopefully we’ll see each other again.”

That’s exactly what I fucking need.

Cleo lifted her hand, waved to him, and walked out the door. There wouldn’t be any more hiding Imogene’s presence. He estimated five minutes before the whole club knew she was staying at his house.

Jekyll made his way into the dining room, stopping at the breakfast bar. Imogene was on her toes reaching for the plates on the top shelf, completely ignoring the paper plates at her eye level. He’d stored the ones Cleo gifted him up top, thinking he’d never use them.

He rounded the counter, nudged her away, and grabbed two, handing them to her. Imogene grabbed them with a small smile playing on her lips. She inched closer.

“Good morning,” she whispered.

She was too close to resist. He dropped his head, taking her for a kiss. Imogene turned in his arms, slipping her tongue between his lips, and moaning softly. *Fuck!* That was his undoing. The kiss ended too soon with his woman’s face awash in a bright shade of red.

“The reality is so much better than the fantasy.”

What?

He furrowed his brows, and she smiled. “I thought about kissing you hundreds of times.”

Fuck me. He’d thought about it too. Way too often while he was locked up and more so when he was set free. Imogene had taken up permanent space in his mind. Jekyll tightened his hold but tried to keep his composure.

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"You wanna eat or fuck?"

Imogene giggled, weaving herself out of his hold.

"Do you have placemats?"

He scowled. "Do I look like I'd have placemats?"

Hell, if not for Cleo, they'd be eating on paper plates.

"No." She snickered, holding up the blue and yellow flower patterned plate. "But you also don't look like a man who'd have a matching dish set."

"Smartass."

Great, that's just what I need…two of them.

*

They had just finished breakfast when she got the phone call. Jekyll watched Imogene pace the room with a smile on her face. "Looking forward to it, Elaine. See you on Saturday."

She tapped her screen and glanced over. "Why are you staring at me?"

"'Cause you just convinced an ex-con with anger issues to do yoga. It's impressive," he teased, and she rolled her eyes.

"If I judged everyone on their rap sheet, you and I would've never met. I wouldn't have volunteered at the prison."

"Why did you?" He asked.

"My dad. He was the motivation behind it, knowing there were innocent people who were locked up. But I'm not so naïve as to think that category is a majority. I know it's not. Most people are in prison because they broke the law. But I also don't think those people are disposable and their mistakes can't turn into a learning lesson."

Imogene was so different from him. He looked at people and expected the worst. Always suspicious.

Jekyll scoffed. "You think everyone can be reformed?"

"Not everyone." She smiled. "Bad people exist. I know that. But how is someone able to decipher between evil and a mistake? You can't unless you understand the person, right? Every interaction I had with an inmate, I gave

them a clean slate in my mind. Treated them with kindness and respect while remaining cautious." She snorted. "I'm not gullible, Jekyll."

The jury is still out on that one.

"Too nice."

She laughed, shaking her head. "There's no such thing."

Jekyll balled his fists. "Yeah, there fucking is when you're dealing with felons."

She raised her brows. "Why? Because they can be calculating and manipulative? They can come across one way and have their deviant thoughts racing through their minds while pretending to be someone else?"

"Yeah."

"I know that." She nodded. "Do you remember Congers? He was in your block."

Jekyll didn't interact with him much but he'd see him from time to time.

"Old guy, kept to himself."

She smirked. "Yes, and by all accounts, respectful. He asked for special tutoring for the GED. He went to administration and was granted permission." She tapped her finger on her chest. "I was the one who declined the tutoring. And I did it for my own safety."

Jekyll straightened. "You were scared of him?"

"His intentions weren't good. The administrators saw a record of zero infractions, no time in solitary, and basically, a model prisoner. I spent time with him in class so I had a different view. Because it's not always about what someone says, it's how they say it. How they move. Red flags were flying, and my guard was up within a week after he entered the class."

How the fuck did I miss that?

"I never saw shit from him."

"He wasn't a threat to you, so you didn't bother looking deep enough. If you had, you would've seen the same thing I did."

Jekyll was quickly realizing, he hadn't given her enough credit. Imogene had more insight on people than he thought. *Still too fucking nice.*

He lifted his chin. "You didn't see me as a threat?"

She widened her eyes and snickered. "To me? Never."

And he wasn't. If anything, he'd been a silent protector. Had he known about Congers, he would've handled it.

"Turns out my intuition was right, huh?"

Yeah. But not always.

"What about your client from the cafe? He make you nervous?"

She flattened her lips and didn't respond. It was an answer without her saying a word.

"Thanks for inviting me to stay for the weekend," she said.

It was a quick change in subject. He'd let it go. For now.

Imogene started to clear the table. This was new territory for him. He wasn't accustomed to anyone taking care of him.

She reached for the plates. "So, are you going to give me a tour of Killcreek?"

Jekyll sipped his coffee then snorted. "Nothing to see."

"Well, there's gotta be something. And I'm fine with just riding around."

He glanced over his shoulder. She was at the sink, rinsing the dishes and loading them into the dishwasher. It was all so normal and domesticated. He should've been unnerved by her being so comfortable in his space. He wasn't.

"Ride?"

"On your bike." She peeked up. "I've never been on a motorcycle."

And Jekyll never carried passengers. Ever. His bike was like a part of him, and no one got access to that. Until her. He liked the idea of being Imogene's first. *And her last.*

"Gotta put jeans and sneakers on."

She smiled, loaded the last of the dishes, and darted out of the kitchen and down the hallway to his bedroom. He expected to be waiting while she got ready, but five minutes later she came rushing into the room like a kid on Christmas.

Jekyll wasn't lying when he said there wasn't much to see. The ride on the backroads was the highlight of the small town. But she didn't complain. There was one spot that had decent views. And that was where he took her.

Jekyll watched her walk to the bank of the creek. Two deep lines formed between her brows, and she gripped her hips, looking from one end of the water to the other.

"This is the creek the town is named after?"

He smirked and folded his arms.

"After a good rain, it fills up."

She slowly nodded. “I guess I’ll take a raincheck on this tour.” She smiled, glancing back at him. “Pun intended. Can I dip my feet in?”

“You can do anything you want.”

She sat down, pulled off her shoes and socks, then hiked up her jeans to midcalf. She pushed up and started down toward the creek. He left his eyes locked on her and bent down, grabbing her phone by her sneakers. He tapped the screen and punched in her code. Cypher had given it to him. He pulled up her text messages. The most recent was exactly what he’d been looking for. A name.

Logan Manning. Her client. *Not for much longer.*

She was scheduling his next appointment. That wasn’t going to happen.

Jekyll looked over at Imogene but she was focused on the creek with her back turned. He bent down and put her phone back.

I’ll handle this.

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CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Waking up any way other than naturally was the bane of her existence. Loud neighbors, ground shaking thunderstorms, and Imogene's most dreaded reason, the alarm clock. But this was definitely an exception. She stretched her arms over her head, grasped onto the iron headboard, and swiveled her hips against his mouth.

This is how I want to wake up every morning.

Jekyll's hands gripped her thighs in a tight hold, leaving her immobile as he sucked her clit. She pressed her head into the pillow, squeezing the bars. Any time she moved an inch back, he yanked her forward, licking her pussy harder.

"Jek." She moaned.

His hands caressed down her legs and grabbed her ankles, swinging them over his shoulders. This new angle made her gasp, lose her breath, and put her right over the edge. She rode his mouth until her body went limp.

She was barely aware of any movement until the mattress shifted, his arm wrapped around her and pulled her into the crook of his side, and she rested her cheek on his chest. His heart was even beating erratically. She should probably return the favor, but she wasn't sure if she was even capable of moving.

She didn't think anything could top yesterday with Jekyll, but this was definitely a close second. Even with all her fantasies about this man, and there were plenty, she'd never envisioned falling asleep with him and waking up beside him. It was just as well. Her creative mind was no match for this reality.

Imogene wasn't certain how long they laid in silence, though she was pretty sure she'd dozed off. The phone alarm had her stirring.

She nestled into his chest. The last thing she wanted to do was get out of bed. Unfortunately, she didn't have a choice. "I have to get up."

His arm tightened around her, and he slid his hand over her ass.

"No, you don't." His deep grumble had her snuggling closer to him.

I'm my worst enemy.

“I do. I have to check in with the center and confirm my appointments.”

His hand stilled, and the vibe in the room shifted. Without him even saying a word, she could feel the tension.

“Who?” he snapped.

“Um, I have Shelby and Elaine here” —She paused— “And one back in Lawry.”

“No.”

She popped up her head and was met with a sharp glare.

“No?”

Jekyll dragged his hand down his face, dropping his hand to his chest. “Yeah. I said no. You ain’t meeting with him again.”

“I have to. It’s my job.”

“Then quit.”

What? She chuckled, scanning his face for some semblance of humor. She found none. Jekyll was not only serious but extremely irritated with her laughing.

Imogene wiggled her way to a seated position, clutching the sheet against her chest. She swiped the strands of hair from her eyes and cocked her head.

“You’re serious?”

“Dead fucking serious. You’re not meeting with him.”

Her mouth fell open. She was used to taking orders. *From my boss.* But never from a partner.

“Jekyll…” She reached for his arm and flinched when he ripped off the covers and got out of bed. He grabbed his jeans from the floor, and stormed out of the room.

What just happened? Imogene quickly got dressed and went in search of him. He wasn’t hard to find. Jekyll was standing in front of the coffee maker with his arms braced on the counter.

“Can we talk about this?”

The muscles on his back strained and veins on his biceps were visible. She inched her way into the kitchen, rounding the breakfast bar. He hadn’t said a word.

Imogene hopped up on the stool and clasped her hands, her arms resting on the counter.

“Please.” She leaned to the right, staring at his profile as he looked out of the backyard window. “I don’t want to fight.”

He drew in a breath and turned, leaned back against the counter, and folded his arms over his chest. A harsh scowl deepened the lines in his forehead.

“You don’t go? There’s no fight.”

That wasn’t fair.

“It’s my job. And before you suggest I quit again, I can’t do that.”

His jaw squared, and his temple pulsed.

“I don’t get to choose my clients, Jekyll.”

He pushed off the counter and stalked toward her. He planted his hands on the breakfast bar, and she slowly lifted her gaze.

“That time I called you back. You were off. I heard it in your voice. And you’d just met with him, right?”

She nodded. Imogene couldn’t deny it. The meeting with Logan had thrown her off balance.

“I watched you that day at the coffee shop. He makes you uncomfortable.”

She sighed, and her shoulders sagged. “It doesn’t matter.”

He slammed his hand down on the hard surface, and she jumped back in her seat. He leaned across the counter. “It fucking matters to me. It’s your job, I get it, but when it puts you somewhere unsafe and alone with a guy on the sex offender registry” —his eyes darkened— “I got a fucking problem with that.”

Imogene sucked in a breath, dropping her hands to her lap. She couldn’t argue with him. Logan did make her uncomfortable. But…

“I just have one more meeting with him, and then it’s over so…”

His gaze darkened. “You don’t have any more fucking meetings with him. You’re gonna call your boss, tell her that you’re not meeting with him, and she needs to find someone else to do it.” His nostrils flared. “And if she’s any good, she’ll assign that motherfucker to a man.”

He had a point. She looked down at the counter and lifted her hand to her mouth, nibbling on the corner of her nail.

Jekyll reached across the counter, pulled her hand from her mouth and slid his hand over her knuckles. He threaded his fingers through hers.

“This isn’t me telling you how to live your life. I don’t give a fuck where you work. As long as you’re safe. I’m trying to protect you. You’ve seen a lot.” He squeezed her hand. “I’ve seen more, and I’m not letting anyone fuck with you.”

It was a sweet sentiment and a rational thought. She couldn't remember the last time anyone put her well-being before everything else.

"I'll call Judy and see if I can switch with someone."

"You do that."

****

This was a wild turn of events. Usually after sex, Jekyll was itching to get the woman out of his bed and hoping it was the last time he saw her. With Imogene? He was watching the clock wishing time would slow down.

After breakfast, she'd left to take a shower and get ready. Meanwhile, Jekyll was at the sink rinsing dishes. *Fucking Cleo and her plates.* After he loaded the dishwasher, he returned a few texts. He'd pretty much ignored his phone yesterday.

"I'm going to have to get you an apron."

He glanced up, and Imogene muffled her laugh, staring at his shoulder. He had forgotten he'd draped the hand towel there after drying his hands. *Again, fucking Cleo.* He tossed it on the counter and shoved the phone in his pocket.

Imogene continued staring as if she had something to say.

"What?"

She rested her head on the doorframe. "Can I ask you something?"

That was always a loaded question. He assumed she wanted to talk about the discussion earlier. Jekyll wasn't backing down. She wasn't taking the meeting with Logan. But he'd hear her out.

"Yeah."

She drew in a breath, hesitating. "Did you ever think of me?"

Think of her? He furrowed his brows, and she inched closer.

"I mean after you left prison. Did you ever" —she shrugged, but her gaze dropped down to his chest and her voice lowered— "Think about me?"

He had, plenty of times. Immediately after his release, he didn't think of much else. She'd been his obsession, unbeknownst to most people, Imogene included. Answering was a no-brainer. But it was complicated. An admission left him in a vulnerable position. He was notoriously guarded, always had been.

"You ever think of me?" He was turning it back on her without answering. It was a calculated move.

She peeked up, smiling. "All the time."

Jekyll clenched his jaw.

“I wondered what you were up to and if you were happy.” She veered her gaze across the room. “I saw you leave. When you were released, I watched you and Hyde walk out.”

I know.

“Thought that was the last time I’d ever see you.”

Me too.

“Well,” she let out a heavy breath. “I should get going or I’ll be late.”

“Come here.” He curled his finger, and her cheeks pinkened.

When she was a foot away, he hooked his arm around her waist and pulled her to his chest. He cupped her cheek, brushing his mouth against hers.

“I’m gonna be late if I don’t leave right now,” she mumbled against his lips.

“Then you’re gonna be fucking late.” Jekyll didn’t wait for a response and kissed her.

“Jekyll.” Her body shook as she laughed.

He finally relented, releasing his hold. Imogene gathered her things and he walked her to her car. The street was quiet. With only three of them living on it, he wasn’t surprised.

“I’ll text you when I get home,” she shrugged. “If you want.”

It was unnecessary. With the tracker, he’d know her whereabouts. But she didn’t know that. It would also give him a piece of information he didn’t have. Where she lived.

“Yeah, do that.”

She smiled, opening the door and tossing her bags in the backseat. He stepped down the stairs. This was another first for him. He didn’t want her to leave.

She waved from the car, and he watched her head down the road, veering right slightly when a motorcycle passed. He expected it to be Cue or Cross since they were the only other two living in the houses. It wasn’t.

“Ah fuck.”

Hyde pulled into his driveway, shut down his bike, and pulled off his helmet. He turned to the empty road, smirking.

“Is that who I think it was?”

Jekyll ignored him and crossed the street. It was no surprise to him when Hyde sidled up next to him.

“Penny called this while we were on the inside.” Hyde grasped his shoulder. “Told her she was wrong. You’ve never taken an interest in any woman long term. But here you are proving me wrong and my old lady right.”

Jekyll remained silent.

“What’s going on?”

“Nothing.”

Hyde rolled his eyes, laughing. “Bullshit. I know you better than anyone. That woman got under your skin a long time ago. You telling me that spending the weekend with Imogene is nothing, is you lying. So?”

“Sex life with Penny so fucking boring now you want details on mine?”

Hyde smirked. “Nothing with Penny is ever fucking boring. And ’cause I love you, man, I’m not gonna tell her you even suggested that ’cause my hellcat would have your balls.”

I don’t doubt that.

“What are you doing here?” Jekyll asked, purposely shifting the conversation.

“Ace called me in. Meeting with Inez tonight.”

Jekyll smirked. “That’s always fun.”

Hyde grinned. “And she wants you there too, brother.”

Fuck me.

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CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Imogene was heating up soup for dinner when she heard the sharp knock on her door. *What the…* She wasn't expecting anyone. *Afterall, I'm not allowed to have visitors.* The knock was louder the second time. She dashed down the hall, checking the peephole. The guy in the dark suit was one of the men who'd helped move her things into the apartment. He'd also been the one who'd laid out all the rules. *Mr. No*. She'd seen him several times since then, but he always ignored her greeting. They all did.

This can't be good.

She opened the door, smiling. "Hi."

Imogene still didn't know the names of any of the security.

"You got an animal in here?"

Uh oh.

"Um…" Imogene was prepared to lie, but Whiskers took that option out of her hands when his grumbling growl echoed through the apartment. *Are you trying to get us evicted?*

He narrowed his eyes.

"It's a cat."

His jaw squared. "Are you illiterate?"

"Excuse me?"

"Can. You. Read?"

I see where this is going.

"Yes."

He slowly nodded. "Then exactly what part of 'no pets" didn't you understand?" He released a heavy breath. "Get your cat and bring it to Inez's."

Who?

"Inez?"

He clenched his jaw, clearly losing his patience. "Your *landlord* two doors down."

Imogene had no idea she was living so close to the landlord. In fact, she knew nothing about the woman and hadn't laid eyes on her. She must be

Judy’s friend.

This is quite the pickle.

She clasped her hands, twisting her fingers. “Unfortunately, I can’t.”

His brows shot to his hairline. “Is that what you want me to tell Inez?”

“Well, I mean, I can come meet her, but I can’t bring the cat.”

He stared at her with a complete mask and sharply nodded his head, turning and walking down the hall. She closed the door and glared at Whiskers.

“This is all your fault.” She started toward the kitchen. She needed to come up with a plausible reason for ignoring the rule.

“Maybe if I…” Imogene jerked around when someone slammed their hand against her door.

Oh shit!

She rushed back to the door when the banging threatened to knock it down. She grabbed the knob, ripping it open.

Uh-oh.

“When I tell you to come over, you fucking come over.”

You must be Inez.

Imogene held up her hands. “I was going to, but the man said I had to bring the cat.”

“Then bring the fucking cat!”

Oh God. Imogene jumped back, widening her eyes. The aggression coming from this woman didn’t line up with her outward appearance.

“I can’t.”

Inez narrowed her gaze, and Imogene immediately lunged closer. “I just mean I literally can’t. He tries to attack me if I get even a few feet from him.”

Inez dipped her brows and walked into the apartment, forcing Imogene to press her back against the wall. Inez stalked down the hallway, stopping at the kitchen area.

“Where the fuck is he?”

Imogene rushed toward her, leaving a three-foot gap between them. She lifted her arm and pointed to the chair in the corner. *My favorite chair.* She’d had it for years, and the cushion was finally shaped to feel like it was made just for her. She had a large pillow tucked in the corner and a soft blanket draped over the back. Most nights, she’d even fall asleep in it.

Well, not since the arrival of Whiskers.

“He looks like an angry fucker.”

He is.

Imogene rocked on her heels, staring at the cat. When he shifted his gaze on her, she immediately looked down at the floor.

“The girl at the shelter said his owner died, and the family surrendered him. They didn’t want him. Apparently, he has aggressive tendencies.”

Inez angled her head. “And you still took him?”

“Well…” *It’s not one of my better decisions.* But in fairness, she felt bad for him. Being abandoned and unwanted was sad. Of course he’d have trust issues. It would take time for him to realize she wasn’t his enemy. Besides, he hadn’t been like this at the shelter. *And…*

“He was on the list to be euthanized.”

Inez scoffed. “You should’ve let them.”

Imogene gasped, widening her eyes. “Everyone deserves patience. Whiskers certainly does after everything he’s been through.”

Inez stared back at her, but Imogene couldn’t quite read through her expression. It was a cross between anger and intense concentration.

“Whiskers?”

“I renamed him.” Imogene said.

“To Whiskers? No wonder he wants to claw your fucking eyes out.”

“I thought giving him a softer name might make him more endearing. New beginnings. Like a fresh start.”

Inez started across the room toward the chair. When she was two feet away, the hair on his back stood and he hissed. This was a warning.

“Shut the fuck up!” Inez snapped.

And surprisingly, he did.

“What was his name before?”

“Hank.”

Inez eyed the cat. “Then call him fucking Hank.”

“Okay.”

Inez glanced around the room, inspecting Imogene’s space. She’d unpacked most of her boxes but hadn’t started organizing or decorating. Inez sauntered to the bookshelf. It was the only section Imogene had started on. It was far from complete, but she’d put some knickknacks and a picture frame on the shelf.

Inez lifted her chin. “Who’s that?”

“Me and my mom. She died when I was little. She had a tumor in her brain. No one knew about it. Not even her. One day, she was fine, and the next she had a seizure and died before the ambulance even got there.” She made her way closer to Inez but cautiously avoided Whiskers. *I mean Hank.* “I stayed with my dad for a year but then went to live with my grandparents after that. They had a huge farm. Actually, lots of barn cats. I used to spend hours playing with them. That’s why I got Whisk” —she cleared her throat — “Hank. I figured I’d been around them most of my life. But apparently, country cats and city cats are very different.” She took a breath. “My grandparents died when I was nineteen.”

Inez slowly turned, dipping her brows. “I asked who was in the picture, not for your fucking life story.”

Imogene clamped her lips.

Inez dragged her hand over her mouth, looking around the room and shifting her gaze to Hank. If Imogene was reading it right, her new landlord was seconds from demanding Imogene get rid of him. It would be the easy way out for her. Guilt free abandonment. But she’d be left in the same position as she started.

“I was lonely.”

Inez jerked her gaze.

Imogene forced a smile, shrugging. “I’m new in the city. I don’t know anyone. I guess companionship is more important than I realized.”

“Your solution to loneliness was getting a cat with serial killer traits?”

Imogene snorted, which rolled into a laugh. “I thought it was fate.”

Inez sighed and rolled her eyes.

“He can stay, but if he kills you in your sleep, you’ll get no sympathy. And your next of kin ain’t getting the security deposit back if I gotta hire cleaners for blood on the carpet.”

“That’s fair.”

Inez started to walk through the room, and Imogene rushed behind her. “Um, can I ask you something?”

Inez sighed heavily, turned, and snapped, “What?”

“What are the security guards’ names?”

“None of your fucking business.”

“Oh, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to overstep. It’s just” —she shrugged— “I see them every time I come in or go out. I usually say hi, but I thought it’s more personal if I address them by their names.”

Inez shook her head, scowling. “People like you are the reason people like me don’t leave our homes.”

That was not a compliment. Imogene was about to apologize again but refrained. Keeping quiet was probably the best decision. But… “It was nice meeting you, Inez and thanks for letting Hank stay.”

Inez scoffed, shook her head, and walked to the hallway. “Another fucking problem child,” she muttered.

Imogene rushed behind her. “Inez, I promise I won’t be a problem.”

Inez ripped open the door, turned back, and sent her a seething glare. “Babygirl, you’re *already* a fucking problem.”

Inez walked out without another word. Imogene inched closer to the door when she heard Inez’s booming shout. “Does no one own a fucking watch anymore? Told you boys to be here at three.”

Imogene slowly started to close the door, but froze when she heard *his* voice.

“Traffic.”

One word was all it took. But she knew exactly who it was. She crept to the edge of the door and poked her head into the hallway.

There he was. Her heart raced, and butterflies flurried in her belly. It’d only been a few hours, but she hadn’t thought of anything other than him.

Jekyll.

What was he doing here?

****

Jekyll and the others were scheduled to leave at noon from Killcreek but decided to wait on Wraith and Cue to get back from their run. It put them behind by an hour. Then they spent another ninety minutes in construction traffic.

None of that mattered to Inez. She didn’t accept any type of excuses. Jekyll was preparing for a fifteen minute berating. *Settle in, boys.*

Inez parted her lips then shifted her gaze over his shoulder.

“Jesus Christ, now what?” Inez spun around, looking down the hall.

He glanced over his shoulder, and his muscles tightened.

“What the fuck, Jek?” Hyde muttered.

Two doors down from Inez’s apartment, Imogene stood in the doorway staring at them. Mainly Jekyll, and when she lifted her hand to wave, he felt another set of eyes boring into him like a death laser.

Inez may have been a foot and a half shorter, but she had enough presence to equal him in size.

“Don’t you dare fucking tell me you know her.” The threat was evident.

Fuck. He fisted his hands.

“Oh, he *knows* her.” Gent’s taunting earned him a severe scowl from all the brothers.

Jekyll glanced over Inez’s head, staring back at Imogene. She smiled, seemingly oblivious to the tension in the hallway. He lowered his voice, but his graveled tone spoke volumes of his rising anger.

“What the hell is she doing here?”

Inez smirked. “Ask her.”

He straightened, and Inez waved Imogene over. She rushed down the hall, shifting her eyes over him and Inez. She stopped a few feet away and glanced to the right. She lifted her hand in a short wave, and he jerked his glare to Inez’s head of security. She had close to fifty men who guarded the apartments, but Darren was usually in charge of them. He ignored Imogene and didn’t respond. Though he did flatten his lips in a tight line and glance up at the ceiling.

“You know my boys?” Inez asked.

Imogene widened her eyes, and her mouth fell open. She jerked her eyes to Jekyll and moved an inch closer. He sucked in a breath, knowing Inez was watching her every move. *And mine.*

“Oh, you’ve got to be fucking kidding me,” Inez sneered, pinning her glare on Jekyll.

“Inez.” He growled.

She poked her finger at his chest. “A whole world of goddamn women, and you pick this one?”

He clenched his jaw, fisting his hands. It was the only way to keep him from pulling her close. That claim in front of Inez wouldn’t go over well. But he wouldn’t stay silent.

“Yeah.”

And he wasn’t letting her go.

Inez threw her hands in the air, shaking her head. “Does anyone listen to a fucking word I say?”

Gent chuckled and lifted his finger. “I’m still single, Inez.”

“Shut your mouth!”

Jekyll didn’t have experience with an overbearing mother. Until Inez.

“I’m sorry, I…” Imogene stared up at him, nervous and unsure. Clearly, she had no idea what was happening.

“What are you doing here?” Jekyll asked.

“I live here.”

Fuck me.

“That’s right, Jekyll. She. Lives. Here.” Inez’s tone was controlled, but he’d known her long enough to read past it.

Jekyll lifted his chin toward the hallway. “Go back to your place. I’ll come see you when I’m done.”

She darted her eyes between him and Inez. “Okay.”

He watched her walk down the hall and glance over her shoulder before slipping inside her apartment.

“Get your asses inside now.”

Jekyll drew in a breath, prepping for Inez’s wrath. But another thing was on his mind. Once in the living room, he turned back to Darren, who was standing near the edge of the kitchen, waiting to be dismissed.

“Hey,” Jekyll snapped, and Darren looked over. “Stay the fuck away from her.”

“With pleasure.” Darren drew in a breath. “I find her incredibly annoying.”

“Somebody explain to me why any of you know” —her arm shot out pointing toward the wall— “that girl.”

Hyde sidled up next to him. “Imogene was a volunteer at the prison. Librarian, and taught some classes.”

Inez furrowed her brows. “Why is she here?”

Hyde glanced up at Jekyll. It was his turn to take the lead.

“Moved here about four months ago after her father was killed in prison. He was serving time for murder.” Jekyll drove his hand over his head. There were too many details, and Inez wasn’t known for her patience. “Said she moved here for a change. Didn’t know she was in Lawry until I ran into her a few weeks ago.”

Inez squinted. “And now she’s looking at you like you’re her man.”

All Jekyll could do was speak his truth.

“’Cause I *am* her man.”

It was a bold statement but an honest one.

Inez snorted. “This forever or for right now?”

For most people it would be too soon to tell. Not Jekyll.

“I’m not letting her go.”

Inez’s eyes grew wild. “Well, who the fuck is next?” She waved her arms, stomped to the cabinet, and grabbed her vodka and a glass. She slammed the bottle on the counter. “Which one of you assholes is gonna give me another fucking problem child?”

There was a rumbling of faint chuckles.

“How do you know her?” Ace asked.

Inez shook her head. “An associate called in a favor. She works for Judy, said the girl needed a safe place to stay. Also fucking said she didn’t have anyone, which is why I agreed to let her in.” She glared across the room at Jekyll.

“Assholes,” she muttered and took a large sip of vodka. “Tell me about Satan’s.”

This was a good sign. She was letting it go. For now.

Ace pulled out a chair at the counter and sat. “Been watching them for a while since we struck the deal, Inez. It doesn’t add up. They’re taking in more than they can sell. But they got the money. We told them we need a list of buyers. Gave them a week to get it to us. Griggs called and said they need more time. He’s stalling.”

The corners of her eyes crinkled. “What are you thinking?”

“Everything points to Satan’s stockpiling the transports for a big run. No way of knowing how much that is or what they’ve got already. So we’re gonna move things along and offer them a triple shipment, and see if they take the bait.”

Cross stepped forward. “’Cause if they do, then we know they aren’t personally selling, and they’re gonna have to move it.”

“And if they take it?” Inez arched her brow.

Ace sighed. “The only safe passage through the state is Ghosttown.”

Her brows hiked, and the corner of her mouth curled. “You think these assholes are dumb enough to transport through Mayberry?”

“That’s exactly what we think.” Cross folded his arms. “And there’s a chance they’ve done it before. Offering this amount of product is gonna force their hand.”

Ace tapped his knuckles on the counter. “If they take it, we’re gonna set up a meeting with Oz. Ghosttown is under his protection, not ours. He can handle it.”

Inez sipped her drink, looking over the rim of her glass. Her eyes were set on one member in particular. The room was silent. Jekyll wasn't sure if she'd say anything to *him* about Ghosttown. It was a sensitive topic, and Inez wasn't known for her compassion.

"Alright." She shifted her gaze to Ace. "Keep me posted. You meet with Oz, I wanna know about it before it happens."

Ace nodded in agreement and stood.

"Jekyll," Inez snapped, knitting her brows. "Thin fucking walls in this place. You understand me?"

"No fucking. I got it."

She smirked. "Good boy."

Yeah.

"Now get the fuck out."

Jekyll followed behind Hyde and Cypher. When Cross closed the door behind him, Gent laughed.

"So we'll be seeing more of *Cherry*, huh, Jek?"

Motherfucker! He turned to Gent, scowling. "You call her that again, I'm gonna fucking kill you."

Gent spread his arms. "Brother, I like her. We *bondaged* over nicknames."

Oak snorted. "It's bonded not bondage, asshole."

"Either way, I wouldn't mind doing both with her." Gent winked, which set Jekyll off.

Jekyll lunged forward, reaching for his throat, but Wraith blocked him. Cue grabbed the back of Gent's cut. "Such a fucking dick."

Ghost shook his head. "Doesn't that shit ever get old, Gent?"

Gent laughed. "No."

Asshole.

While all the other members headed to the elevator, Jekyll went in the opposite direction.

He knocked on her door, and it swung open instantly.

"Hi."

Jekyll smirked. If he didn't know better, he'd think she'd been standing there the whole time he was at Inez's, just waiting.

She stepped aside. "Come on in."

Jekyll walked down the hall, scanning the apartment. It was set up like Inez's, except Imogene's décor wasn't nearly as dated.

“It’s kind of wild, right? Us running into each other here.”

Yeah, fucking wild.

“So how do you know Inez?”

This is where it would get tricky. Luckily, Jekyll was pretty good at evading questions he didn’t want to answer.

“An associate.”

“Oh.” She cocked her head. “What kind of…”

Jekyll folded his arms. “Is it okay if I stay the night?”

Her eyes widened. “Here? With me?”

He gave a sharp nod. “Yeah. And we’ll hang out tomorrow. That work for you?”

“Yes.” She blurted.

Mission accomplished.

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CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

This wasn't the first time she'd retreated into the second apartment in the middle of the night. But it was a first leaving a man in her bed in the other.

Even after his explanation of Inez being an associate of the club, she couldn't shake the feeling there were missing pieces to his story. Jekyll was vague and brushed off the encounter as nothing more than coincidence. Imogene pressed a little more, but when he announced he was staying the night, she got sidetracked. When he'd suggested they hang out the next day, her curiosity about their connection ceased to exist. *Details weren't really important, right?*

She covered a yawn and considered going back to the apartment before she heard faint footsteps.

Imogene jerked in her seat and leaned across the breakfast bar when she heard the door creak open. From her vantage point, she couldn't see him until he had passed the kitchen wall from the hallway. Jekyll was shirtless, only in his jeans. He hadn't even bothered with boots or socks.

"It's three in the morning. What are you doing up?"

She shrugged. "Couldn't sleep."

He gave a slow nod and walked into the living room. The boxes of files hadn't been sorted just yet. Most of them were stacked against the wall.

She slipped off the chair and wandered into the room opposite of him. "What are you doing up?"

He dragged his hand over his beard, eyeing the boxes. "Got up to take a piss, you weren't there, came looking for you." He lifted the top of one of the boxes. "What's all this?"

"Files on my dad's case."

His hand stilled, and he angled his head, staring back at her.

"It's more for me than him."

His brows dipped. "What do you mean?"

She forced a smile and shrugged, hoping he'd let it go. He didn't.

"Asked you a question."

She drew in a breath. “Not sure I want to answer.”

“Why?”

“Because sometimes the truth is ugly.”

“You gonna explain *that* to me?”

She moved closer to the boxes, glancing over them. “I know that with him being gone, it seems pointless to pursue the case. It won’t change his outcome anyway. He’ll still be gone. But there’s a part of me that needs validation that I was right.”

“What’s so ugly about that?”

Everything.

She flattened her lips, staring down at the ground. She heard his steps get closer but kept her head bowed, not wanting to look him in the eye. It only lasted a few seconds before he cupped her jaw, forcing her to look at him.

“Tell me.”

She swallowed the knot in her throat. “Because if I’m not right, and he was guilty, then I spent the last four years advocating for a murderer to be set free.”

This was the first time Imogene had ever admitted that to anyone.

“You want to be right, or you want the truth?”

“I want both,” she whispered. “I want them to be the same thing.”

“But you got your doubts?”

Her eyes welled. It was a vulnerable spot to be in. Admitting that she had her doubts about her father’s innocence had never been anything she was willing to vocalize. At the beginning, it wasn’t an issue. She wholeheartedly believed in him. But now?

“We should go back to bed.”

Her heart was pounding in her chest. It was stoked by fear that he’d push for more, and she wasn’t ready to give it. But she knew if Jekyll demanded more, she’d probably give in.

His thumbs strummed her cheeks. “Come on.”

Thank you.

****

This woman is like Houdini in the mornings.

When he woke up in the morning, Imogene’s side of the bed was empty. Again. He was quickly learning this was to be expected. Instead of getting out of bed, he stared up at the old ceiling fan. Things had gotten deep last

night with her. He got a firsthand look at the weight she was carrying courtesy of her father. It didn't sit right with him. Her father was dead, and his case was officially closed.

But not for her.

He jerked his eyes to the door when he heard rushed steps outside the bedroom. Then it was silent.

What the…

Jekyll got out of bed, put on his jeans and went in search of her. He walked out of her room to find Imogene standing at the edge of the breakfast bar, staring into the kitchen. She seemed to be in a trance.

Jekyll came up behind her, resting his hand on her hip. The second he made contact, she flinched and spun around.

"What the fuck is wrong?"

She shifted her gaze to the counter. An orange cat was stationed directly in front of the coffee maker laying down.

"I'm going to run out for coffee." Imogene said.

"Why don't you make it here?"

She sighed, and her shoulders sagged. She slowly lifted her arm, pointing to the cat.

What the fuck?

"Move him."

She gasped, and her eyes were wild as if he'd just suggested they rob a bank and take ten hostages.

"You can't just *move* Hank. He has to" —her throat bobbed and her lips turned downward into a severe frown— "Hank moves himself."

Jekyll tightened his lips, battening down his amusement. "Are you afraid of your cat?"

"I have good reason." She pulled up her sleeves, and her arms were covered with faint scratches. They weren't too deep and almost healed but there were a lot of them.

"He did that to you?"

She nodded and glanced over at Hank, taking a step back.

"Then get rid of the fucking cat."

She knitted her brows. "I can't do that."

Jekyll snorted. "Why not?"

"I adopted him, made a commitment." She sighed heavily. "So now he's mine. 'Til death do us part."

This was fucking nuts! Jekyll moved past her, but she grabbed his arm. “Don’t. He’ll claw your arms and scratch your tattoos.”

Jekyll scoffed. “He ain’t gonna do shit to me.”

“You’re not going to hurt him, right?”

Jekyll leaned in, kissing her. “No.”

He walked across the room, keeping his eyes on the cat, who had gone into protection mode. The hair on his back stood, and a grumbling growl echoed through the room. It didn’t slow Jekyll down. When Hank attempted to swat him, Jekyll grabbed both paws in one hand, and scooped his arm under the cat’s belly. He tucked him against his chest and the growling faded.

When Jekyll turned, Imogene was standing a few feet away, eyes the size of saucers and mouth gaping.

“Where do you want him?”

She was silent.

“Imogene? Where?”

She blinked, coming out of her trance and pointing to the living room. “He likes the chair in the corner.”

Jekyll scoffed. “I don’t give a shit what he likes. Where do *you* want him?”

She twisted her lips, shrugging.

Jekyll smiled, knowing her answer before she even said it.

“Um, the chair in the corner.”

Jekyll walked through the room, placed him on the chair, and walked back to the kitchen.

“I’ve never been able to pick him up.”

No shit.

“Yeah, I figured that. You need to remind him you’re not his fucking pet.”

She hiked her brows. “You think that he thinks” —she pressed her hand against her chest— “I’m the pet, and he’s the owner?”

That’s exactly what that angry fucker thinks. “Let’s go for breakfast.”

“And a ride?”

He arched his brow. “Created a fucking monster.”

“I’m addicted.”

His lips twitched, and he lifted his chin. “Get dressed. Jeans and boots.”

Imogene gave him a quick kiss and rushed back to the bathroom.

*

These were the best kind of rides. Jekyll had no destination except to get out of the city. They rode for about an hour before stopping to get something to eat. It wasn't anything more than a food truck, but Imogene seemed to like it. He took the last bite of his breakfast burrito when he heard a soft moan. He glanced down and she was licking her lips, smiling.

The corner of his mouth curled. "That good, huh?"

Her hands were wrapped around the cup and she chuckled. "I love hot chocolate. You want to try it?"

"No."

"It's really good."

Jekyll snorted. "Hate anything chocolate."

Her brows furrowed and she cocked her head. "I guess you didn't enjoy the cupcake."

"Didn't eat it."

Her eyes widened. "Then why did you take it?"

Jekyll could've brushed it off or changed the subject.

"'Cause you made it for me." He paused. "I don't like chocolate but I liked you."

Her eyes softened and she inched closer, sliding her arm around his waist. "I'll make you vanilla cupcakes next time."

Jekyll pulled her against his chest, smiling. *Too fucking sweet.*

"Let's get outta here."

Jekyll had planned for another hour or two on the bike, then they'd head back to her place. They were halfway across the lot when his phone rang. He picked up on the second ring.

"Yeah?"

"You in Lawry?" Cross asked.

"No, took a ride."

"How close are you from Satan's clubhouse?"

Ironically, they weren't far.

"About fifteen minutes."

"Need you here now."

He glanced down at Imogene.

"Can't get anyone else?"

"No, and just so we're clear, I'm not asking. This is an order."

It was the worst timing but Jekyll always showed up for the club.

“Alright.” He tapped the screen, tucked his phone in his pocket, and grabbed her hand, leading her back to his bike. “Gotta make a stop and meet up with Cross.”

“Okay.” She squeezed his hand. “Am I coming with you?”

Unfortunately, yes. The last place he’d want to bring her was the Satan’s clubhouse, but he didn’t have a choice. Lawry was too far away to drop her off and Cross needed him.

“Yeah.”

He’d been off on his estimation due to construction, and they arrived at the clubhouse twenty-five minutes later. Jekyll parked on the street and walked up the driveway.

To his surprise, there were quite a few brothers standing with Cross. It was more than enough to cover a meeting with the Satan’s. *Why the fuck do you need me?*

As they got closer to the group, Cross glanced over his shoulder, and his eyes landed on Imogene.

“You brought her?”

“Had her with me.” Jekyll narrowed his gaze. “You didn’t give me much of a fucking choice. You needed me, and I’m here. We’re an hour out from her place, and I’m not dropping her off alone anywhere in this piece of shit town, Cross.”

“Hey Imogene,” Hyde said, and she waved.

“Hi.”

“We need to talk.” Cross gestured for Jekyll and Hyde to follow him.

Jekyll looked back at her. “Wait here a sec.”

“Okay.” She clasped her hands, looking around the yard.

They were about ten feet away, and he noticed Wraith move closer to Imogene. He didn’t say anything to her. He was just acting as a protective shield.

“What’s going on?” Jekyll asked.

“Called you because Wraith and Hyde hadn’t showed up.”

Hyde snorted. “Have you seen the fucking interstate construction?”

Cross glared at him but turned back to Jekyll. “They got here about fifteen minutes ago, so we had the meeting.” Cross paused. “They took the bait.”

As expected.

“Gonna set up the meeting with Oz?”

“Yeah.” He nodded. “Now let’s get the fuck outta here.”

Cross started to walk away, but Jekyll stopped him.

“Need something.”

It had been on his mind since last night. She needed the truth and he wanted to make sure she got it.

Cross arched his brow. “What do you need?”

“The name of the guy who killed her dad inside.”

He could feel Hyde’s eyes on him, but Jekyll stared back at Cross.

“Why?”

Jekyll dragged his hand over his beard. “A lot of missing pieces to her story. Just looking to fill in the gaps. Figured, I’d start at the end and work my way back.”

He expected more questions. He didn’t get any.

Cross gave a curt nod. “We’ll get it.”

Jekyll had given up a lot for the club and asked for little in return. But he wanted this. For her.

“Eden?” Imogene’s high-pitched voice was loud and excited.

Jekyll spun around and watched her rush past Wraith and Cue, making a beeline for the yard. Where the hell was she going? Jekyll stalked to the back, stopping next to the brothers.

“What the fuck?” Cue muttered, jerking his gaze to Jekyll. “She knows Eden?”

This is Eden, the Satan’s club whore? The redhead cradled a scrappy dog against her chest and smiled.

“Hi Imogene.” Eden knitted her brows, clearly confused. “What are you doing here?”

Imogene hooked her thumb over her shoulder. “I’m with Jekyll.”

Eden glanced over and immediately lost her smile. Her face paled and she stepped back. Fear was easy to recognize. She scanned him and the others as they approached.

“How do you two know each other?” Cue asked.

Imogene smiled. “Oh, Eden works at the shelter where I got my cat.”

Jekyll squared his jaw, eyeing the other redhead. “She’s responsible for the angry asshole?”

Imogene furrowed her brows. “I picked Hank.”

“How’s that going?” Eden asked keeping her eyes locked on Imogene.

“I think we’re making progress.”

When Jekyll snorted, she shot him a glare. “It takes time.”

Imogene turned back to Eden, smiling. “It’s so nice seeing you again.”

His woman was oblivious to the tension in the yard. But Eden wasn’t.

“It’s nice seeing you too,” she cleared her throat. “Well, I have to go,” Eden said, avoiding eye contact with everyone but Imogene. “Tell Hank I said hi.”

Imogene chuckled and waved, watching Eden until she disappeared around the building. Jekyll turned to the brothers when he noticed Griggs and Spinner watching them from the back door.

“You boys staying for the party?” Griggs asked, then looked over at Imogene. There was a gleam in his eye that had Jekyll’s blood racing through his veins. “All are welcome. That includes you, sweetheart.”

Motherfucker!

Jekyll grabbed her hand, and walked down the driveway without a word. They hadn’t gotten a long look at his woman, but they’d seen her. And with her knowing Eden, they could press the club whore for more information on Imogene. That didn’t sit well with him. He wasn’t the only one.

Cross, Wraith, Cue, and Hyde stopped at the end of the driveway on their bikes. They’d wait until he and Imogene took off before leaving. He looked over at Hyde, who pointed to the clubhouse and mouthed, “I didn’t like that.”

Jekyll wasn’t the only man watching over his woman. It may have seemed extreme but he needed her safe and there was only one way he could guarantee that.

He handed her the helmet. “Gonna take you back to your place. You pack up, you’re gonna stay with me in Killcreek.”

“Really?” Her voice spiked.

He nodded.

“For how long?”

Jekyll wasn’t sure.

“A while.”

Her smile faltered, and she bowed her head, mumbling, “I can’t.”

“Yeah, you can.”

“No, I really can’t.”

“Imogene.” He growled.

This was non-negotiable.

“No, I mean, I want to, but I can’t.” She sighed. “Hank.”

Fuck me.

“Bring him.”

Her brows hiked, and her eyes widened. “You want me to bring Hank to your house?”

Fuck, no. But he didn’t have any other choice. It was either both of them or none of them.

“Yeah.”

Fucking Hank.

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CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

And to think, six months ago Imogene didn't think she'd ever see Jekyll again. *Now, I'm practically living with him.*

Packing up her stuff had been no issue. Hank was a different story. Thankfully, Jekyll was able to put him in the carrier without a problem. Now he was sprawled on the recliner as if he owned it.

She'd settled in just as easy.

Imogene set up her computer in his dining room to do most of her work. There was only one thing left before she called it a day. Imogene clasped her hands, staring at the name on the screen. She hadn't fulfilled Jekyll's request to call Judy and drop Logan as a client. While he had valid points, and she agreed with him on most, it wasn't so simple. In fact, it got complicated. Earlier in the day, she'd gotten a group message from Judy. She was informing everyone that Marge had quit unexpectedly which meant her clients would be divided among the group. It was the worst timing. She couldn't ask for someone else to take Logan when they were down a person. Besides, what did it say about her and her work ethic if she didn't follow through when things got a little hard and uncomfortable?

Imogene intended on taking every precaution. They would get together in a public place, same as last time. Logan requested they meet at the bar he worked at in Lawry. It didn't get much better than that. It was close to her apartment, a busy atmosphere with plenty of people, and he'd be under the scrutiny of his boss watching. This was the best-case scenario.

Imogene quickly typed up her confirmation and hit send.

When she heard his footsteps coming down the hall, she quickly closed the top.

Jekyll walked in the room, glanced down at his phone, and furrowed his brows. "I'll be back in a little bit."

"Is something wrong?"

He shook his head and tucked his phone in his back pocket. "No, just gotta talk to Hyde."

He grabbed her neck and brushed his lips against hers. *I could get used to this.* And maybe she would. They hadn't exactly talked about future plans. But when she envisioned her own, he was there.

She watched Jekyll walk out the door then scanned the living room. The décor screamed minimalist. It was the polar opposite to her pack-rat mentality. Imogene would've kept everything if she'd had the space. She'd hated parting with so many of her things when she'd sold her condo and left town.

She made her way across the room. Besides a couch, recliner, one end table, and the biggest television she'd ever seen, it was pretty much bare. She sat on the edge of the recliner, looked down at the shelf on the end table, and squinted. *Is that?*

Imogene reached to the shelf, pulling out the book. She smiled, flipping through the pages. The binding was well broken in, and some pages were dog-eared. It had obviously been read thoroughly and multiple times. She'd always wondered if he'd actually read it but had no way of knowing. Until now.

It had been a last-minute gift idea. She'd needed to get it approved by her boss, but he'd signed off on it without argument. She slid her finger under the cover and flipped it open. The note she'd written him was still stuck onto the page.

He'd kept it.

Imogene moved to the couch and tucked her legs under her butt, curling into the corner. She could use a reread. Before she had the chance to get settled in, her phone pinged. She pulled it from her pocket and tapped the screen.

Eden: Hi Imogene! This is Eden. How are you?

Imogene responded immediately.

Imogene: Hi Eden!!!! It's so nice hearing from you. I'm doing good. How are you?

Eden: Good. I was wondering if you'd be able to stop by the shelter? We just realized that not all your paperwork had been filled out, and we need you to sign one more thing. Could you come by today?

Shoot!

Imogene: I'm sorry, I'm not in Lawry. I should be back in a few days. Can I come in on Monday?

She watched the bubbles, then they disappeared without a message. *That's odd*. It happened again, and she waited for the message to come through. Then nothing. Was there something wrong with her phone?

Eden: That works. Anytime between eleven and five. I'll be there.

Imogene: See you then.

She had to check in with her weekly meeting, but it would be easy to swing by after.

****

Hyde had been vague in his text but there was a sense of urgency. Jekyll hadn't even realized Hyde was back in Killcreek until he got the message. Aside from runs and meetings, his cousin hadn't spent much time with the MC since his release. Jekyll understood it from the beginning. He wanted to be with his woman.

Jekyll made his way through the yard and back entrance. Being the middle of the day, it was like a ghost town in the clubhouse. There'd been a few runs and pick-ups scheduled. They'd been offered to him, but for the first time since he got out, he'd declined, choosing to stay back. With Imogene.

Nothing surprised him more than walking into the main room and seeing Penny sitting next to Hyde. She rarely made any appearances in Killcreek. And when she did show up, chaos usually followed. He slowed his steps as he got closer to the table, eyeing the couple.

"What's going on?"

Hyde gestured to the chair across from them. Jekyll sat, folded his arms and waited. He'd hung out with them before, but it was usually in a larger setting with the whole club.

"As if you didn't already love and adore me, I'm about to make it impossible for you to deny it."

Love and adore was a stretch. Though he did respect Penny. She'd stuck by Hyde's side, and his own, during their two-year lock up.

"Well, let me start off by saying" —Penny gave him a cheeky smile and rested her arms on the table— "You're welcome."

Jekyll furrowed his brows and shifted his gaze to Hyde, who remained silent. But he noticed a small smile playing on his lips.

Jekyll raised his brows. "What exactly am I thanking you for?"

"Axel."

He was completely lost.

“Gonna need more than that, Pen.”

She sighed. “Axel is in the same prison that Imogene’s dad was in. Which means he’s gonna have the intel on who took out her father.”

Jekyll stilled and hardened his glare, aiming it at his cousin. “For fuck’s sake, you tell her everything?”

“If I think she can help? Yeah.” Hyde shrugged. “And in this case, I’m right.”

Jekyll snorted, shaking his head. “Alright, then someone clue me the fuck in. What about Axel?”

Hyde gestured to Penny.

“He’s going to call you tomorrow night at ten. Make sure you’re available.”

What the fuck?

“How’d you make that happen?”

“You mean besides being brilliant?” She flattened her hands on the table, stretching out her arms. “It’s been a while since I’ve seen the inside of a prison, and doing charity work is good for the soul, so I paid a visit to Reiser.”

He was familiar with the prison though he never served time there.

“You went to see Axel?” Jekyll asked.

“I did.” She lifted her hand, pointing to him. “And he had the same expression as you when he walked up to the visiting area.” Penny laughed. “I love a good surprise.”

“Penny.” He growled.

She waved her hand. “Too serious, Jek. Anyway, we caught up, and well, he’s going to call you.”

“What did you say?”

“Nothing that could be interpreted as anything but a catch up sesh with an old friend.”

“You sure about that?”

Her whole demeanor shifted, and the corners of her eyes crinkled. “Don’t fucking insult me, Jek, when I just did you a huge favor. I’ve been doing this for a long time. I’m fluent in vague and evasive when it comes to prison visits.” She leaned closer, glaring. “Or did you forget?”

Penny visited Hyde on the regular while they’d been locked up. Being states away, it wasn’t every weekend, but it was a lot. In that time, she’d also made a point of visiting him. His only visitor in his two years. He’d

never requested it and even told her not to bother, but every couple months, she'd show up for him.

"I didn't forget."

Her gaze softened. "Tomorrow night at ten. He mentioned clean lines, which I took as access to a burner phone."

Perfect.

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CHAPTER NINETEEN

This is fun!

It was a lowkey night at the clubhouse, and she enjoyed it more than the actual party. Imogene mostly just listened to the banter between the members. Until she was asked about herself. It came as no surprise Gent took an interest. Of all the members, he'd been the friendliest to her. *Maybe too friendly?*

"I started out as the librarian in the prison. That's where I met Jekyll. And Hyde too."

"Give them book recommendations?" Gent asked.

"Sometimes. I watched the books they returned and got a feel for the genres they were most interested in. Then I made them available."

"Teacher too, right?" Cross asked.

"Yes. I had a history class, and English, and I did the GED program. Jekyll and Hyde were in my class."

"Oh fuck." Oak burst out laughing and pointed the end of his bottle at Imogene. "Please tell me you got a picture of these two assholes in a cap and gown. I'll pay you for it. Name your price."

Imogene chuckled. "Unfortunately, no. Neither Jekyll nor Hyde were willing to participate in the graduation ceremony."

"Dammit." Oak shook his head, residual humor playing on his features.

"But they were top of the class. The highest scores." She glanced over at him, smiling. "One and two."

Jekyll grabbed his beer, finishing it off. He hadn't said much while they'd hung out. When he stood, she followed suit.

"Calling it a night?" Ghost asked.

Jekyll lifted his chin to her. "Gonna take her to the house."

"I have to be up early. But it was nice hanging out with you all."

They walked out to the yard and toward his house. He was still quiet, and she wondered if maybe she'd said too much in front of the other members.

"Did I embarrass you back there?"

He furrowed his brows. “With what?”

She shrugged. “All the talk about the GED. I was bragging a bit.”

“Not embarrassed, just not used to it.”

“I’m just proud of you, that’s all.” She said.

“Not used to that either,” he said and walked up the porch steps, opening the door.

“Surely, your mom and dad bragged about your accomplishments when you were a kid.”

His hand stilled on the doorknob, and he glanced back. His brows dipped low.

“Right?”

Jekyll scoffed. “Got no fucking clue who my dad is ’cause even she didn’t know. And as for her, she was a shit mom. Only cared about herself. Cruel, heartless bitch.”

Oh. Imogene clasped her hands, shifting on her feet. They hadn’t spoken much about his past. Now she knew why he hadn’t offered anything up about his childhood.

“I’m sorry.”

Jekyll shrugged, widened the door, and lifted his chin.

“That ain’t on you.”

But it kind of was. She wasn’t the reason he’d had a poor upbringing, but being his partner gave her some responsibility of caring for the aftermath.

“Sorry I brought it up.”

His gaze softened. “Making this a bigger deal than it is.”

I don’t think I am.

Imogene grabbed his hand, threaded her fingers through his, and gave a tight squeeze. Jekyll looked down at their hands and furrowed his brows.

“Well, I’m really proud of you.”

They stood in silence for a few seconds, then he glanced up, and the corner of his mouth curled.

“Probably wouldn’t be proud of half the shit I do.”

She shrugged. “Nobody’s perfect.”

Jekyll smiled, gesturing toward the door. “I gotta talk to Ghost about something. I’ll be back in a little bit.”

“Okay.”

****

Talking to Ghost was a complete ruse, but he didn't want to take the call with her in earshot. He rounded the clubhouse to the front yard.

His phone vibrated in his chest pocket.

Right on time.

"Yeah?"

Looking for another novel?

Search **Lokepub** on Google and start browsing.

"Jekyll, it's been a while," Axel said.

Yes, it has. He hadn't been particularly close to the original president and vice-president of Satan's Hex. But they'd worked together on a few deals and Jekyll respected them. Unlike the new leadership, Axel and Slater had been loyal to the Killcreek Drifters.

"How's it going?" He asked.

"Pretty fucking good. Looks like we're gonna beat these charges. But that's not why you called me, Jek. So, what do you need?"

"About four months ago, Rich Peppercorn was shanked."

Axel snorted. "Yeah, it was a wild fucking night here."

"Anyone claim it?"

There was a long stretch of silence.

"Who's asking?"

"Me. It's personal."

"What's it worth to you, Jek?"

"A lot, so what do you fucking want?"

"I want to talk to Ace."

This was going to be a big favor.

"I'll make that happen. Give me ten and then call him."

"Alright." The call ended, and he shoved his phone in his pocket. He walked back into the clubhouse. Some of the members had moved from the table to the bar. He walked over to Ace.

"Cross tell you about my *request*?"

Ace gave a curt nod.

“Axel is gonna call you.”

Ace’s hand stilled at his mouth, holding a cigarette. He eyed Jekyll and arched his brow.

“He’s looking for a trade.”

“For what?”

“The guy who took out Imogene’s dad on the inside.”

At that exact moment, Ace’s phone rang. He stood and stalked to the back wing, gesturing for Cross to follow him.

Jekyll grabbed a beer from the bar and took a seat at the table with the others. No one seemed to have noticed Ace’s abrupt departure. Except Cypher.

Fifteen minutes later, Cross called all the brothers into a meeting. Once everyone filed in, Ace sat down.

“Just got off the phone with Axel. Looks like him and Slater will be getting out next month.”

“What does that have to do with us?” Oak asked.

Ace looked over at Jekyll. “They want us to align with them.”

Jekyll had known the information would cost him, but not this big.

Wraith narrowed his gaze. “The Satan’s and us? That’s a hard fucking no from me.”

Ghost lifted his hand. “I’m not even entertaining that shit.”

“They don’t want to align clubs. They want our help destroying their own.”

Gent snorted. “Are you fucking kidding me?”

Ace shook his head. “No, and considering what we got going on with Satan’s, this will work in our favor if we help them. Griggs and Spinner may be running things now, but Axel and Slater know all their connections.”

“What do we get out of it besides some intel?” Cypher asked.

Ace shifted his gaze to Jekyll. “He gave me the name of the guy who killed Imogene’s dad on the inside.”

What the…

“He just gave it to you without having a deal in place?”

Ace slowly nodded.

Oak scoffed. “Then what’s the point of taking a deal with them if we already know who it is?”

Ace narrowed his eyes. "'Cause if we do, Axel will tell us who *ordered* the hit. And it came from the outside."

Someone ordered it? Jekyll had not expected that.

"Let's take a vote." Ace raised his hand, and everyone else followed.

A united front.

"We done?" Gent asked.

"Yeah. Need everyone in Lawry tomorrow night. Inez wants us at her place to finalize the meeting with Oz."

This couldn't have worked out better.

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CHAPTER TWENTY

How could I be so stupid?

In fairness, it was her job. She'd taken precautions. They were meeting in a public place. However, that ended about twenty minutes ago when all the patrons left, along with the owner since Logan was closing. Then they were alone. He'd locked the door after the owner walked out and tucked the key in his pocket. It was a red flag, and she didn't ignore it. She'd insisted on heading home. And he'd *insisted* she stay.

Thankfully, he hadn't put up much of an argument when she asked to use the bathroom. It's where she'd been hiding for the last few minutes trying to come up with an escape plan. Her first thought was to call Jekyll. She had no idea where he was, but she'd hoped not too far away. Of course, all her calls went to voicemail, and texts were left unread.

She circled the small room, scanning every inch. For all its craziness, she did try the window, but it had solid bars on it. There had to be a back exit, but she had no idea where it was located or if it was unlocked.

Imogene slumped against the wall and tried Jekyll again. Straight to voicemail. She scrolled through her contacts, pulling up her cousin. *Again with the damn voicemail.* She left the same instructions she had for Jekyll. She told them she was meeting a client and something was off, giving the address. Imogene had even tried calling Judy with the same result. *Doesn't anyone answer their phone anymore?* She tapped her screen and true panic started to set in. She was out of options. Imogene didn't have many people she could call. She glanced down at her contact list and her eyes widened. She completely forgot she had his number.

"It's worth a shot."

The phone rang three times, and she bowed her head. It was going to go straight to voicemail. She knew it.

"Hey, darlin'. Wasn't expecting this."

She gasped. "Gent! Gent! Oh, thank God."

"You give your man this same reception when he answers? Or am I special?"

What was he talking about?

"I need you."

He whistled. "Now *that* darlin', is gonna get us both in trouble with Jek."

How could he joke at a time like this?

"Gent, please, I'm in a very precarious position."

His soft chuckle echoed over the line. "Darlin', I think it's sexy as fuck that you think I know what that word means."

Gah, this goddamn man!

"I'm currently locked in the bathroom at a bar on Centre Street. It's called The Oakwood. It's got lots of neon bar signs and the front windows are blacked out. Can you come get me?"

There was a long stretch of silence.

"Gent!"

"Yeah, I'm here. Gonna put you on speaker, okay? Tell me everything you just said."

She swallowed the knot in her throat. "So, I was meeting my client 'cause he works here, and he said it would be easiest for him. And it's a public place, so I thought it was safe, but then everyone left, and he locked the door. I told him I had to go, but he's insisting I stay for a drink. Right now, I'm in the bathroom." Her voice was shaking, and she was on the verge of tears. "Can you please come get me?"

"What the fuck, Imogene!" Jekyll's voice was so loud she had to pull the phone away from her ear. The anger streaming through his tone was enough to send a shiver down her spine. "I told you no more meetings with him."

And I should've listened. But that was neither here nor there. Hindsight was 20/20. If she had a choice, she'd be drinking a cup of coffee in her apartment while Hank sent her a death stare. *God, that sounds perfect right now.* Imogene was finally at her breaking point.

"Imogene," Jekyll snapped.

Tears streamed down her face, and her voice shook. "Can you just come get me and then yell at me later?" She sniffled. "Please."

"Fuck, where?"

Jekyll's voice faded, and she heard Gent say, "The Oakwood."

Even over the line she could hear heavy boots, and not just Jekyll's. It sounded like an army.

“Jek’s on his way. Usually takes about ten minutes from here, but you can expect them in three. You just stay on the line with me, darlin’.”

“Okay.” She wiped her cheeks. “He’s pretty mad, huh?”

Gent laughed. “Oh, he ain’t the only one.”

“What do you mean?”

Gent snorted. “You’ll see when you get here, darlin’.”

Uh-oh!

****

A plan was probably in order, but he wasn’t wasting time coming up with one. He grabbed a garbage can from the back entrance and tossed it through the window of the back door. Jekyll knocked away the broken glass and slid his hand to unlock it. He swung open the door and charged down the hallway and to the main bar. The guy was at the farthest end of the bar, and he scanned the room.

“Where the fuck is she?”

Logan widened his eyes. “Who?”

You motherfucker!

Jekyll stormed forward, reached across the bar, wrapping his hands around Logan’s throat. “I’m gonna fucking kill you.” Jekyll dragged him over the bar, slamming him down to the ground. “Where the fuck is she?”

For everything he endured throughout his life, Jekyll had never felt rage like this.

“Everybody hands up!”

Jekyll froze and slowly angled his head. He was looking down the barrel of a gun aimed directly at him.

“I’m not gonna tell you twice. I’m just gonna start shooting.”

A cop in plain clothes.

Jekyll straightened, releasing Logan. He circled the table while the rest of the brothers slowly moved closer.

The cop kept his gun on them and waved them toward the wall. “Don’t do anything fucking stupid.” He looked around the room and shouted, “Imogene?”

Jekyll furrowed his brows and shared a look with Ace.

She emerged from the back corner of the room. Her arms were wrapped around her stomach and her cheeks damp. But she didn’t look hurt. Her red-rimmed eyes landed on him, and he saw the relief flash over her features.

“You okay?” The officer asked.

She nodded, looking up. “Yeah, Erik. I just got really scared.” She went to walk past him, but he stepped in her path.

There was a familiarity between them. It clicked instantly. Erik Murdoch, the police detective. Her cousin. She must’ve called him.

“Need you to stay close to me. I got back up coming.”

“Back up?” Imogene seemed confused.

“In case you haven’t noticed, we’re outnumbered.”

She leaned past him and pointed to Jekyll and the club. “I called them to come get me.”

“What?”

“Yeah. At first, I called Jekyll a bunch of times but I couldn’t get through, so I called you and left a voicemail. Then I tried Gent, and he picked up.”

His brother’s name was so casually spoken, and the cop took notice. He shifted his eyes to him and the brothers. “You know them?”

Say it, Imogene.

She nodded. It wasn’t good enough.

“How do you know them?” Erik asked, suspicion lacing his tone.

Imogene bit her bottom lip staring at Jekyll.

Say it.

She pointed across the room. “Jekyll is my boyfriend.”

Good girl.

The next few minutes were a bit chaotic. As promised, more officers showed up. Even knowing they weren’t involved in any type of crime, the club was still questioned. None of them had much to say. They were well-trained when it came to dealing with the authorities.

Imogene had been questioned, then she made her way to him and stuck by his side, curled against his chest. After a few minutes Erik approached them.

“You’re all free to go. You can probably expect a bill for the door, but the owner has declined to press charges.” Erik smirked. “But you probably already know that.”

Yeah, we fucking do.

Most local businesses knew who ran Lawry. Killcreek may not live here, but everyone knew who they were and more importantly, who they were connected to.

“Imogene?” Murdoch glanced down. “Do you want to press charges?”

“I um” —She glanced up at Jekyll, who steeled his features— “I don’t know.”

“If you do, he’ll be sent back to prison. And after everything that happened tonight, I think you should.”

As Murdoch said, pressing charges would have Logan locked up. *That’s not where I want him.*

It would be harder to get to him. But that wasn’t exactly something he’d share with her in the presence of police.

“You don’t have to decide now,” Jekyll said, and Murdoch narrowed his gaze.

“If it’s okay, I want to think about it.”

“Well” —Murdoch snorted and shook his head— “then there’s nothing left. You all can go.”

Jekyll hooked his arm around Imogene’s shoulder and looked over at Logan as they passed. *I’m coming for you.*

“Imogene?”

She stopped and looked back.

“We’re due for lunch, yeah? Call me tomorrow.”

She smiled. “Okay.”

Jekyll drew in a breath. He knew exactly what that lunch would entail. But he’d deal with it later. For now, he just wanted to get her out of here.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Imogene drove her car back to the apartment, but it felt very much like a motorcade with all the motorcycles following her. When she pulled into the lot, all the bikes lined up beside her. By the time she opened the door, Jekyll was waiting for her. He didn't say a word as they walked into the building and went up the elevator.

This was bad, and the blame rested solely on her. Jekyll had warned her about this exact scenario that had become her reality. She expected his anger, but his silence was making her anxious.

She wasn't exactly sure why all the members were coming upstairs. Of course, she didn't have to wait long to find out. Half-way down the hallway, a door flew open, and Inez was standing with her hands on her hips. Her hand shot out, pointing to her apartment.

"Get your ass inside right now."

Uh oh, is she talking to me?

Cue snorted and passed them when Imogene slowed her steps. He glanced back, smiling. "We were here when Gent got the call. She heard everything on speakerphone."

"She looks really mad," she mumbled, and Jekyll's hand tightened over her back.

"She's fucking pissed, and so am I."

She glanced up. "I'm sorry. I know…"

His gaze darkened, and he shook his head.

She immediately clamped her lips.

"We ain't doing this right now." He lifted his chin toward Inez's apartment. "First, you gotta deal with her."

I don't know what's worse.

She walked down the small hall and noticed Gent and a few other members. She expected them to be there. What she didn't expect was the familiar welcoming face seated in the corner of the room. What was he doing here?

"Well, this is a surprise." The older man smiled. "Hello, Imogene."

She lifted her hand in a short wave. “Hi, Sal.”

“What the fuck?” She couldn’t be sure who’d said it, but there was no missing the shock in his tone.

Imogene looked over at Jekyll, who darted his gaze between her and Sal. When she peered around the room all the members shared the same puzzled stare. Inez was more vocal.

“How the hell does she know everybody?” she shouted.

Sal laughed, pushing up from the chair. “We met at Elle’s shop. Imogene was browsing, and we struck up a conversation about the perfect green hat.”

Imogene smiled. “Sal’s leaving out the part where he bought the hat for me.”

Sal winked.

Gent burst out laughing. “What the fuck is happening right now?”

Imogene was just happy there was at least one person in the room who wasn’t upset with her.

Thanks, Sal.

****

Jekyll couldn’t wrap his head around Imogene knowing Sal. It momentarily broke the tension in the room. But not for long.

Inez scowled, pointing in his direction but addressing Imogene. “Jekyll told you not to meet with him again.”

Yes, I did.

Imogene obediently nodded. “He did *suggest* that.”

Jekyll balled his fists, sending her a sharp glare. “That wasn’t a fucking suggestion, and you know it.”

He’d explicitly told her under no circumstance was she to meet up with Logan.

“Well, since you can’t follow simple instructions, then you can’t work there,” Inez said.

“What?” Imogene whipped her head, looking back at him. If she thought he’d be on her side, she was about to be disappointed. He agreed 100 percent with Inez’s decision.

Jekyll folded his arms, and she pouted slightly.

“I’m not quitting.”

Inez snorted, taking a long drag from her cigarette. “Then you’ll be fired.”

Imogene straightened her shoulders. “You don’t have any say in my employment.”

Inez smirked. “Aw babygirl, you don’t fucking get it, do you?”

No, she didn’t.

“I have other clients, good people, that are depending on me. I can’t just abandon them.” She sucked in a breath.

“Valid point.”

She glanced over at Ghost, smiling. “Thank you.”

Asshole.

“If I may,” Sal said.

“Jesus Christ, old man,” Inez snapped and glared at him. “This has got nothing to do with you.”

“I disagree. Imogene is a *friend of mine*.”

Inez scoffed. “Is that so?”

“And as her friend, I’d like to speak on her behalf.” Sal smiled. “Come on, Inez, the girl has bills to pay, and she has to eat. Let her keep the job, but work it out with her boss that she needs safer clients. Everyone wins.” Sal looked over at Jekyll. “And I do think *removal* of the client from tonight is necessary.”

Jekyll knew exactly what Sal was inferring without saying the actual words.

Oh, don’t you worry, Sal, he’s gonna be permanently removed. From this fucking earth.

Inez continued to berate her for another ten minutes, but once again Sal interjected, and he suggested Imogene go back to her apartment after her traumatic night.

They still had to finish up the meeting, but Jekyll walked her over to her place. There wasn’t any time for him to share his feelings about what had gone down. *I’m gonna save that for later.*

“You’re coming back to Killcreek.”

“I have to work.”

“Imogene.” He growled, and she rested her hand on his chest.

“I have a shift at the library tomorrow. I can’t call out.” She lifted her chin. “I won’t. It’s the job I love, and I’m not messing it up, Jekyll. But I get off at four. I can drive up after work.”

Imogene would be sitting in traffic for hours at that time.

“Come up the day after.”

She smiled, but Jekyll was still holding onto his residual anger.
Her days in Lawry were coming to a close.
Officially!

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CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Imogene had her one-on-one meeting with Judy, who didn't seem nearly as surprised or shocked when Imogene broke everything down. Judy was extremely sympathetic and assured Imogene she would handpick all her clients and vet them going forward. When Imogene argued that she shouldn't get special treatment, Judy said it wasn't up for discussion.

After her shift at the library, she headed straight to the animal shelter. It had been a long day, and she was eager to get back to her apartment, have dinner, and go straight to bed.

She walked in and headed to the woman sitting behind the desk. Imogene couldn't recall her name, but she'd been the one to go over all the information for Hank's adoption. She smiled, scanned her face, then frowned.

"You want to surrender him, don't you?" The woman tossed her pen on the desk and shook her head. "I knew this was going to happen."

What? Surrender who? Hank? As much as he would probably love to be rid of her forever, Imogene was holding out hope he'd eventually warm up to her. But even if he didn't and she remained his archnemesis until his last breath, she wasn't giving him up.

"Eden asked me to come down."

The woman squinted. "To surrender Hank?"

"No."

"Really?"

Eden came rushing out from the back. "I got this, Joanie. Hi, Imogene."

"Hi, Eden." She waved.

"You can come in the back."

Imogene followed her down a long hall, passing the office where she'd originally filled out the paperwork for Hank. Eden opened the back door, holding it open for her as they entered the yard. *This is where the paperwork is?*

When the door closed, she turned. Eden's face was pale, and she was biting on her bottom lip. She was clearly nervous.

“Are you okay?”

“I lied to you. There is no paperwork for you to sign.” Eden grasped her hips. “I needed a reason to get you down here.”

“Oh,” she muttered. “Is something wrong?”

Eden panned the yard. Imogene did the same. They were completely alone.

Eden’s eyes welled, and she sucked in a breath. “I need a favor.”

“Sure.” Imogene inched closer, but Eden immediately stepped back.

“Can you ask him to stop?” Eden’s voice trembled on her plea.

“Ask who?”

And stop what?

“Cue.” Eden gulped, and her voice shook. “He’s making it worse.”

Making what worse?

“I appreciate it, but it’s not helping. Nothing will, so please will you help me?” Eden’s desperate tone was sending Imogene’s own fear to the next level.

She was well aware she was missing key elements to this story.

“I don’t understand.”

Eden sniffled, wiping the corner of her eyes. “He will. Just please ask him to stop.”

“Did Cue do something to you? Did he hurt you?”

Imogene was beyond shocked and confused. Of all the members of the club, Cue had been one of the most welcoming to her.

Eden vehemently shook her head. “No. If anything, I think he was trying to help.” She snorted, and a tear slipped down her cheek. “I don’t even know why he would, but it’s just making things worse for me.”

“At the motorcycle club?”

Eden gave a small nod.

“You can leave.”

She shook her head, “I can’t. I live there. My whole life is with them. I just,” —she paused, taking a breath— “I can’t leave.”

A dozen programs ran through her mind. She had pamphlets on all of them. Eden hadn’t admitted she was a victim of domestic violence, but there were too many signs to ignore.

“Can you go to a shelter? Or maybe you can stay with a friend? Do you have family close by?”

Eden’s shoulders sagged and she let out a heavy breath. “I don’t have anyone, so please just talk to Cue.”

Even if she did what Eden asked, she was still in a dangerous living space. A thought popped in her head. It was perfect.

Imogene drew in a breath. “If you need a place to stay, my apartment is vacant.”

Eden shook her head, but Imogene continued on. “It’s only fifteen minutes from here. I’ll talk to the landlord. You just have to pass the background check, and…”

“I won’t pass a background check,” Eden blurted, and wiped a tear from her cheek. She reached out, grabbing Imogene’s hand. “I appreciate the offer and everything you’re trying to do for me. I hate involving you in this. You’ve been nothing but sweet to me. More than I deserve.”

This was absolutely heartbreaking.

Imogene squeezed her hand. “You deserve people to be nice to you, Eden.”

She bowed her head, whispering, “Yeah.”

It didn’t sound believable. Probably because it wasn’t.

“Can you just ask him to stop? For me.”

If it was the only thing Imogene could do for Eden, then she’d do it.

“I will.”

****

Jekyll wasn’t expecting Imogene until tomorrow. Her shift at the library ended at four, which would put her in traffic if she tried heading to Killcreek afterwards. He’d specifically told her to come the following day for that reason.

Therefore, no one was more surprised when she came rushing through the front door of the clubhouse a little after nine. Most Mondays were quiet, and it was rare that anybody other than club members were hanging out.

Jekyll rounded the bar, meeting her halfway through the room.

“What are you doing here?”

She sucked in a breath, looking around the room.

“I’m sorry. I know you told me not to come.”

“Told you not to come ’cause I didn’t want your ass sitting in traffic for hours.”

She smiled, though it seemed forced. “Well, I can leave. I just need to talk to Cue first.”

Cue? He furrowed his brows, shifting his gaze to his brother at the table with Oak, Ghost, and Cross. Cue seemed just as surprised at the admission and pointed to his chest.

"Me?"

She vigorously nodded and headed toward Cue. What the fuck was going on? She stopped at the end of the table, grasping the back of the chair in two tight fists.

"I don't know how to say this because I don't really know the whole story."

Cue jerked his gaze to Jekyll. He was at a complete loss too.

"What's going on, Imogene?" Jekyll asked, and she glanced over. The lines between her brows deepened, and she bit her bottom lip then veered her gaze to Cue.

"Whatever you're doing with Eden? You have to stop."

What the hell was she talking about? He looked over at Cue, who was clearly as confused as the rest of them. Though Jekyll caught the underlying tension. Almost territorial.

"What exactly am I *doing* with Eden?" Cue scowled.

He had a similar reaction when anyone brought up her name.

Imogene shrugged. "That's the thing. I don't know. She was really vague when we spoke."

Cue straightened in his chair. "Hold up, you talked to her? When?"

"After my shift at the library. She called a few days ago asking me to come down to the shelter because I forgot to sign an adoption paper for Hank. But when I got there today, she admitted that was just a ruse to get me down there."

None of this made sense.

Jekyll moved closer to Imogene, resting his hand on her back. "From the beginning. What did she say?"

She swallowed and turned to him. "She asked me if I could tell Cue to stop what he was doing, and that while she appreciated him trying to help, it was only making it worse."

"Ah, fuck," Cross muttered, dragging his hand over his mouth and sharing a look with Cue.

They were obviously privy to more information than he was.

"I thought she wasn't staying at Satan's anymore," Cross said.

“Me too.” Cue growled, shifting his glare to Imogene. “What else did she say?”

“That was basically it.”

Cue shot up from the table, knocking the chair half way across the room. Cross was quick to follow.

“Cue!” Cross shouted, but the brother ignored him, heading toward the wall where they hung their helmets. It was easy to see where Cue’s head was at. And where he was going.

“You three go with his ass and make sure he doesn’t do anything fucking stupid.” Cross ordered.

A ride wasn’t part of his plans for the night, especially with Imogene’s impromptu visit. But he wasn’t going to let Cue ride alone and do something dangerous.

Oak grabbed his bottle of beer, downed it in one shot, and wiped his mouth. “I guess we’re heading to Satan’s?”

Jekyll gave a curt nod and pulled her against his chest. “The house is unlocked. Settle in. Or come hang at the clubhouse. Whatever you wanna do.”

Her eyes widened. “I can go back to Lawry and come back tomorrow like we originally planned.”

The corner of his mouth curled. “No. You stay here.” He kissed her and circled around the table, heading toward the back entrance to his house. He lengthened his steps when he heard the engines start. He’d have to catch up to them, because he knew Cue wasn’t waiting for anyone.

This is gonna be a long fucking night.

*

“Get Eden.”

This wasn’t how Jekyll would’ve handled it. Unfortunately, there was no reasoning with Cue once they arrived at the Satan’s clubhouse. He was fueled by pure anger and aggression. The club members had been hanging in the yard when they’d entered it. Instead of asking where she was, Cue spouted off demands. That only triggered all their members to take a united front. *Now, we’re in a standoff.*

Griggs took a drag of his cigarette. “Brother, she ain’t here.”

Cue pointed at the president. “Bullshit! Get her.”

Griggs smirked. “I offered her up plenty of times, and you turned it down. Now, you want her?”

“Yeah, so fucking get her.”

Oak stepped in front of Cue, tapping his chest. “Settle the fuck down.”

Griggs smirked, glancing over at one of the women. “She here?”

“No,” they all said in unison.

They were lying.

Cue clenched his jaw and jerked his head across the yard. There was a small scruffy dog sniffing the grass. It was the same one Eden had been holding the last time they were there with Imogene. Cue’s lips spread into a sinister smile. He stalked through the yard, and picked up the dog.

“Then I’m taking her fucking dog,” he shouted. “And you let her know I’m not a dog person, so there’s no telling how long it’ll be before I snap his fucking neck!” His voice was so loud, it could be heard down the street.

It was done with purpose.

Jekyll maintained his composure. He knew exactly what Cue was doing. It was a smoke bomb forcing her out. And it did just that. The back door swung open with so much force it slammed against the wall. Eden darted past Griggs and the others, making a beeline for Cue. She stopped a foot away, out of breath and reaching for her dog.

“Please, don’t hurt him.” There was pure panic in her tone.

“You want him?” Cue asked.

And she reached her arms farther, inches from the dog, but Cue tightened his hold. He lifted his chin toward the clubhouse. “Then go pack your shit.”

Jesus fucking Christ!

“Cue,” Ghost warned, but the brother ignored him, keeping his eyes locked on Eden.

Jekyll couldn’t predict the future, but this wasn’t going to end well. Taking in the tension rising through the yard, it was clear the Satan’s weren’t happy with Cue making demands and essentially taking a woman they considered their own.

Eden’s eyes darted around the group, clearly just as confused as everyone else.

“What?”

“You want him?” Cue lifted the dog a few inches. “Then go get your shit and meet me at my bike.”

She looked like a deer caught in headlights. From everything he’d heard, Cue had vocally turned down every and all advances this woman

made. And now he was declaring an order to leave with him? He couldn't blame Eden for not understanding the situation. *Hell, I don't even fucking know what's going on.* But one thing was obvious, they were at a stalemate.

Cue wasn't going to back down, and Eden was going to stand silent in confusion.

"Fuck, I don't have time for this," Jekyll muttered and rounded Cue's back, stopping next to Eden. Her eyes widened, but she still said nothing. Her heart was pounding so hard, her chest was rising and falling at a rapid rate. Usually, it wouldn't bother him. Feeling anything for a woman he didn't know had never been an issue for him. But he felt pity for Eden. She was stuck in a bad situation to begin with, and it was only getting worse.

Jekyll held up two fingers. "Two choices. Stay here, and we take the dog." *I can't believe I just fucking said that.* "Or you go with Cue, and you get your dog."

Eden bit her lip, glancing over at Cue.

"What's it gonna be? 'Cause you got ten seconds before we leave, with or without you," Jekyll said.

Her throat bobbed, and she leaned closer, lowering her voice. "I just want my dog."

Jekyll clenched his jaw and scowled at Cue, who didn't seem the least bit fazed.

"Then I guess you made your decision," Cue said without an ounce of emotion.

She slowly nodded and ducked her head, turning toward the back door. When Cue stepped forward to follow her, Jekyll rested his hand on his chest. Cue's order had already raised tensions. They needed to diffuse the situation, not escalate it.

"I'll go. You stay the fuck out here."

Jekyll walked toward the back door following Eden. Just as he reached it, Spinner stepped in front of his path.

"She doesn't need help."

The corner of his mouth curled. "No? That your way of telling me I'm not welcome in your house?" He shifted his gaze to Griggs, who was openly glaring at him. "That's what you're saying? 'Cause if that's the case, then maybe you're not welcome to our deal."

The vein in Griggs forehead thickened, and his temple pulsed.

"If she wants your help, she can ask." Spinner folded his arms.

Eden cleared her throat. “I could use the help.”

Jekyll smirked, and Spinner stepped aside. He walked behind her into the house. She turned into the second room on the left. Jekyll stood in the doorway but never turned his back to the hallway. There was a queen-size bed in the center of the room, an array of empty bottles scattered throughout, and some condoms on the nightstand.

“Whose room is this?” he asked.

Eden grabbed a duffle bag from the closet floor and shrugged. “Nobody’s and everybody’s.” She leaned into the closet again and stuffed a plastic bag of dog food, a bowl, and leash into the bag. She zipped it up, stood, and hooked it over her shoulder. The light caught the angle of her face, and Jekyll balled his fist. She’d tried to mask it, but he could see the outline of a handprint on her cheek.

She clasped her hands in front of her, stared, but didn’t say anything else. He glanced around the room.

“Where’s the rest of your stuff?”

She swung her bag forward. “This is it.”

He raised his brows.

She licked her lips, tucking her hands in her back pockets and looking down at the floor. “I travel light.”

Jekyll stepped out into the hallway, and started toward the back door. He didn’t bother checking to see if she was following. He heard her heels click against the wood floor. He pushed open the door. It was the same scene he’d left five minutes ago. When Cue’s gaze scanned over his shoulder, he nodded and walked to his bike.

Jekyll was just past Griggs when he said, “We’ll be in touch.”

He got no response. Jekyll didn’t expect one. This had Griggs seething, but he was smart enough to not risk their deal over a woman.

By the time Jekyll reached his bike, Eden was inches from his back. He pointed to Cue’s bike.

“You’re with him.”

Jekyll had done his part. Eden was now Cue’s sole responsibility.

“Uh…” Her voice shook.

He grabbed his helmet from the handlebars. “You ain’t riding on the back of my bike.” That seat was reserved for only one woman.

“Let’s go,” Cue snapped, offering her the dog. She rushed toward him. She snatched it from his hands so quickly, as though she didn’t trust Cue to

pull away. He didn't.

Cue took her bag, packed it in his saddlebag, and offered her a helmet. Jekyll was impressed how she put it on without ever releasing the dog. Cue straddled his bike and lifted his chin, gesturing for her to get on the back of his bike, but Eden didn't move.

Jesus fucking Christ!

"Get on the bike," Jekyll ordered, and her eyes welled.

Fuck me! Jekyll grasped his hips and squared his jaw.

Ghost walked up next to him. "What's the problem?"

"No problem." Cue growled and turned to Eden. "Get on my bike."

Eden shook her head, and spun around. "You don't have a car?"

What the fuck? Jekyll was losing his patience. Thankfully, Ghost stepped in between them.

"We can get her a car service," Ghost said.

"No," Cue said.

"Well, how far is the ride to where we're dropping her off?"

Cue stared across the lot. "Not dropping her off."

Ghost shared a look with Jekyll. He wasn't following his brother's intentions either.

"Then where are you taking her?" Jekyll asked.

"Killcreek."

What the fuck? He heard Eden gasp. This was becoming a problem.

"She can't hold the dog for hours on the back of your bike, Cue," Ghost said.

Cue hadn't put much thought into this plan, obviously.

Oak sighed, and his jaw squared. "Might wanna make a call to Ace."

"No."

Cue had made his decision.

"Alright, hold on. I might have something," Ghost said and walked to his bike, bending down to his saddlebags. Jekyll took the time to glare at Cue. This plan was a clusterfuck and would have consequences. Ace, Cross, and the rest of the members weren't going to back his half-cocked and completely reckless decision.

Ghost walked back over with an empty backpack. He shook it out and unfolded the straps.

"You can wear it across your chest. That way if he gets scared and tries to escape, you can at least keep him from jumping out."

It wasn’t the best plan, but they didn’t have many options. Ghost held the opening wide, and she slipped the dog inside, then put her arms through her straps.

“That work?” Ghost asked.

She nodded, though it wasn’t convincing. He couldn’t fault her. It wasn’t the safest way to transport the dog for a few hours on the bike. But it was the only option they had. Jekyll mounted his motorcycle and started up the engine.

They were just waiting on Eden. She slowly walked next to Cue. When he grabbed her arm, she flinched and froze.

“Turn around.” His voice was much softer than before.

Eden’s tension was visible but she followed his order. Cue adjusted the straps of the backpack, tightening them.

“Now get on.”

Eden straddled the bike and cradled the backpack against her chest. Cue turned slightly.

“You gotta hold on.”

“I want to make sure he doesn’t try to jump out.”

“Yeah, well that’s not gonna matter if you fall off the bike. Give me at least one hand. Not going anywhere until you do.”

Eden reached her arm around his stomach. Jekyll noticed Cue stiffen, but he started his engine and seconds later, they were rolling out of the Satan’s driveway. They’d have a few hours reprieve before arriving home to face the next battle round with the club.

What a fucking shitshow!

*

“What the fuck were you thinking?”

This was exactly the response Jekyll had expected from his vice-president.

“Fuck, Cue,” Ace snapped, narrowing his gaze. “I rely on you to be one of the level-headed brothers out of this bunch of assholes. This is Oak and Gent shit, not you!”

“Why the fuck am I being brought up. I wasn’t even there.” Gent laughed but Ace ignored him.

Even Jekyll could admit this was completely out of character for Cue. He was one of the more reserved brothers. He didn’t make moves without being given an order. He didn’t take risky chances.

Ace paced around the room. Jekyll stood near the wall with Ghost and Oak just watching. They'd get their own reprimand for allowing it to happen, but not until Ace was done with Cue. By the intense irritation rolling off him in waves, it was going to be a while.

Ace stalked toward Cue, stopping a foot away. His face was red and the vein in his forehead was visible. Jekyll had seen his president angry before but not to this level.

"With everything we got going on with Satan's, this is the shit you pull?"

It definitely complicated things. Jekyll doubted it would directly affect the deal with Satan's. Griggs was too greedy to pass it up, and he'd have to answer to the person backing it. It was less than likely they'd back out. However, it shifted the whole dynamic. Killcreek was notorious for their control. It also zoned in on an obvious weak spot for a member. It was a strong rule they never showed where their vulnerabilities lay. Cue had completely exposed himself. And in a sense, Killcreek.

"I was supposed to just fucking leave her there?" Cue spread his arms and looked over at Cross.

The vice-president's gaze darkened. "Was she in any immediate danger, Cue?"

This was where Jekyll was forced to step in.

"Yeah, she was."

Ace spun around, and Cross sidled up next to him.

"I got a good fucking look with her sitting in our clubhouse. I didn't see a mark on her." Cross pointed to the wall.

Jekyll shook his head. "Get up close enough, you can see past the caked on makeup and get a full view of the handprint on her cheek." He cocked his brow. "I did."

In fairness, with the exception of Cue and himself, no one had gotten close to Eden. But he saw it.

"So you're backing this move?" Ace pointed at Cue.

Jekyll wouldn't condone it but he wouldn't condemn it either.

"Just telling you what I saw."

"Alright, fucking fine. Let's say Cue over here wants to play fucking knight in shining armor." Ace jerked his head to the brother. "Then you *quietly* get her outta there and you take her somewhere safe. You do not bring her back here."

“Where could I take her that the Satan’s wouldn’t find her, ’cause at this point…they’d find her.” Cue countered.

Gent raised his hand. “Can someone explain why another club’s whore is our responsibility? Did we start a new rescue program I don’t know about?”

“Gent,” Ace warned.

Cross shook his head, with his eyes pinned on Cue. “You think you rescued her, Cue? After that stunt, they’re gonna make her suffer for it.”

Cue folded his arms, remaining extremely calm. It was as if he hadn’t just blown up the clubhouse by bringing in Eden. He had to give the brother credit for standing up for his actions, especially going up against Ace and Cross.

“Not if she’s here.”

The room was drowned in silence.

“This could work for us,” Ghost said.

Every other member got quiet.

“This I gotta fucking hear.” Ace scoffed. “How do you figure?”

Ghost drew in a breath. “We’ve all taken a meeting at Satan’s. We know how they run it. Hell” —He snorted— “Eden was at most of them, right? Serving drinks while Griggs was laying out deals, talking transports, giving up storage locations.”

Ace stilled, sharing a look with Cross.

“And you think she was paying attention?” Wraith scoffed.

Ghost glanced back at the enforcer and smirked. “Cleo paid attention, right? She knew way more than any of us suspected. It’s like Inez said; we got too comfortable with her. Just like Satan’s with all the girls who hang there. Griggs wasn’t doing anything behind closed doors. I bet you Eden knows a lot.”

Interesting.

“And you think she’ll just give them up?” Cross asked.

“There’s no fucking way,” Hyde blurted, pointing to the door. “She’s with the Satan’s. Not gonna turn her back on them.”

The brother was making a good point. But…They had something to hold over Eden’s head.

Jekyll pushed off the wall and stood next to Cue. “Imogene said Eden appreciated Cue trying to help her. Let’s use that.”

Oak scoffed. “What makes you think she’ll even stay after fucking Casanova over there” —he gestured to Cue— “Kidnapped her. Or did you forget that part, Jek?”

He squared his jaw and turned to Ace. “I wanna bring Imogene in.”

He raised his brows. “To our meeting?”

“She was the one who talked to Eden. It was Eden reaching out to her. So yeah, let’s bring her in.”

Cross didn’t even wait for a response from Ace. He opened the door and spoke to the prospect. A minute later, Imogene was standing in the doorway. Jekyll slipped past Ace and Cross, rested his hand on her back, and led her to the middle of the room. She was uneasy.

He could only imagine what she was seeing from the members. The intense aura from Ace hadn’t faded when she walked into the room. If anything, it had heightened.

“When you talked to Eden, she wanted Cue to stop asking about her at Satan’s?” Jekyll asked.

“Well, she didn’t say that exactly.”

“What did she say?” Cue asked.

“That she appreciated you trying to protect her, and she didn’t know why you were doing it, but she was thankful. But it wasn’t helping, so she just wanted you to stop.”

Cross stepped closer. “She talk about them hitting her?”

She shook her head. “No but that was my first thought. Eden shows signs of someone who has been abused.”

“Fuck,” Cue muttered, cupping his jaw. “Why do you think she stays?”

Imogene shrugged. “Because she doesn’t have anywhere else to go. Since I’m here so much with Jekyll, I offered her to stay at my apartment. I thought maybe considering her situation that Inez would be okay with it. But when I mentioned it, Eden said no.”

“You offered her a safe place, and she turned you down?” Jekyll asked, and she turned, looking up at him.

“She said she wouldn’t pass a background check.”

Fuck! This was bringing a whole new light to the Eden situation.

“She say why?” Ace asked, and Imogene shook her head.

Ace walked around the table and pointed to the door. “You can go.”

She stiffened under his hand. “You’re not going to send her back there, are you?”

Cue wouldn’t allow it. Neither would Jekyll and the other brothers in the room. For everything they’d done, hurting women had never hit their radar. He wrapped his arm around her hip and walked her to the hallway. She spun in his arms.

“Maybe Inez will let her stay without a background check.” Her voice was shaky, and she pressed her hand on his chest. “I’ll vouch for her. That’s a thing, right? If she does anything wrong, I’ll take full responsibility for her with Inez, I promise.”

“You don’t even know Eden.”

“I know enough,” she whispered. There was no missing the fear in her tone.

He clasped his hands around her jaw and pressed his lips against hers. This woman was too good for him, his club, and most people.

“I’m gonna take care of this. Trust me?”

She nodded, and he waited until she disappeared down the hallway before entering the room again. No one was talking. If he had to guess, they were all processing what Imogene had just said.

“We taking a vote?” Jekyll asked. “’Cause she’s got mine to stay. It’s like Ghost said, she’s gotta know more than we do. We use that to our advantage, and she earns a safe place until we can move her. Everybody fucking wins.”

Ace sighed, looking around the room. “Any objections.”

There was none.

“Where’s she gonna stay?” Gent smirked. “’Cause I have no problem taking in a temporary roommate.”

“She’ll stay in my room.” Cue growled, glaring at Gent.

“At your house,” Ace snapped.

Cue jerked his head, scowling. “She can stay in my room at the clubhouse.”

“No, she can’t. This is our house. You have your own, so your ass is gonna put her up. After all, you fucking brought her here. That makes her your responsibility, Cue.”

As far as Jekyll knew, Cue was just as territorial about his own space as he was. Having a complete stranger living with him wasn’t exactly ideal. And from his tight expression, it wasn’t welcome either.

This is gonna be a fucking mess.

Cross walked up to Cue, who was visibly angry. “Get her settled and we’ll give her a week. Hopefully, earn some trust so she can help us. That means make her feel welcome, Cue.”

Gent raised his hand. “I’d be more than happy to volunteer and lead the welcome wagon.”

Cue jerked around, seething. “Shut the fuck up, Gent. And stay the fuck away from her.”

Lines were drawn, and no one missed Cue’s claim over Eden.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Imogene waited in silence in the main room of the clubhouse. Addison had tried to make small talk with Eden, but while polite, she didn't speak much. Imogene still wasn't sure what had happened. Cue was the first to walk out and gestured for Eden to follow him. She immediately stood, hugging the little dog to her chest and they walked out the back entrance.

She figured Jekyll would come out soon, but after fifteen minutes she headed back to his house. She purposely slowed her steps as she got closer to Cue's house. She made no move to be inconspicuous and stared through the front window as she walked past. She could see a taller figure, presumably Cue, walking through the living room with Eden trailing a few feet behind.

When she was walking up the porch steps, she heard a door close and looked down the short street. Cue was walking toward the clubhouse with a duffle bag hooked over his shoulder. There was no sight of Eden.

She paced around the living room for another ten minutes, then Jekyll walked in.

"What's the verdict?"

He cocked his brow, and she waved her hands impatiently. "Can Eden stay?"

"Yeah, she'll be at Cue's house."

Yes!

This was the best-case scenario. Imogene rushed across the room, throwing her arms over his shoulders and taking him in for a hug. It may have seemed over the top, but it was a relief. Imogene still didn't know the extent of it.

"Thank you."

Jekyll scoffed. "Club decision. Don't know how long she'll be here, but she's not going back to Satan's."

Imogene pulled away slightly but didn't let him go. "You told me to trust you, and you'd handle it. And you did."

It had been a long time since she'd had anyone she could count on. Jekyll came through for her. To others, it might not be much. To Imogene it was everything.

She stepped back and smiled. "Do you think she'd like to come to yoga with me and Elaine."

Jekyll narrowed his gaze. "Let her get settled, and clear that shit with Cue."

Imogene knitted her brows. Why would she have to ask Cue? Eden could make the choice on her own. Jekyll must've read her confusion and her annoyance.

He sighed and gripped his hips. "Don't know what's going on with the two of them, but there's something. And Eden is Cue's responsibility while she's staying here. He needs eyes on her or to know where she is." Jekyll paused. "Give him that."

What? Something going on? As in romantic? Imogene could totally see them together. She didn't know him well, but Cue seemed like a great guy, handsome, and obviously sweet to take in Eden. He'd also tried to protect her. And the woman was beautiful, caring, and so kind. Imogene found herself getting excited over the prospect of Cue and Eden together.

****

Meetings with Oz were always held at his club, The X-Lounge, and on days when it wasn't open for business. The parking lot reflected that when they pulled in the back.

They got off their bikes and started toward the back entrance. The door opened, and Nash, along with Oz's security, were stationed around the doors and hallways. They'd been doing business with Oz long enough that they had a decent rapport with his guys. But Nash was closer with Ace, Cross, and Wraith dating back to when the club was initially formed.

"He's waiting for you," Nash side-eyed Ace. "Anything you'd like to share with me?"

Ace snorted. "Yeah, it's been a while since you've been up for a ride with us."

Nash shook his head, smirking. "I was thinking more on the lines of the meeting."

"You made your choice years ago, Nash. If you'd chosen differently, you'd already know," Cross said.

Nash narrowed his gaze. “You all really enjoy busting my balls.”

“Yeah, we do,” said Wraith.

They were led upstairs in the elevator and walked toward the back of the balcony. The members spread out through the room, matching the placement of the security team. They were evenly matched if something went down, but it wouldn’t come to that. They were just there to pass along information.

Oz lifted his cigar to his lips and gestured for Ace and Cross to have a seat.

“You have information?” Oz arched his brow.

Ace folded his arms. “We’ve had a deal on the table with Satan’s Hex for a while now. They’ve been taking on more product, but pay on time in cash. No trades.”

Oz lowered his chin. “Sounds like a solid deal.”

On the surface, it did.

“That’s what we thought, initially. However, they don’t have the clientele to distribute that much, Oz. But they keep upping their shipment. Did some checks on who and where they sell. The numbers don’t add up. Tested that theory when we asked for a list of buyers, and they couldn’t get us one. Then offered them a triple shipment. They didn’t hesitate and took it.” Ace sighed. “We think they’re stockpiling for a major haul out of state.”

“And that’s a problem?”

“It is if they transport it themselves and move through areas protected by you, don’t you think?” Ace cocked a brow.

The king of the Underground was a hard read. Rarely did he show any emotion.

Oz drew in a breath. “Where?”

“We think they’re planning on cutting through Ghosttown.”

Nash, who was standing a few feet from the table, lifted his chin. “Why would they take that chance?”

“It’s a big payout, Nash. And minimal risk for them if they’ve got someone in power backing them.” Ace glanced between Oz and Nash. “We got reason to think they’ve done it before. They’re confident they can make it happen again.”

“Christ,” Nash muttered.

Oz slowly nodded. “You’ll handle this.”

Fuck.

Ace held up his hand. “We weren’t offering to take the job. Just sharing with you as a courtesy. We’ll handle Satan’s on our end if they follow through with the transport and let you know, but nothing more than that.”

“How much?”

Ace shook his head. “We don’t want it, Oz.”

Oz cocked his brow. “Has the club become independently wealthy unbeknownst to me?”

“Not interested,” Cross said.

Oz shifted his gaze, scanning the brothers and lingering on one specifically. Jekyll sucked in a breath. It could’ve been random. Aside from the club and Inez, no one else was privy to that personal information. Then again, Oz knew a lot when it came to those in the Underground, and Killcreek fell under that umbrella.

Oz reached for his glass and took a sip. “A hundred grand. You keep half the product.” Oz narrowed his gaze. “I believe I’m being more than generous.”

Jekyll stilled and shared a look with Hyde, who flattened his lips. It was a generous offer. One they wouldn’t usually pass up. Ace’s hesitant response seemed to be the consensus for the group.

“In the meantime, I will find out who is behind Satan’s cashflow.”

“You gonna stop it before it happens?” Cross asked.

“No. If they don’t follow through, then I don’t have grounds to take them out. I want a valid reason to serve as a reminder that no one comes in my state without my permission. And they don’t have it.”

“Well, what the fuck do we have here?”

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Jekyll knew the voice but still looked over at the opening of the balcony.

Fucking Rogue.

“You can wait in my office,” Oz ordered.

Rogue smirked, walking farther into the room. “Where’s the fucking fun in that?”

“Rogue,” Oz warned, though his brother didn’t seem to heed it.

Among everything involving the club, Jekyll had been told firsthand by Cross what had gone down at a meeting involving Addison. While Jekyll respected Cross’s woman for going head-to-head with Rogue, Jekyll, along with all of Killcreek, harbored a lot of anger about his comments in regards to Knox.

A small woman rushed forward and stepped in front of Rogue. She cocked her brow and rested her hand on his chest.

“Unless you intend to apologize, which I highly doubt” —she narrowed her gaze— “I suggest you say nothing. I don’t think either one of us wants a repeat of *those two weeks* from six months ago.”

This must be Quinn.

The threat was evident. Jekyll had been briefed on everything that had gone down while he was away. This had to have stemmed from Rogue’s confrontation with Cross and Addison. From everything he gathered from this interaction, it must’ve been an interesting time in Rogue’s house after it had all gone down.

Rogue’s gaze darkened and shifted across the room to the club.

“Is it worth it?” Quinn said in a low tone, but Jekyll heard it.

Rogue squinted and ushered her out of the room without another word.

“I hate to admit it, but Quinn?” —Gent sighed heavily, staring at the hallway— “She’s starting to grow on me.”

Oz furrowed his brows and turned to Ace. “Back to the deal.”

Ace grunted, sharing a look with Cross. “There is no deal. We don’t want it.”

Oz grabbed his glass, taking a sip and looking over at Jekyll. He rarely had one-on-one interactions with the leader of the Underground. There’d never been a reason. Until now.

“Perhaps there’s something I can add.” He arched his brow. “Jekyll?”

All eyes were on him as he moved closer to the table. For as intimidating as Oz was to most people, Jekyll wasn’t shook. There was no reason to be. *I’m not afraid of the king.*

“You don’t have anything I need, Oz.”

“I believe I do.”

“And what’s that?” Ace asked.

“There’s word going around that Killcreek has taken a special interest in a certain prison murder from four months ago. Do you have a name?”

They did. After the deal with Axel and Slater was made, the former president of Satan’s provided it to Ace. Cypher was still working on more intel, but as of now, it wasn’t looking good for Killcreek. Nestor Calloway was high along the criminal chain. They’d need an *in* to get direct information. And they didn’t have it.

“Why are you asking, Oz?” Ace taunted.

“A meeting with Calloway? The club can’t facilitate that on their own. Neither can Inez, though she has tried. Put in a few calls, but she’s made a lot of enemies over the years. Calloway being one of them.”

It didn’t come as a surprise Inez would try to make it happen behind the scenes. That was the thing about Inez. She took care of her boys.

“Let me guess.” Ace scowled. “You’ll make that happen if we take the deal for Ghosttown?”

“I’ll personally set up the meeting with Calloway.”

It was exactly what Jekyll wanted.

“We’d have to take a vote on it.” Ace smirked. “No Kings in this club.”

Oz spread his arms. “Well, by all means, vote. Because this offer is off the table the minute you walk out the door.”

Fuck.

Oz was forcing their hand, and there wasn’t anything they could do about it.

Ace leaned forward, rested his elbows on the table, and turned back to look at the brothers. One in particular. *This member* had to be the first to agree. None of them, including Jekyll, would take the Ghosttown deal without *his* approval.

“Any objections to taking the deal?” Ace asked, but his gaze remained on one member.

Jekyll lowered his head, glancing over. The brother was staring back at him. A meeting with Calloway had nothing to do with the club. It was for Imogene. And *he* didn’t owe her anything.

“I don’t have any,” he said.

It was followed by every member agreeing to the deal. They’d get paid, half the product returned, which was essentially another income, and he’d get the truth. And so would Imogene.

“I’ll set it up. The terms are non-negotiable. Understand?” Oz asked.

“Yeah.” Ace stood.

Jekyll wasn’t sure how he felt about the Ghosttown deal. With Killcreek in control, they’d have the upper hand, and it would get done right. The payout was good, but it would come at a cost. They just didn’t know how high of a price they’d have to pay. Only time would tell.

As they walked out, Jekyll stayed back, slowing his steps until Cross sidled up next to him.

“Oz’s terms, non-negotiable.” Cross sighed. “Be prepared for shit you don’t like.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“Alright,” Cross said and veered toward his bike.

“Cross.”

He glanced over his shoulder and stopped when Jekyll caught up to him.

“Make sure *he’s* good with this.” Names were unnecessary. Cross knew exactly who Jekyll was talking about. This was about to get intensely personal for one of their own. While Jekyll appreciated the solidarity, and meeting with Calloway was imperative for Imogene, he didn’t want to sacrifice a brother for it.

“This isn’t club business.” Jekyll drew in a breath. “It’s for Imogene.”

“And you.” Cross grasped his shoulder in a tight squeeze. “I’ll talk to him. But Jek? You’re his family, not them.”

Jekyll snorted. “DNA would say different.”

Cross shrugged. “He wouldn’t.”

No, he wouldn’t.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Imogene was in desperate need of a shower. After rescheduling twice, she and Elaine finally made it to yoga. *I'll be lucky if she shows up for our next meeting, let alone another yoga class.* It was Imogene's fault. When she was looking at the schedule, she'd seen an early morning class, which had been Elaine's preference, so she booked it. Imogene had made the mistake of not reading the full description. She saw the stretch and light motion and figured it would be ideal for Elaine, who was a beginner. What she'd missed was the "heated" class part. Forty-five minutes after they'd walked in, Elaine was drenched, red as if she'd gotten horrible sunburn, and a glare that would get her sent back to prison if she acted on it.

Imogene walked through Jekyll's front door, dropping her bag and mat near the couch. As per usual, Hank was snoring softly on the recliner.

Jekyll walked out from the kitchen and halted. His gaze traveled over her body in a slow perusal. She could only imagine how horrible she looked. The sweat hadn't dried up, and her hair was a giant frizz ball. She matted down her strands and drew in a breath, prepared to explain the mess. But Jekyll hadn't stopped staring.

"I'm a mess."

The corner of his mouth curled. "Come here."

She knitted her brows. "What?"

He stalked forward, but she side-stepped him. *I know that look.*

"I need a shower. I'm all sweaty."

His eyes heated. "I don't fucking care."

"I do." She rounded the table and made a beeline for his room and went straight to the bathroom. She turned on the water and pulled her ponytail out of the hair tie. When she turned around, Jekyll was standing in the doorway, pulling off his shirt.

What is he doing?

"Do you want to go first?" She pointed to the shower stall.

Jekyll dropped his chin to his chest, and his body shook. *Is he laughing at me?*

“We’re going together.”

Shower together? This was a first for Imogene.

“You can’t come home” —he arched his brow and gestured to her body — “wearing that and think I ain’t gonna fuck you.”

What? She glanced down at her clothes. It was a light blue matching set of a sports bra and form fitting pants. Nothing outrageously sexy, though it did show off all her curves. *And, apparently, Jekyll likes it.*

She peeked up, fighting against her smile. “You like my yoga outfit?”

“Yeah, but I like what’s under it better, so take it off.”

Imogene didn’t hesitate. She pulled off her sports bra and pants, watching Jekyll shuck his jeans through the steamed room. He opened the door, and she ducked under his arm. The water pelted her skin, and she stopped directly under it, soaking her hair.

“I’ve never showered with anyone.”

“Get used to it.” He growled.

Jekyll slid his hands under her arms and lifted her. Instinctively, she wrapped her legs around him, locking her ankles together. He dropped his mouth to the crook of her neck, sliding his lips over her damp skin. Between the hot water washing over them, the thick steam and his hands everywhere, she was more than ready to get to the main event. Foreplay was unnecessary. It seemed Jekyll was on the same page. His cock slid inside her and his graveled groan echoed in the small room. He backed her against the shower wall and kissed her, his tongue tangling with hers. *God, this man and his mouth.* A familiar thought raced through her mind. *The reality is so much better than my fantasy*. His hands dropped to her ass, and he thrust his hips, sinking into her core. The water sprinkled over them as he fucked her slow.

Imogene pulled away from the kiss and took in a deep breath, wrapping her arms around his shoulders and tightening her hold. His lips spread against her neck, licking the column of her throat.

“Jek.” She moaned, and his rumbling chest vibrated against her breasts.

I’m so close. She wasn’t sure if it was the new experience, the water, or just him, but she was on the brink of an orgasm. She dug her nails into his back, as he pounded inside her. Imogene’s breath shallowed, and she gasped, moaning his name once again as she came. She held onto him while he fucked her harder and slammed into her one last time before his guttural groan echoed through the bathroom.

This position is my new favorite.

*

Nothing could top shower sex, but this might be a close second. They'd retreated to bed after they'd dried off. She was expecting round two, but Jekyll wanted to hear about yoga with Elaine. It was the first time she'd heard him laugh. *I love that sound.*

"Is there anything you won't do to help?" He laughed. "Christ, it's like you're going for sainthood."

Sainthood? She was far from it. And for some reason, the insinuation bothered her. Imogene rolled away from him and sat up.

"I'm not some perfect little do-gooder, Jekyll."

He snorted, sliding his finger across her forehead and hooking her hair over her ear. He was not going to distract her with his touch. She grabbed his wrist, pulling his hand down to her lap.

"I'm not!"

The corner of his mouth curled. "Alright."

She raised her brows and pinched her nose. "You don't believe me?"

He didn't hesitate. "No."

She scoffed. "I stole a car when I was sixteen."

"The fuck you did."

She nodded. "I did. I was living with my grandparents out on the farm. It was about fifteen minutes from town, where all the parties happened. They had strict rules about me driving at night, so I knew they wouldn't let me go even if I asked." She drew in a breath. "So I waited until they went to bed, which wasn't late since their normal bedtime was nine-thirty. I tiptoed down the stairs, grabbed the keys, and took off."

His lips twitched. "I'm impressed."

Tell the whole story.

Imogene sighed. "Don't be. I got caught. I guess my grandfather woke up sometime after I left to check on the animals, saw his car was gone, and called the police. He hadn't checked my room since I was a pretty good kid, so he assumed it was stolen by a stranger. I was literally a block away from the party when I saw the sirens behind me. I pulled over, got arrested, put in handcuffs, and taken to a holding cell." She cocked her head. "Now does that sound like a do-gooder to you?"

"It sounds like regular kid shit." He snorted. "But what happened?"

“Well, my grandparents came to the police station to collect me. Obviously, they didn’t press charges, but I had to go to court where the judge issued me one hundred hours of community service.” She held up her finger. “And I got my own kind of punishment at home. Grounded for a month.”

“Little rebel.” He smirked.

“See, I told you. I also set a mini fire to the barn six months later.”

His brows hiked.

“Not on purpose. I was smoking a cigarette” —she rolled her eyes— “’cause I thought it was cool. Heard a farm hand coming, so I put it out quickly. But apparently not completely. Luckily, it was contained, but unfortunately for me, I once again got caught.”

“Jail time?” he teased.

“No. But my sentence was a two-month grounding, taking a fire safety course, and” —she flattened her lips— “My grandmother made me watch six hours of videos showing the dangers of smoking. That was effective. Never tried smoking again. So? Still think I’m a do-gooder?”

“Ain’t nothing wrong with being the way you are.”

“I know, but I’m not as good as you may think I am. Just want to prove it.”

“By telling me all the shit you did as a kid? That makes you a stupid teenager, not a criminal.”

If you only knew… Maybe he should.

“What if I told you I did something that was not only a federal offense but if caught, I *would* get prison time.”

He furrowed his brows. “Bullshit.”

“It’s true.” She waved her hand. “Obviously, I wasn’t caught, and I’ve never told anyone. But yep, I did it.”

Jekyll leaned up on his elbow. “Tell me.”

Her cheeks pinkened. “Um…”

“Tell me.”

She licked her lips. “I went into a restricted access area at the prison and photocopied information of an inmate for my own personal use.”

“Who?”

She cleared her throat and whispered. “You.”

Jekyll stared back at her, and she felt the heat rise from her chest to her cheeks. Maybe she shouldn’t have shared that.

“I wasn’t going to use it for anything.”

His jaw squared. “Why’d you take it?”

She shrugged. Hadn’t she already shared enough?

“Imogene.” He growled.

“I just wanted to know more about you. Maybe have something. I know it’s silly, but I…”

Imogene never finished her sentence. Jekyll yanked her down to his chest and kissed her.

I guess he’s not mad.

When his phone pinged, he groaned, but seemingly ignored it and rolled her onto her back. Then it pinged again, and he broke away from the kiss. He leaned across her, and she couldn’t resist; she caressed her fingers over his chest. This man was solid. She felt him stiffen under her touch and glanced up. His eyes were trained on the phone, and the lines on his forehead deepened.

“What’s wrong?”

He dropped the phone on the nightstand and climbed out of bed. “Gotta take a ride with the club. Get dressed. Jeans and boots.”

“I’m coming with you?”

Jekyll was pulling up his jeans and reaching for his cut on the back of the chair. “Yeah.”

It was all he said before walking out the door.

****

Jekyll didn’t give her a heads up. Maybe he should’ve. Or maybe being unprepared was better. He’d find out soon enough. They pulled into the parking lot of the X-Lounge and waited for the others to arrive. When he’d gotten the message that the meeting was set up so quickly, he was eager to get it done. But he hadn’t expected Oz to demand that Imogene be there.

After he’d left Imogene in his room, he walked out to his backyard, and called Ace. Oz’s demands were non-negotiable but it didn’t stop Jekyll from trying to refuse or come up with an alternative plan. There was no reason for her to be there. Then, Ace gave him one. The whole truth about her dad.

Her arm was wrapped around his waist and she squeezed his stomach.

“Are you taking me dancing?” She giggled and he rested his hand over hers.

Realistically, this was for the best. Hearing it from an indisputable source would carry more weight than coming from him. She’d finally get

the answers she needed. Still, he felt a sense of guilt knowing she was walking in blind.

Her eyes scanned his face. “What’s wrong?”

Thankfully, he didn’t have time to answer. The brothers pulled into the lot and parked. He turned and grasped her hips.

“Remember when you told me about your dad. That you still wanted to look into everything ’cause you had some doubts.”

She knitted her brows. “I didn’t say I had doubts.”

Technically, she hadn’t said the words, but Jekyll read through her silence.

“Would you rather the truth over being right?”

She shook her head. “I don’t understand…”

He drew in a breath. “What’s more important to you? Being right or the truth?”

There was a long stretch of silence.

Another story, whenever you're ready.

Come to Lokepub to pick your next novel.

“I just want the truth.” She muttered.

“Alright.” He grabbed her hand, meeting up with the club members at the back entrance.

Nash escorted them upstairs like last time. But today none of them were sharing jabs. Jekyll caught Nash looking over at Imogene twice. She must’ve felt it too, because she curled closer to him.

When they exited the elevator and walked through the room, he could feel her tense up and squeeze his hand. The brothers spread out around the room, but this time Jekyll followed Ace and Cross to the table.

“Jekyll,” she whispered.

He bowed his head and lowered his voice. “You wanted the truth, and he’s gonna give it to you.”

Her eyes immediately darted to the table. There were only two seats across from Oz and Calloway. Both Ace and Cross stepped aside but stayed

close, allowing him and Imogene to sit down. Jekyll wasn't sure how they'd approach the beginning of the meeting, but they weren't known for sugar coating and easing into any conversation.

Oz lifted his hand, gesturing to Calloway beside him.

"I had your father stabbed to death in prison," he said in an eerily calm voice.

Fuck me. Jekyll clenched his jaw and his shoulders tensed.

"I'm sorry?" Her voice shook, slightly and Jekyll grabbed her hand. It was the only form of comfort he could provide.

"Your father was killed as a result of my order."

There was no hesitation, no remorse or emotion. It was the same drone most people used to order takeout food.

"Why?" Jekyll's tone was the polar opposite.

Imogene needed all the answers.

"My nephew was doing a small stint in the same prison. For a brief time before he was released, he shared a cell with her father." He paused, directly looking at her. "Your dad liked to talk, and my nephew is very good at listening. It's one of his best attributes, among using information for his own gain. Your father talked about his new trial. Getting a second chance due to a technicality of representation didn't change the evidence, which was strong enough to convict the first time and probably would've been for the second." He folded his hands, resting them on his stomach. "My nephew offered him an alternative. An alibi."

Jekyll glanced over at Imogene. The blood drained from her face, and her grip on his hand tightened.

"Not a real one, of course. He didn't even know your father. But he was willing to find someone who would testify that he was in the bar the night of the murder. He'd provide a long lost receipt, and from his connections, maybe even jog a few memories from the past."

Imogene shook her head, and her doubt made sense. It sounded like the plot to a B-movie that went straight to streaming services with no chance of making it into theaters.

"Your father took the deal." The corner of his mouth curled. "For a little over one hundred grand."

Imogene's missing funds.

"My father didn't have any money." Her voice shook.

He slid his thumb over the back of her hand. This was going to hurt.

“He had *your* money,” Jekyll said, and her neck spasmed, her eyes looking like she was seconds from tears.

“For his defense.”

This was a lot all at once. First finding out that her father, whom she’d supported for years, was actually guilty. And he used all her money to gain his freedom.

Oz glanced over at Calloway. “Give her the details.”

He sighed, as if bored. “Your father had two accounts set up. One for lawyers and the other for personal. And that account was closed a few days before his murder. He’d transferred the money to an untraceable account that belonged to my nephew. Once it cleared, the order was fulfilled. Is that enough detail or would you like to know how long it took for him to bleed out in prison?”

“Shut the fuck up,” Jekyll snapped.

He wanted Imogene to have the truth but the cruelty was unnecessary. She was already suffering enough.

The man merely shrugged with a smug half-smile. He stood and adjusted the button on his jacket.

“If that’s all, I’ll see myself out,” Calloway said.

Oz pointed to the opposite end of the balcony. “I’m not done. You can wait in my office. Ridge and Caine will take you there.”

Oz’s security came up on either side of him. It was the first time Calloway looked unsettled.

“Oz?”

“My office.”

He started through the room, and Imogene spun in her chair. “You’re not even sorry, are you?”

Calloway scoffed. “For killing a murderer? No.”

“How about for taking money from a murderer, and providing a false alibi to set him free?”

Calloway smiled. “The false alibi? It wasn’t a very original idea, was it, Imogene? Your dad had already tried it once...with you.”

What the fuck was he talking about? Jekyll angled his head, looking at Imogene. Her bottom lip trembled and she shook her head.

“I was never his alibi.”

“Because you wouldn’t lie. Like I said, your dad liked to talk.” Calloway smirked and his tone was mocking. “You were so happy to see

him.”

Her face paled and a tear slid down her cheek.

“What the fuck is he talking about?” Jekyll asked.

Imogene was in a trance, staring back at Calloway.

“My office,” Oz said, and Calloway proceeded to walk away with Caine and Ridge.

Jekyll knew the truth would come at a price. He just wasn’t prepared for it to completely destroy her. She was shutting down before his eyes, and there wasn’t anything he could do to stop it. At least not immediately. He needed to get her home.

“Come on.” He grabbed her hand, and she stood, but her body almost seemed lifeless.

“Not done with you, Jekyll,” Oz said and pointed to Nash. “Get her a car.”

There was no way he was leaving her alone.

“Fuck you.”

Oz cocked his brow, and his jaw squared. “Non-negotiable, remember?”

Ghost stepped up. “Let me get her out of here, Jek.”

Jekyll hated to leave her side, but he didn’t have a choice.

He gave everyone his back and cupped her jaw, forcing her to look up at him. Her eyes were welled, and while she was looking directly at him, it was as if she was in some type of trance. His thumbs strummed her cheeks.

“You’re gonna go with Ghost, and I’m gonna be there as soon as I’m done here. Okay?”

She nodded.

Hyde said something to Ghost, and he lowered his chin, then came up next to Jekyll. “I got her.”

“Stay with her.”

“Won’t leave her until you get there.”

Jekyll watched Cyrus lead her and Ghost to the elevator. He didn’t turn back to Oz until she disappeared from his sight.

“I’m trusting you to keep her in check.” His gaze darkened. “Because if you can’t, we will.”

Jekyll lunged forward, but Wraith stepped in his path, blocking him. “Don’t you ever fucking threaten her.”

“Not a threat. Consider it a warning.” Oz didn’t even flinch. He grabbed his glass and took a sip while staring at him over the rim of his glass. Jekyll

was beyond raging, and the blood rushed through his veins.

"Settle down," Wraith said.

Gent clucked his tongue. "This is all getting out of hand. Threatening women?" He shook his head and smiled at Oz. "Speaking of women, how's Elle doing?"

It was an unspoken rule. No one ever mentioned Oz's wife.

"Watch yourself, Gent." Oz's tone was sharp.

He spread his arms. "Just inquiring about your lady. I mean, aren't we all family in the end? You, your asshole brother, Trey, and Sal. And us and Inez." Gent angled his head. "Wonder what Inez would think of you keeping *Imogene in check*. Might have to ask her next time we meet up." Gent smirked. "See, this is the part of the kingdom that I don't envy, Oz. 'Cause unlike you, I got nothing to lose."

"Alright, Gent." Cypher stepped in front of him. "You've made your point."

Gent pinned Oz in his stare. "Have I?

Oz narrowed his gaze.

"What else do you need?" Ace asked.

Oz kept his eyes on Gent. There was zero fear in his stare. But it was safe to say Gent just marked himself on Oz's radar.

"A total."

Jekyll straightened. "A total of what?"

Oz slowly turned to him. "The money she's owed."

"You're gonna pay her for what she lost?"

"I'm not, but Calloway will."

Oz was just as unpredictable as Rogue. He hadn't seen that coming.

"You're gonna make him pay her back the money? You really think he's going to agree to that?" Ace snorted.

"I am. And he will."

"Why? You don't even know her." Jekyll asked the same question they were all thinking.

"This order came from above my head." Oz cocked his brow. "It seems your woman has made quite an impression on him."

Sal.

Jekyll nodded. "Cypher's got the numbers."

Oz lowered his chin.

They walked out of the building. Imogene was probably thirty minutes closer to Killcreek than him. Or so he thought. Hyde sidled up next to him.

"I had Ghost take her to Penny's. Thought the closer she was, the quicker you could get to her."

Perfect!

"What the fuck were you thinking back there?" Ace snapped at Gent, who laughed. "You got some kind of death wish, don't you?"

Gent scoffed. "Someone threatens Cherry, I'm gonna say something. It's a redhead thing in solidarity; you wouldn't get it."

Cherry.

Jekyll ground his teeth and balled his fist. That fucking nickname.

I'm gonna let it slide this time.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

The last hour had been a bit of a blur. Ghost hadn't taken her far when they left the club. It was only a fifteen-minute ride. She didn't recognize the house when he pulled into the driveway and parked. It was cute with a little front porch and lots of flowers lining the walkway.

Ghost shut down the engine and turned his head but didn't say anything. Imogene knew he was waiting for her to get off.

"Where are we?"

"A friend's place." He tapped her knee. "You ready?"

Imogene got off the bike, took off her helmet, and blindly handed it to Ghost as she peered down the street. The neighborhood looked a lot like the ones near her condo back home. A quiet, warm, and welcoming road lined with similar houses, though each had something unique separating them from each other.

"Come on."

She followed Ghost up the stairs, glancing over the porch. At the far end was a double swing with polka dot cushions and a bright pink throw pillow. This was not at all what she would expect from a friend of the MC.

When the door opened, Ghost was standing in front of her, blocking her view.

"It's about time. Was thinking you got lost."

Ghost snorted. "Maybe that's a sign you need to invite me over more."

There was a stretch of silence. "No, I don't think it is."

She heard Ghost's faint chuckle as he walked in. The woman slapped his back then turned to Imogene, who was standing in the doorway. Her gaze softened and she reached for Imogene's wrist.

"Hey Imogene."

"Hi Penny."

"Come on in." Her tone was warm, completely unlike how she spoke to Ghost.

Penny walked her into the living room, took her jacket, and sat her down on the couch. That had been thirty minutes ago. In the meantime,

she'd been offered a drink, use of the bathroom, and food. Imogene declined them all and remained silent.

Listening to Penny and Ghost's banter was a nice distraction, and she tried her best to focus on that. She didn't join in though. She feared saying anything might trigger the night and have her breaking down. Jekyll's voice played over in her mind. *You wanna be right, or you want the truth?* Her eyes welled, and she sucked in a breath, staring at the bookshelf in the corner of the room. Anything to take her mind off the night.

"You guys hungry?" Penny asked.

Imogene shook her head. The last thing she wanted was anything in her stomach. She'd had an onset of nausea back in the club, and it had yet to subside.

"I can eat." Ghost stood and pulled out his wallet.

Penny scoffed, grabbing her pocketbook from the side table. "I got money, Ghost."

He ignored her, pulling out a few bills. He held them up, smirking. "Take mine, and you get to keep yours."

"True." Penny said, snatching the cash from his hand. "Any special requests?"

"Parry's."

Imogene perked up at the familiar name. It didn't go unnoticed.

Penny smiled. "Have you tried Parry's?"

"A few times but" —she cleared her throat— "I'm currently banned for two weeks. I let the door slam behind me."

Penny laughed, hooking her bag over her shoulder. "Don't feel bad. The club was banned for life a few years ago."

"Well then that settles it, right?" Ghost cocked a brow, which almost came off as pleading.

Penny winked. "Lucky I don't despise you, Ghost."

"Good thing I'm not Oak."

She snorted. "If you were Oak, you'd be on the porch." She walked out the door, leaving Imogene and Ghost alone.

She glanced over at him seated on the couch across from her. They hadn't really spoken. Now that it was just the two of them, it would make for more awkward silence. He looked up at the ceiling then leaned across the couch, staring down the hall.

Ghost stood and waved to her. "Come on."

Imogene was still in a daze, but found herself standing and following him to the staircase and up. Ghost walked into what looked like Penny's bedroom. Imogene remained in the doorway. He walked to the window, looking out.

"Should we be in her bedroom?"

Ghost laughed and turned back, striding towards her. "Probably not but it doesn't matter. The pitch is too steep anyway."

The pitch? Was he referring to the porch roof? She didn't bother asking and just followed him to the room at the opposite end of the house. It looked like an office set up. A large desk with a few monitors. It was neat and orderly, much like all of Penny's house. He once again walked to the window, and from his profile she saw him grin.

"This will do." He opened the window, removed the screen, and climbed out onto the roof.

Imogene was rooted near the door. Was he serious? Why would they go onto the roof?

"You coming?"

Um, okay.

She walked through the room and climbed out. She wasn't afraid of heights, but she was aware of her mind and body being off. Balance was key when climbing onto a roof. She slowly scooted on her butt and noticed Ghost mirroring her. If she slipped, he'd block her fall. *Or we'll both fall.*

"Almost there. You got it."

She inched farther down the roof. "Are you sure we won't fall off?"

Ghost snorted. "Jekyll will fucking kill me if anything happens to you, and since I'm not looking to meet my Maker anytime soon…you won't fall. You got my word."

After adjusting a few times and panicking once, Ghost lived up to his word. They were situated on the roof only a few inches apart.

Ghost dug into his pocket and pulled out a lighter and a joint. He took a long drag, released the smoke and offered it to her. But she shook her head.

"So is it true?" Ghost asked.

"Is what true?"

He shrugged. "You know that whole 'the truth will set you free' bullshit? Did it?"

"I don't feel very free right now." Her voice cracked, and she looked up at the sky. It had been overcast all day with an impending storm coming

through. Not a star in the sky.

"What do you feel?"

She swallowed the knot in her throat, trying to rein in her emotions. "Like a fool."

Ghost nodded, taking another puff. "I get that."

The last person she should be discussing her father with was a stranger. Or maybe it was the best person. Either way, she spoke without hesitation.

"I really believed him," she whispered.

"Yeah, why wouldn't you? He's your dad. He's swearing to you he didn't do it. Add in your loyalty to him. Your dad being innocent, and you wanting him to be innocent. Those are two very different things. But when you're in it, the lines get blurred."

So blurred. Tears streamed down her face, and she didn't even bother wiping them.

There was a long stretch of silence.

"Sometimes we get it wrong, Imogene."

That was an understatement.

"Yeah," she whispered. "Except everyone else got it right. It was laid out in front of everyone and they could see it. Why couldn't I?"

"You saw it tonight."

She nodded and wiped the tears from her cheeks and scoffed. "A little too late."

"But you see it, Imogene. That's what matters."

I hope so.

****

Jekyll stood just inside the room. Listening.

He and Hyde arrived at Penny's twenty minutes ago. She was in the living room eating and told him that Imogene and Ghost were upstairs on the roof. *This brother and a roof.* It had always been Ghost's go-to place. Jekyll didn't get it. Most of the brothers didn't either.

When he'd attempted to go upstairs, Penny stopped him.

"Ghost is good therapy."

Jekyll didn't particularly like that answer. But he accepted it, knowing it was the truth. After twenty minutes he was prepared to break it up and take her home. She'd been through a lot tonight, and he wanted her safely nestled by his side.

Jekyll hadn't planned on eavesdropping, but he took advantage.

“You’re a good listener,” Imogene said, which made Jekyll crack a smile.

Penny was right, Ghost was exactly what she needed at the moment.

“Let me ask you something.” Ghost paused, briefly. “You think you’ll ever forgive your dad for what he did?”

“No.” There was zero hesitation on her end.

“Yeah, killing someone is unforgiveable.”

Jekyll shook his head, feeling the weight of Ghost’s guilt. *Brother, you didn’t kill him.* There weren’t secrets among the brothers. They all knew everything, especially when it came to their pasts. Some were darker than others. Some carried pain that would probably stick with them forever. Ghost was one of those people.

Jekyll pushed off the wall, making his way to the open window. He’d smelled the scent earlier, but from his view hadn’t seen Imogene partake.

“Getting my girl high?”

Imogene and Ghost both glanced over their shoulders.

Ghost laughed. “I was trying, man, but she refused.”

“Maybe another time.” Imogene said.

Ghost waved his finger. “Jek, you heard that, right? I’m holding you to that. Come on my roof. Penny’s is shit.” He gestured to the window. “You first.”

Imogene turned, carefully climbing toward the window. When she was in arms’ reach, he grabbed her hands and guided her inside.

“Hi.”

Jekyll tucked her into his side, pressing his lips to her head. He waited for Ghost to come in and close the window before all three retreated to the living room. Ghost passed them, heading into the kitchen.

“You’re welcome, Ghost!” Penny shouted and smiled over at Imogene. “There’s plenty of food if you guys are hungry, but I suggest you get it now.”

Jekyll rubbed her back. “Wanna eat?”

She shook her head.

Hyde glanced between them. “There’s a spare room if you guys want to crash.”

“What do you want to do? Stay here, back to your apartment, or go home?”

Jekyll wanted nothing more than to take her back to Killcreek. But this would be her call. The ride was long, it was getting cooler out, and she'd been through a lot tonight.

She glanced up, and her eyes widened. "Home? Like your house?"

"Yeah, home." He didn't make it a big deal, but it was a statement.

"I think I want to go home."

"Long ride. Are you up for that?" Jekyll wasn't trying to talk her out of it. He wanted her to be sure.

"Yes." It was the first semblance of a smile he'd seen since they'd arrived at the X-Lounge.

"Alright." He looked over at Hyde. "We'll see you later."

Hyde nodded.

Ghost walked into the living room as they headed toward the door. Jekyll opened it, and Imogene gave a short wave then stepped onto the porch. He was closing the door when he locked eyes with Ghost.

"Thanks, brother."

Ghost flattened his lips and slowly lowered his chin.

*

They made it back to Killcreek in record time. But it felt long as hell. By the time they reached the clubhouse, most of the members were back. Dozens of bikes lined the side of the house. Jekyll didn't bother stopping in. There would be a debriefing with every member. Again, no secrets in the MC. But it could wait.

Jekyll had one priority. *Her.*

They settled in at the house. Imogene got changed, and he made some food. She barely touched anything. He wasn't expecting much from her tonight. When she moved to the couch, he followed her, sitting on the opposite end. This was new territory for him. He wasn't sure he'd ever consoled anyone in his life aside from Hyde when they were kids.

She pulled her knees to her chest, and wrapped her arms around her legs. "You probably have questions."

He did. A lot. While he followed most of the explanation, the cryptic alibi accusation at the end had him questioning it. It certainly got a response from her. Imogene hadn't said anything, but the way her face paled, he knew it had struck something in her.

"You can tell me now, tell me later, or never tell me. Not gonna change anything."

Her throat bobbed, and she whispered. “I can tell you now.”

Imogene rested her chin on her knees. “My dad and I were never particularly close. After my mom died, I only lived with him for a year before my grandparents took me in. They weren’t big fans of his, especially my grandfather. They never stopped him from seeing me, but they also never encouraged it. I once overheard my grandfather say my dad was born bad, and the only good thing about him was me.”

Your grandfather was right.

“You didn’t see him a lot?”

Imogene shook her head. “A couple times a year when his route took him through our area. He was a truck driver, so he was always on the road. He called every other month at the beginning. But the older I got, the less he called. He came to my high school graduation. I remember that. Actually remember all the times he showed up ’cause it didn’t happen often. It was like I was savoring the memory.” Her eyes welled, and her voice cracked. “And I think that’s a really important part of the story.”

“Alright. Tell me.”

“About five years ago, my dad just showed up at my condo. No call or heads up. He was just there. He said he was on the road and had his truck parked at the motel. Took an uber over ’cause he wanted to surprise me. I was in shock because I hadn’t seen him since my grandparents’ funerals. We only spoke maybe twice a year, my birthday and his own. But I always tried for more. He said with his schedule it was nearly impossible. So I was really excited and didn’t really question it.” She paused, staring down at her knees. “He wasn’t up to going to a restaurant, so we ordered take out. When I was leaving to pick it up, he handed me a wad of cash. I told him I wanted to treat him because he’d gone out of his way to come see me, but he insisted.” She released a heavy breath. “I remember thinking how nice that was of him. I went out, got the food, and we spent the rest of the night catching up. Talked about everything. It got really late, so he even stayed over. The next morning, we got breakfast. It was the first time in my life I thought ‘this is what it’s like to have a real dad in my life.’” She swiped the tears trailing down her cheeks. “He had to leave that afternoon but promised to keep in touch more. And he did.”

“You saw him after that?” Jekyll asked.

She nodded. “Only a few times, but it was more than I’d seen him collectively in my whole life. He called twice a week just to check in. We

even started to make plans to take a vacation together. It would've been our first. And then five months later, it all came crashing down." She sniffled. "I was at work when I got the call that he'd been arrested. I thought it had to be a mistake, but when I talked to him and asked what the charges were, he said murder."

"What did he tell you?"

"That they got the wrong guy. That he didn't do it. And of course, he didn't." Her voice shook and she tapped her chest. "Because I know my dad and he's incapable of something like this. And then he started rambling about being with me that night. Surprising me at my house, treating me to dinner and then staying over. Which was exactly true, so I knew they'd made a mistake. I called immediately, and two hours later I was meeting with the detectives to take my statement. I thought it would be cleared up by morning, and my dad would be free after this horrible mistake." She drew in a breath. "Then they confirmed the date. The murder happened on a Tuesday. My dad came to see me on Wednesday. But when I talked to him, he swore it was Tuesday. So much so, I was second guessing myself. Or maybe I was trying to trick myself into believing it was Tuesday. The officers asked for the receipt from dinner, but I had given it to my dad along with the change. Told my dad, and he said he threw it out. But he was still insisting it was Tuesday." She sighed. "And then I got a ticket in the mail. When I went to pick up the food, I double parked and got a fine through the mail. The date was on it. Wednesday. When I told him, he was so angry." She pointed to her chest. "At me. When he finally calmed down, he said the ticket had to be misdated." She shrugged. "But it wasn't, and I couldn't lie and say it was. He stopped calling me for two weeks after. Like he was punishing me. But I just couldn't lie."

Motherfucker!

"That's what Calloway meant by you were his first alibi?"

"Nobody but my dad would know that. Or someone he told." She nodded. "I didn't see it that way back then, but he did push and push, trying to convince me I was wrong on the date. The proof was in the ticket. But I still believed he was innocent and vowed to help him prove it."

Jekyll had given her space to tell her story, but it was enough for one night. He leaned across the couch, grabbing her arm and pulling her to him. Imogene went willingly, crashed against his chest, and wrapped her arms around him, holding on tight as if he was her lifeline.

I am.

*

Imogene had gone to bed almost immediately after their talk. Jekyll was exhausted but not tired enough to fall asleep. He had too much on his mind. The truth was necessary and it was important for her to hear it firsthand. But it wouldn't come without scars. Jekyll was fully prepared to pick up the pieces for her.

This may have been new territory for him, but he was all in. He had no doubt he'd fuck things up along the way. Jekyll wasn't built, nor was he raised to be someone who dealt easily with emotions. But for Imogene, he'd do whatever it took.

Jekyll was finishing off his beer in the kitchen when Imogene stopped in the doorway. She wore his T-shirt that came down to her knees, swallowing her.

"Can't sleep?"

Imogene shrugged, looking up at him with uncertainty. "I woke up, and you weren't there so…" She inched in the room but still kept her distance. "I thought maybe you might be having second thoughts."

What the hell was she talking about?

He placed his bottle on the counter. "Second thoughts about what?"

She lifted her shaky hand, pointing to her chest. "Me." Her voice cracked, and her eyes welled.

Jekyll stalked across the room and wrapped his arms around her.

"No."

"This has been a lot."

"Yeah." For her it had been, but nothing he couldn't handle. If the mood wasn't so serious, it would be laughable. Everything in his life had always been unsure, dangerous, and chaotic. The polar opposite of hers until a few years ago.

"I'm sorry."

He rubbed his hand over her back. "For what?"

"For all of this," she mumbled.

"You got nothing to apologize for. You didn't do anything wrong. He did. That's not on you, and I'm not letting you carry that."

She tightened her hold and whispered, "I love you."

Jekyll couldn't remember the last time he'd heard those three words. If ever. He angled his head and brushed his lips over her temple.

“Say it again.”

She stilled, briefly and looked up.

“I love you.”

“Love you. And there’s nothing I wouldn’t fucking do for you.” He cupped her jaw. “Tell me you know that.”

She slowly nodded. “I do.”

His thumbs strummed over her cheeks. It had been a long night, and she needed her rest.

“Come on.”

He led her down the hall to his room, and they got settled in bed. She was curled into his side with her cheek resting on his chest and her arm over his stomach. She was probably seconds away from passing out, but Jekyll couldn’t help himself. He just wanted to hear it one more time.

“Say it again.”

Her hand caressed over his hip. “I love you.”

Fucking perfect!

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CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Imogene spent the last two days in hiding. *Kind of.* She never left Jekyll's house and ignored her phone, but she got up every day, showered, ate, and did all the things to somehow shake her funk. It was a lot to process. It would take more time to show herself some grace and forgiveness. Jekyll assured her there was nothing to forgive on her end, and she was the innocent one in her dad's story. Maybe he was right, but her mind just couldn't accept that yet.

This would mark her first outing since that night. She leaned closer to the mirror, applying her lip gloss, and running her fingers through her hair. She'd cried a lot in the last two days, and her puffy eyes were proof.

"Where you going?"

Jekyll was standing in the doorway.

"Strip club."

Jekyll smiled. "Business or pleasure?"

Imogene rolled her eyes and smacked his chest as she passed by. "I set up the meeting with Shelby last week."

"You can cancel it."

She shook her head. "No, I can't. I need this. A wise man once gave me great advice on distraction, and I'm going to take it. Besides, as much as I love your house, I need to get out."

He grabbed her waist, yanked her against his chest, and growled. "*Our* house."

I love that.

"Ours." She hopped up on her toes, brushing her lips against his.

"I can drive you over."

Imogene laughed, "I'm not going to a strip club with my boyfriend."

He narrowed his gaze, and she kissed him again, pulling away and heading toward the door. He was two steps behind her. He stood on the edge of the curb until she backed out and started down the street. She was looking in her rearview mirror when she heard a woman shout.

"Stop!"

Imogene slammed on her brakes, jerking forward. Her heart pounded against her chest. *What just happened?* She saw a flash of red from the front lawn at Cue's house. Eden bent down, picking up her little scruffy dog. *Did I almost hit him?* Imogene threw the car in park and got out, rounding the front bumper. Jekyll was stalking down the street.

Eden clutched the dog to her chest, her eyes darting between her and Jekyll. "I'm so sorry, I wasn't yelling at you." She pointed to the dog. "I was yelling at him. He was getting close to the street when I saw you coming, and I just got scared and screamed. I'm so sorry."

What, no!

"It's okay. I'm just so relieved he didn't get hurt."

"You got a fucking fenced in yard back there!" Jekyll shouted, and Imogene instinctively turned and slapped his chest. He turned his glare on her. But she wasn't about to listen to a word he said.

"Don't yell at her! She said she was sorry. Can't you see how upset she is?"

Jekyll straightened, keeping his glare pinned on Imogene.

"I will use the yard from now on, I promise," Eden said, clearly sensing the tension. "Again, I'm sorry. I guess I was just looking for a change of scenery. Only so many times you can circle the neighborhood." She laughed, which eased the mood.

It also prompted an idea.

"Would you like to come to the strip club with me?"

Eden widened her eyes and looked over at Jekyll as if she'd lost her mind. He snickered, dragging his hand down his beard.

"Why don't you tell her *why* you're going."

She turned back to Eden, who remained silent and seemingly in shock.

"I work at a resource center, and one of my clients is a dancer. She prefers to meet up with me at the club on her break. It's more convenient."

"Oh, okay." Eden laughed. "That makes sense."

"So do you want to come with me? We can get lunch while we're there."

Eden didn't say a word but looked over to Jekyll.

"Would that be okay with him?" Eden asked.

With who?

Jekyll hesitated then gave a curt nod. "I'll let Cue know."

“Great.” Eden instantly perked up. “Let me just put him away and grab my bag.” She raced up the stairs and into the house.

“You hit me.” He growled.

I did not! Technically, yes but it wasn’t hard. It certainly wasn’t meant to hurt him.

She spun around to find Jekyll inches from her. “It was a light tap to get your attention.”

“Oh yeah?” He smirked. “I’m gonna be trying that *light tap* on your ass tonight.”

Did he think that was a threat? If anything, she was intrigued. She looped her arms around his waist, resting her chin on his chest.

“Okay.”

Jekyll snorted, shaking his head, but she noticed a small smile. When Eden came out, she gave him a quick kiss, and they got into the car.

Just two girls, possible future friends, off to the strip club.

*

Imogene covered her mouth and half choked on her drink. This was the third time it happened over the course of their two-hour lunch at the strip club bar. She’d wrapped up her meeting with Shelby fairly quickly and was prepared to eat at the bar in the front. Ava insisted they stay in the strip club and keep her company.

It was a good choice. Watching Ava, who stood no taller than five-seven, going head to head with grown men who seemed to shudder when she walked over to their table, was so entertaining. And inspiring. Ava showed zero fear and all the confidence in the world. Even the bouncers gave her a wide berth and followed her lead when she confronted unruly customers.

Eden chuckled. “Did she really just threaten to call his wife and have her come pick up his drunk ass if he didn’t settle down?”

“Yup. That was amazing.”

Ava rounded the bar and winked as she passed by, grabbing a bottle from the wall. As she reached for a glass her phone rang, and she glanced down at the screen. Even over the loud music, Imogene heard the muffled groan. Ava stopped in mid pour and feverishly tapped on the screen.

She finished making the drink and put it on the tray in the corner. When she turned to them, Imogene offered a sympathetic smile.

“Kids again?”

Ava let out a short breath, which rolled into a laugh. “My kid isn’t the issue this time. My babysitter is relocating next month, and I’m trying to find a replacement, but” —Ava sighed— “I’m not having much luck.”

“Can’t you hire a high schooler?” Eden asked, which was a good suggestion.

“I need someone watching him while I’m here, and I don’t get off until one in the morning, sometimes two. Not very enticing hours, and it wouldn’t work for a kid who has to be up at six the next morning. And to be honest, the pay’s not great.”

“Do you have family close by?” Imogene asked.

“Just me and my son.”

“I’m sure you’ll find someone,” Imogene said, and Ava smiled.

Eden glanced over at Imogene as if she was going to say something, but her gaze drifted past her shoulders, and she froze momentarily.

What happened?

“Oh shit.” Eden turned in her seat, staring down at her plate.

“What’s wrong?” Imogene asked.

Eden slowly peeked up, looking past Imogene’s shoulder, then once again turned back. This time she leaned closer and whispered. “Ace is here.”

The president, Ace? Without thinking, she whipped her head to the door. Sure enough, the president of the club was walking toward them. When he made eye contact, she dropped her gaze to the top of the bar and stilled.

Ava leaned down, resting her elbows on the bar. “Why do you both look like the principal just walked in?”

’Cause he just did. Or at least that was how it felt. He was especially cold and unapproachable. At least to her. While other members seem to engage with Imogene, Ace barely spoke a word. It seemed Eden was receiving the same treatment.

“Ace is here.”

Ava glanced over her shoulder and smiled. “I know.”

Imogene cleared her throat. “Is he coming this way?”

Ava snickered. “Yes.”

“Shit,” Eden muttered.

“Is that a problem, ladies?” Ava asked.

Was it?

“I just feel like we’re in trouble,” Eden said, and Imogene agreed. They hadn’t done anything, but he was so intense, unfriendly, and had a very strong presence.

“Did you do something?” Ava teased.

Imogene shared a look with Eden, and they both shook their heads.

From her peripheral vision, she saw him lean his arm on the bar facing them. He was impossible to ignore, and Imogene peeked up, smiling. It was too bright and obviously forced. And not returned. He shifted his gaze between them.

“Jekyll and Cue know you two are here?”

“Yes,” Imogene blurted.

“Uh-huh.” Eden’s response was barely audible.

Ava chuckled, which gained the attention of all three, but her eyes were on Ace.

She waved her finger between her and Eden. “You make them nervous. Why is that?”

“We’re not nervous,” Eden said, but when Ace slowly angled his head, and his gaze darkened, she bowed her head.

We’re nervous.

“Can I get you something?” Ava asked, distracting Ace.

“Scotch.”

Imogene pushed her plate to the edge of the bar and grabbed her drink, taking a long sip. The hairs on the back of her neck stood. She slowly looked over at Ace. As suspected, he was watching her.

He lifted his chin. “You alright?”

Ace had witnessed everything go down the other night. He wasn’t exactly showing her concern, but he was asking. This was the most he’d ever said to her.

“I’m okay.”

Ava placed his glass on the bar, and he grabbed it, walking away without another word.

****

I’m definitely fucking smacking her ass tonight.

Jekyll walked into the clubhouse, scouting the room. There were only a few brothers hanging out. They were scheduled to start planning out the Ghosttown invasion next week. Everyone had their own tasks assigned. Jekyll would be working with Cross and the direct contacts for Satan’s.

Once everything aligned, it would be brought to Oz for final approval. This wouldn't be rushed, and the Satan's would never see it coming.

"How's our girl, Jek?"

Jekyll balled his fists but battened down his temper. Gent only enjoyed his taunting if he got a reaction. Eventually, he'd move on to another brother, who would threaten him with death. Until then, Jekyll would ignore him.

I'll fucking try, but I might still kill him.

"It's like you want to die." Oak burst out laughing.

Gent smirked. "Let's be honest here. Cherry was *my* date first. Yeah, she chose Jekyll, but we still have history, so I get a fair claim. Right, Jek?"

"Imogene is too stable for you," Ghost said as he passed the table.

Cue snickered. "Yeah, you need a woman with psychotic tendencies. So you have something in common."

Jekyll took the seat next to Cue. He grabbed his drink, taking a sip and staring at Gent over the rim. *You just fucking wait, asshole*. Someday, Gent was going to meet his match. *And I can't wait to fucking watch it.*

Ghost stopped at the end of the table. "How's Imogene doing?"

"Good. Went over to Barry's to meet up with that dancer she's working with." He turned to Cue. "Eden's with her."

Cue scowled. "What?"

"Imogene asked her to go along and get lunch." He lowered his voice. "Eden asked me if it would be okay with you. I said yeah."

Cue didn't say anything, but he seemed pissed.

"I did it for Imogene. She doesn't have anybody. Neither does Eden, right?" Jekyll arched his brow. "They sound like a pretty good fucking match."

"Yeah." Cue cracked smile. "Or a recipe for fucking trouble."

Probably.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Imogene had officially and permanently moved to Killcreek. She'd given her notice two weeks ago at the resource center. Judy had offered her the same position and would hand pick clients in her own area, but Imogene had gotten a fulltime position at the library in Birch, only twenty minutes from Killcreek. The timing was perfect. *Too perfect?* It seemed so, but when she questioned Jekyll if he had any involvement in getting her the job, he denied it.

In a few hours, she'd wrap up her last shift at the library in Lawry and head home. To Killcreek.

She piled the returned books on the cart and maneuvered it around the counter.

"You've been avoiding me."

Imogene froze, gripping tight to the handle.

I know that voice. Shoot!

She slowly turned, forcing a smile. "Hi Erik."

He wasn't lying. She'd actively been letting his calls go straight to voicemail. For weeks.

"I'm sorry. I've been swamped with work."

He slowly scanned the room. It was the worst possible time to use that excuse. Collectively, there were only about ten people in the library.

"I can see that." His tone was laced in sarcasm. "Do you know what I find incredibly interesting?" He arched his brow. "You've spent the last few months trying to meet up with me. Now I'm making the effort, and you've been ghosting me. Why is that?"

Because you and my boyfriend are on opposite ends of the law. And I pick him.

She carelessly shrugged. "Not on purpose."

Liar.

He snorted. "They've got you trained already?"

Imogene ignored the comment and grabbed a stack of books, hugging them against her chest. "I have to get back to work."

“When do you get off?” he asked.

At least this was working in her favor. She still had quite a few hours on her shift. Surely, he wouldn’t wait around.

“Five.”

He pulled back his cuff, glancing down at his watch. A small smile played on his lips.

“Six hours, which means by law you’re entitled to a break.”

Oh shit.

He narrowed his gaze. “Take it now.”

She racked her brain for some type of excuse, but she wasn’t quick enough.

“Meet me outside,” Erik said, then walked toward the back exit.

There was an outdoor seating area with tables, chairs, and umbrellas. It was usually occupied by students. Since the library prohibited food and drink, it was a great alternative. She pushed open the door and found him sitting at the table on the far end. Imogene made her way to him, slowing her steps as she grew closer.

“I only have fifteen minutes.”

Erik nodded and gestured to the chair across from him.

She sat, clasping her hands in her lap. There was only one reason Erik was visiting her. It was the one topic she wouldn’t discuss. But Imogene had a plan. She could control the conversation, keeping it light and steering away from the incident.

“How are you?”

“I should be asking you that. You were the one who’d experienced a traumatic event.”

That didn’t work.

“I’m fine.”

He scanned her face and nodded. “I expected to see you at the station.”

I bet you did.

“Are you upset that I didn’t file charges?” Her tone was void of any emotion.

He cocked his brow, and his lips twitched. “Is Jekyll?”

The last thing she wanted to talk to him about was Jekyll or the MC. And she wouldn’t.

“He knows I won’t be working with Logan again, so he’s not really worried.”

In fact, he wasn't concerned at all. According to Jekyll, the club had handled it. Imogene had pushed for more details but she didn't get any. Jekyll claimed it was club business and Logan had been dealt with. He also assured her, she'd never have to worry about him again.

"So let me get this straight." Erik paused. "Your man isn't the least bit concerned about someone who basically kidnapped you and scared the hell out of you? A club based notoriously on revenge." He spread his arms. "And that doesn't strike you as odd?"

Imogene flattened her lips and remained silent.

"I have a theory I want to share. Had you pressed charges, Logan would've been arrested that night. There would've been no bond because he's still on probation. He would've gone straight back to jail." He smiled. "That means no one on the outside would have access to him. And for a club like Killcreek who's based solely on revenge, that doesn't work for them. So my theory would be that Jekyll didn't want you to press charges and allow the law to do its job. Instead, he and the club would take care of Logan."

Sounds about right.

Erik rested his elbows on the table. "What do you think of my theory?"

"I think if that's what you believe then you should get Logan off the streets as soon as possible. Maybe get him protection from the club if you're so worried about his well-being. I mean, someone should get protection in this whole scenario. It wasn't available to me, and in the future it won't be for another woman who has the unfortunate luck of crossing paths with Logan." She shrugged, battening down her anger. "But yeah, definitely *protect him*, Erik."

His jaw squared. "He's missing, you know."

"I didn't know that." Imogene smirked. "Are you suggesting I join the search party? Because if so, I'm going to have to decline. I still have a few more hours on my shift, and after that, I'm going home to Killcreek."

"Want some advice?"

Imogene stood. "Nope."

He laughed and folded his arms. "Not the same girl who moved here a few months ago."

"No, I'm not."

And she never would be again.

Imogene got a few feet from the door when he called her name. She was tempted to ignore him but glanced over her shoulder.

"You ever find yourself in need of *my* side of the law, call me, okay?" His gaze softened. "After all, we're family."

The irony made her smile, and she pointed to him. "Distant."

He lifted his chin. "Cousins."

She chuckled. "Second."

Erik smiled. "Still family."

Yes, we are.

****

Jekyll eyed the boxes of files stacked up by the door. Most of her things had been moved in last week. Her furniture was being stored in the garage for now. Apparently, she had a whole design of how she wanted to decorate. *I don't fucking know.* And it didn't matter. As long as she was there with him, Imogene had free rein on their house.

There had only been one piece of furniture that she immediately brought into the living room. She called it her reading chair, but he had yet to see her in it. It was always occupied. He glared over at the piece tucked in the corner of the room. Hank was curled in the corner, and when they made eye contact, he let out a slow grumble.

"Growl again, and I'm bringing a fucking dog in this house."

Imogene hadn't made any progress with the cat. But for some reason, he'd taken a liking to Jekyll. He jumped off the chair, sauntered to him, and weaved between his legs, rubbing against his boots. Jekyll hadn't shown him an ounce of affection, but Hank seemed to respect a threat. Another fucking psycho in his life.

He glanced up when he heard the key in the door. Jekyll resisted the urge to roll his eyes. He'd told her over a dozen times that there wasn't a need to lock the door. She was in the safest spot she could be, especially during the day.

She walked in and smiled. Then dropped her gaze to Hank at his feet. She pouted and huffed. Imogene was seconds from stomping her foot. *Here we fucking go.*

"It's so unfair."

I know.

Her lips pulled down in a severe frown. "I feed him, clean his litter box, and talk to him every day. I even got him those little treats he likes. And

toys.” She pointed to the basket near the TV. “Why does he like you and not me?”

’Cause he’s an asshole.

“Yell at him. He likes that shit.”

“I’m not going to yell at him.” Imogene bent down, smiling. “Hi Hank.”

The cat stopped at his feet, looked over at her then walked across the room and jumped up on the chair. This was their routine.

“How’d it go?”

She dropped her bag on the couch and sauntered toward him with a small smile playing on her lips. She wrapped her arms around his shoulders, and he bent slightly, kissing her.

“I’m officially a full-time resident of Killcreek.”

Fucking perfect.

“I finished my day” —she paused, eyeing him— “Tied up some loose ends.”

It was cryptic, and he was about to ask, but she dropped her arms and turned toward the door. She stared at the boxes for a few seconds.

“Figured you didn’t want them in the garage.” It was waterproof, but they were expecting a few days of rain, and he didn’t want to take the chance of a leak.

“I don’t,” she whispered, glancing over her shoulder. “Can we burn them in the fire pit?”

Jekyll steeled his reaction. He’d assumed she wanted to keep them, but it was clear Imogene was getting rid of her past. He gave a curt nod.

“I’ll do it after dinner.”

She looked back at the boxes and nodded. It was years of her life wasted on a man and a lie. She’d forever be scarred, but it was a good sign that she was trying to move forward. He walked up behind her, wrapped his arm around her shoulders, and turned her toward the kitchen. On the dining room table was a platter of cupcakes. He had no idea when she’d made them and hadn’t discovered them until she left for work.

“Thanks for the cupcakes.”

She glanced up, grinning. “So vanilla was a hit?”

A huge fucking hit. He’d eaten six of them in one sitting.

He brushed his lips against her mouth. “Yeah.”

Jekyll never paid much attention to the small things in life. Until Imogene.

“Go get changed and meet me out back. I’m grilling steaks.”

“Okay.”

Thirty minutes later, he heard the back door screen creak as she opened it. He expected more of a discussion about her dad. That’s not what he got.

“I wasn’t snooping.”

Jekyll stilled, glancing up from the grill. That denial almost sounded like a confession. There wasn’t much she’d figure out about him without hearing it. Unlike some brothers, he didn’t have any worldly possessions. He’d spent most of his life living out of a backpack. It always carried the necessities. There was never any space in his bag or life for anything special.

“Alright. So what did you find when you weren’t snooping?”

Her cheeks pinkened, and she rocked back on her heels, glancing down at her feet. “The book I gave you when you got released. It was on the shelf.” She peeked up. “The binding is broken in, as if you read it.”

Jekyll had made a few things a priority when he’d first arrived home. The book wasn’t the first, but it was in the top ten. He’d started and finished the book by the end of the first week. It was good. Great plot, lots of action and twists. It kept his attention throughout, and it wasn’t ’til the very end when he figured out the villain of the story. But that wasn’t why he’d read it so soon. It was a gift from her, and her favorite. In some way, it kind of connected them. He liked that.

“I did. A few times.”

Her lips spread into a wide smile. “So you liked it?”

“Yeah.”

She rounded the grill and stopped a few feet from him. “I can recommend more if you want.”

“Alright.”

She grinned. He was learning quickly, it didn’t take much to make her happy.

“Maybe we can even read in bed sometimes. That’s kind of sexy, right?” She lifted her brows.

No.

“Or we could fuck.” He countered.

Imogene snickered with a bright blush shading her cheeks. “We could fuck and then read.”

That’s a fair compromise.

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EPILOGUE

Seven years later…

Motherhood is not for the weak. Imogene covered her mouth, giving in to her yawn. She should've been taking this time to rest while the boys were napping. *Yes, four-year-old twins.* She rested her hand on her belly. She was still in the first trimester and barely showing. But Imogene was feeling all the side effects to pregnancy. Mainly, fatigue. She didn't remember being this tired last time. Of course, she wasn't chasing two little boys around back then.

She glanced around the house. Imogene always tried to prioritize her free time when the boys were asleep. What task could she check off her list in the next hour? Certainly not cleaning. The house was a disaster. She was usually good at keeping up with it, but after the traumatic morning they'd had, it had all gone to hell.

Jekyll was currently at the vet with Hank. *Yeah, he's still here.* The cat had been acting strange for the last two days. He was eating less and sleeping more. It could've been a result of his age, but Imogene wanted to have him checked out. Her husband offered to take him. Now it was a waiting game until they got home.

Imogene had managed to get half the living room cleaned up when the doorbell rang. She wasn't expecting anyone, but that meant nothing in the little neighborhood behind the clubhouse. It had grown to full capacity, but recently a few brothers with families had gotten property in Killcreek and built homes. That was a touchy subject in their house.

She opened the door and smiled.

"Hey, Cleo."

She spread out her arms. "I'm reporting for babysitting duty."

What?

It wasn't the first time Cleo looked after the boys. In fact, of all the women, she was one of their favorites. *Aunt Cleo.* But?

Imogene cocked her head. "Babysitting?"

Was she so exhausted that she'd forgotten she'd asked Cleo to watch the kids? *And if that was the case, what the hell did I plan to do?*

"Yeah, Jek asked me last night when he came to see Wraith." Cleo knitted her brows, then her face paled. "Oh my God, was this supposed to be a surprise, and I just ruined it?"

"I mean" —Imogene chuckled— "it's a surprise to me."

It was perfect timing that Jekyll's truck drove down the road and pulled into the driveway. Imogene rushed down the stairs as he retrieved Hank's carrier from the passenger side.

"Is he okay? What did the doctor say?"

"Three hundred fucking dollars to find out his iron is low." Jekyll scowled, shaking his head.

Imogene bent down, looking at Hank through the mesh window. "But he's gonna be fine?"

Jekyll scoffed. "Yeah, he's healthy and got a lot more years. Lucky fucking us." His tone was laced in sarcasm.

Hank had eventually warmed up to Imogene but still only lukewarm. However, he took every chance to sit next to Jekyll on the couch.

"Hey Jekyll." Cleo waved as they walked up the porch stairs.

He lowered his chin and turned to Imogene. "Get your shoes on."

She raised her brows. "Where are we going?"

He walked through the door. "You'll see when we get there."

"I love surprises," Cleo said, following her inside.

Usually, Imogene was a fan too. But this had been sprung on her without notice. She glanced down at her stretchy pants and tank top.

"Should I change my clothes?"

Jekyll glanced over his shoulder, smiled, and shook his head. "No."

Hmmm, where are you taking me?

****

This was probably not the best way to approach the subject. *Again.* Imogene had been pretty adamant about wanting to stay on the clubhouse property, and for a while, he'd agreed. But they'd outgrown the house. The boys were sharing a bedroom, and with another on the way, it was going to get very tight real quick.

The ride was only five minutes down the road. The land had been cleared, but construction hadn't started yet. And it wouldn't until she gave

her approval. He pulled up the dirt driveway and parked, shutting down his engine.

He tapped her leg when she remained seated on the back of his bike.

“Jekyll.” She sighed.

“Just hear me out.”

She got off the bike, glancing over the property. It was about three acres and not too far from the creek. He’d already planned on getting the boys four-wheelers when they were old enough. It would be a kid’s paradise and playground.

Imogene folded her arms. “Let’s hear it.”

“Four bedrooms, three baths, three-car garage.”

Her shoulders sagged. “But I like our little house.”

He pointed to her stomach. “Where’s she gonna go?”

Imogene rested her hand on her belly and smiled. “You think it’s a girl?”

They wouldn’t officially know for another few weeks. But Jekyll had a gut feeling. *And I’m never wrong.*

He snorted. “Yeah.”

That lightened the mood slightly, but it wasn’t enough to sell her on the new house.

“I didn’t have shit as a kid. No real home, most nights not even a bed.” Jekyll had shared his rough childhood with Imogene years ago. He didn’t bring it up often. It wasn’t something worth remembering. But he’d never forget.

“I want them to have everything I didn’t. Things you didn’t get. And I wanna give them a place they can come back to. A real home, they’ve known their entire lives.”

Her eyes welled, and she clasped his hand, peering over the land.

“I could have a really big garden here.”

“Yeah.”

“How much land is it?”

“Three acres.” He pointed to the left. “Ends at the marker.”

Imogene leaned past him. “Does anyone own that property?”

This would sell her on the idea.

“Hyde.”

She jerked her head and widened her eyes. “Hyde and Penny will be our neighbors?” She squinted. “Did Penny agree to that?”

Jekyll pulled her into his chest. “According to Hyde, yeah. And the other side has been spoken for, so the club is going to be close by.”

She turned in his arms. “Really?”

He clenched his jaw. “Yeah.”

I’m never gonna get rid of that asshole.

“Okay,” she whispered. “Let’s do it.”

He cocked a brow. “Yeah?”

She nodded with a smile. “Yes, because in the end, it doesn’t really matter where we are as long as we’re together.”

Forever.

The End

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Amelia Shea

Amelia Shea writes contemporary romance. With her strong passion for series romance, her writing style includes a little sweet, a little sassy and lots of steam. She loves building stories with settings that become comfortable and familiar, and developing characters who feel real, and though they may be flawed, they learn and grow, and finally deserve a happy ending.

Born and raised, a Jersey girl, she has settled down in the south with her amazingly supportive husband, and children.

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BOOKS IN THIS SERIES

Killcreek Drifters MC

The Savior (Killcreek Drifters #1)

The List (Killcreek Drifters #2)

The Innocent (Killcreek Drifters #3)

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The Favor (Ghosttown Riders #1)

The Hero (Ghosttown Riders #2)

The Samaritan (Ghosttown Riders #3)

The Saint (Ghosttown Riders #4)

The Enemy (Ghosttown Riders #5)

The Return (Ghosttown Riders #6)

The Outlaw (Ghosttown Riders #7)

The Player (Ghosttown Riders #8)

The Enforcer (Ghosttown East #1)

The Rulebreaker (Ghosttown East #2)

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